Changing paradigms about issues in speaking: insights from a group of Spanish-speaking EFL Learners

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Table of Contents

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. Literature Review
4. Method
5. Findings
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion
8. References
9. Appendix

Abstract

Making mistakes is natural when learning a new language, but, for many learners, it is a source of frustration and enough reason to prevent them from learning. As undergraduate students of a BA in TEFL and current teachers at an English institute, we aimed to analyze the processes our learners go through when Speaking English, especially those related to their mother tongue. Through an analysis of collected data in the form of audio recordings from real classes, we drew the most frequent mistakes made by our participants. Data gathered showed not only the influence of the learners' native language in their performance but also the way they coped when struggling during a conversation. Understanding the role of the learners' native language helped us conclude that struggles in the learning process are not hindrances but opportunities to learn. Overall, we can see how a balance between mistakes and coping strategies sets the foundation for an ideal language-speaking development in EFL learners.

Keywords: *Translanguaging, Coping Strategies, Mistakes, Speaking skills, Spanish speakers*

Introduction

This paper analyzes the common struggles adult Spanish native speakers might face in learning EFL in the Colombian context. English has become a fundamental part of professional and personal development, becoming necessary to gain access to privileges in society. Those privileges include access to information, communication with people worldwide, business, education, etc. Learning the English language demands the learner to go through a long process to gain competence in the language. The aspects they have to cope with at the moment of speaking, especially when linguistic components of the L1 differ greatly from English, are the correct use of vocabulary and grammar rules. Learners struggle with acquiring and learning the language due to these differences, which can result in frustration, low motivation, or even abandonment.

For an English teacher, acquiring as much knowledge as possible is imperative to bring out the best in students and help them get the language competence that might allow them to accomplish their goals. In this sense, it is necessary to learn the aspects of language learning that might present difficulties to learners and help them overcome those difficulties and ease their learning process.

The main topic for this research originally arose from our observation of the mistakes EFL learners in our classes made when speaking English. However, throughout the study, we realized that this concept should be seen from a different perspective, taking into account aspects such as students' learning processes. At the beginning, the reason for errors and mistakes was unclear, since in most cases the learners had previously learned the grammar rules related to what they were trying to communicate. After recording, the errors and mistakes became clear enough to understand that making a mistake is not always a matter of memory, but part of a more complex process.

Findings during the study conclude that, to some extent, the differences in the two languages sometimes create confusion and lead participants to struggle when speaking. Nevertheless, these differences also showed the great capacity of speakers to find out strategies to not fail in the communication process. For instance, native Spanish speakers use the possessive adjective “your” for almost all personal pronouns. On the other hand, in English, every personal pronoun has its corresponding possessive adjective, leading to a misunderstanding of those grammatical concepts. As English teachers, this is an everyday mistake in learners, and it is interesting to understand to what extent L1 interferes with performing the Foreign Language (FL). According to Bhela (1999), when learners feel gaps in their L2 syntactic structures when writing, they use the syntactic structures of their first language (as cited in Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). This situation also happens when speaking, causing the mentioned mistakes.

Research conducted regarding this issue in the Colombian context has not been found, which leads to the purpose of this research to understand and provide insights related to the matter. Consequently, it is worth exploring the possibilities and revising if the conditions assessed in previous studies apply to the Colombian one. Moreover, revising the fields involving translanguaging in the local context could provide new contributions to the academic field. Besides, the contributions might lead to further creation of material and strategies to foster language learning for adults, emphasizing speaking skills.

With these initial insights, aspects related to coping strategies and mistakes will be addressed to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. It is well known that learning a language does not rely only on acquiring the grammatical rules. This inquiry aims to obtain insights that will help teachers and learners who may encounter these issues by

answering the following question: What processes do students go through when they try to speak in English? The following pages aim to provide insights relating to this matter.

Literature Review

Our approach to this research is based on a constructivist perception, where we understand learners as active participants in their learning process because they are capable of incorporating the pieces of knowledge, they acquire through time to improve their skills even further. This section will explore three main constructs: mistakes, coping strategies, and translanguaging. We found these constructs relevant to our research to set the basis for the upcoming sections of this paper. The first construct, mistakes analysis, aimed at providing insights into the use and the issues participants may face in speaking English. After this, the use of a variety of coping strategies, which may vary depending on students' personalities, allows them to not fail and get through the communication process. In terms of translanguaging is an alternative to being in a bilingual classroom where the mother tongue can be used whenever a learner's English is not enough to ensure a clear communication.

Mistakes

All mistakes cannot be approached the same. According to Edge (1989), mistakes can be classified into three categories:

> **slips**, which a student can self-correct;
>
> **errors**, which a student can't self-correct, but where it is clear which form the student wanted to use, and where the class is familiar with that form;
>
> **attempts**, where students have no real idea how to structure what they want to mean, or where intended meaning and structure are not clear to the teacher. (p. 11)

EFL learners can make mistakes due to several different reasons. Subandowo (2017) classified these reasons as difficulty in distinguishing between sounds of the learner's native language and English, difficulty in producing accepted pronunciation of English, and difficulty in pronouncing sounds of English that do not exist in the learner's native language.

This author also stated that there is a clear influence of the learner's native language when EFL learners try to produce English. However, this does not mean that such a phenomenon is detrimental to the learning process, as many would believe.

Coping Strategies

Kondo and Yang (2004, as cited in Yasuda & Nabei, 2018) listed five coping strategies students normally use in EFL classes: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation. Each student will lean on one or the other more significantly, depending on their personality. However, according to Kondo and Yang's research, two of these categories are generally more prominent: preparation and positive thinking. On one hand, Yasuda and Nabei (2018) state that preparation goes beyond students just being prepared for a topic before a class, it is about students who know how to be autonomous so they can keep learning by themselves even when there are no teachers around. On the other hand, positive thinking relies a lot on what Bandura (1997) called *self-efficacy* and is defined as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3).

Similarly, Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) classified the strategies EFL learners apply when they experience difficulties at the moment of speaking English. According to them, there are strategies used to help them understand a message and they "could be employed either while the message was being transmitted or after the message had already been transmitted" (p. 90). There are also strategies used to convey a message successfully which are divided into two subcategories: continuous (no intermission or pause) and discontinuous (intermission or pause for a while to find a way to convey the intended message to the interlocutor). EFL learners use all of them, but depending on their personalities they will lean more towards specific types of strategies that they feel help them more in their process.

Translanguaging

Day by day, this concept gains more popularity in the EFL classroom since students and teachers may feel more comfortable in an environment where speaking English is not mandatory. Translanguaging encourages students and teachers to make use of their mother tongue whenever they consider it necessary to foster communication. In the words of Rivera and Mazak (2017), "The use of multiple languages in the classroom may benefit the students' learning, depending on the needs of the students and the goals the educators are pursuing" (p.123). This eliminates the language barrier and allows learners to increase their willingness to use the target language and enjoy the learning process. Learners perceive learning not just as a rigorous process one must endure, but as a process that helps them to be themselves in another language. De los Ríos and Seltzer (2017, as cited in Ortega, 2019) stated, "translanguaging has been demonstrated to be a powerful tool that can challenge monolingual and colonial tendencies of the English language by giving space for students to draw on their fluid linguistic and cultural resources" (p. 163).

The ultimate goal of implementing translanguaging in the classroom is to ease the transition from a monolingual to a bilingual classroom. Learners train enough to acquire a proficiency that can allow them to speak English in a natural context as if they were speaking in their mother tongue. For example, Sayer (2013, as cited in Rivera & Mazak, 2017) proposed learners should be allowed to use their native languages and be taught to use them in tandem with the target language. However, once language proficiency in English is achieved, the learners can be transitioned to a fully English-speaking classroom. (p.125). Thus, native language is seen as an important and positive strategy that should be allowed in the classroom.

Similarly, Creese and Blackledge (2010) stated "Both languages are needed simultaneously to convey the information, ... each language is used to convey a different

informational message, but it is in the bilingualism of the text that the full message is conveyed". (as cited in García & Lin, 2017.) In the EFL classroom, both of the learner's languages are as important because each of them serves a different purpose in the communication process, setting the basis for an entire system. Being forced to use one language without the other would not allow the class to reach its true potential of bilingualism. Involvement and cooperation are features in a bilingual classroom where independently of the language competence every student has the possibility to take part in the learning process and contribute with ideas, thoughts, or even questions that in other settings they find difficult to do.

Method

For this research, we implemented a qualitative study to identify when learners struggled when speaking English and what coping strategies, they implemented to feel more comfortable in those situations. Therefore, we audio-recorded some of our sessions with the consent of our participants, made transcriptions of each recording, identified the coping strategies and mistakes evidenced in the participants' interventions, and finally arranged them on a separate chart for a more thorough analysis and subsequent conclusions.

Setting

This research was conducted at an international EFL institute. Our participants were Colombian students. The institute employs a hybrid class model, which means our research participants could take any of their classes on-site or online.

This institute offers two types of classes: e-talks and e-labs. An e-talk is a class where the student improves and makes use of listening and speaking skills by discussing and taking part in activities about a particular topic (science, technology, history, etc.) for an hour with the teacher and classmates. An e-lab is a class where the student improves and makes use of their reading and writing skills by developing exercises on the Center's platform corresponding to their particular level in the program.

The program is divided into four stages, each corresponding to a level in the Common European Framework of Reference. The main study materials of this institute are the Keynote series and the World Link Intro, all published by National Geographic Learning.

Institution's Level	Study Material	CEFR Level
Essentials	World Link	Pre-A1-A2
Progressive 1	Keynote 1	A1
Progressive 2	Keynote 2	A2

Evolution	Keynote 3	B1
Vantage	Keynote 4	B2

The institution aims to establish a worldwide renowned method to teach English as a foreign language in the long term by making the most of the hybrid class model and the resources it implements. Their uniqueness lies in a non-conventional and conversation-focused approach to teaching English as a foreign language to individuals all around the world. At the time of writing this paper, they operate in Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Spain, and The United States.

Participants

The participants were 9 students from the institute, all Spanish-speaking adults with various needs to learn English. From teenagers to participants in their 40s, all of them could communicate through the language but with different levels of proficiency. They take online and on-site classes where the methodology focuses on the communicative approach to help them perform better in a real-life context. In the following chart, we will provide more information about each participant.

Participant	Sex	Age	Proficiency	Additional Relevant Information
Participant 1	Female	30s	Lower intermediate	This participant was constantly eager to talk but did not always have enough vocabulary to express herself, resulting in confusing statements sometimes.
Participant 2	Male	40s	Intermediate	This participant's level was proficient and was always very participative despite some struggles with pronunciation.
Participant 3	Female	30s	Lower intermediate	This participant was always willing to communicate in spite of struggling with vocabulary and grammar at some points.
Participant 4	Female	40s	Lower intermediate	This participant had some difficulties in terms of pronunciation. Her grammar knowledge was not vast, but she was eager to communicate all her ideas in English.

Participant 5	Male	20s	Intermediate	The participant's pronunciation was appropriate. However, he would take some time to organize his ideas before talking, resulting in limited participation.
Participant 6	Female	20s	Low Intermediate	This participant did not have a wide knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. She did not talk too much, but it was hard to tell if it was because of a lack of interest in the topic or her proficiency level in English.
Participant 7	Male	10s	Intermediate	The participant's pronunciation was appropriate. He was always eager to participate and, even though he would struggle sometimes, because of a lack of vocabulary or a gap in grammar, his overall use of English was proficient.
Participant 8	Female	30s	Intermediate	This participant was always eager to participate, in spite of some struggles with vocabulary and grammar.
Participant 9	Female	40s	Low Intermediate	This participant intended to communicate but was not confident enough because of a limited knowledge in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

Research procedure

For this research, we reflected on and discussed the issues we had noticed in our students during speaking exercises/activities in class. We realized there were similarities in issues related to their speaking skills. With this in mind, we designed the research. We asked permission from the institute's Coordinator to conduct a qualitative study involving a group of students. Upon receiving approval, we made a public invitation to our classes. Once they willingly agreed to participate, we started the study with the participants who accepted the invitation. We provided them with a comprehensive overview of our research objectives before requesting their consent. We recorded seven sessions, capturing a diverse range of interactions in classes for the nine participants. We transcribed all the sessions and analyzed the audio recordings. We used the free plan of an editing software powered by artificial

intelligence called Descript (2023) that helped us turn speech (audio) into text. As the transcriptions by the software were not a hundred percent accurate, we made additional adjustments to fix any remaining errors and enhance the resulting format.

We summarized our interventions in these sessions, but the students' interventions were completely transcribed verbatim. The first reading aimed to analyze some student's interventions in line with the theories and articles we have included in this study. This attempt was made to see a potential answer to the research question.

Data analysis

After completing the seven different documents to analyze, one for each recording. Based on the discussion in our research meetings, the literature reviewed and the preliminary reading of the data; we established some pre-categories to analyze the data. In each document, we highlighted every mistake and coping strategy we could identify based on the following categories:

Mistake	Definition
Wrong Word	Words that were either not necessary or wrongly taking the place of others
Missing Word	Words that were omitted but necessary
Pronunciation	Struggles in articulation that could generate confusion in conversation
Conjugation	Tenses not being used properly according to the conveyed message
Word Order	Structures were not arranged properly and generated confusion in the conversation

Coping Strategy	Definition
Repetition	Similar to a stutter. A repetition of sounds or even entire words before moving on to the next one
Hesitation	A complete pause while trying to figure out the right words to keep talking

Self-monitoring	Correcting oneself after recognizing a mistake without any help or hint
Clarification	Directly asking for help because something is not completely understood
Translanguaging	Switching to Spanish when not knowing how to say something in English
Literal Translation	Saying something in English as one would say it in Spanish

Subsequently, we created an Excel document with a worksheet for each transcription and organized all the previously highlighted coping strategies and mistakes (Appendix 3 and 4). When all the information was included into Excel, we calculated the most recurrent strategies and mistakes from our participants, and from those we worked on the analysis itself. Through the analysis, we sought to understand why those coping strategies and mistakes were so frequent and we looked for patterns we could turn into opportunities for learning in EFL learners.

Findings

In this section, we will describe the findings from the data analysis process. First, we based the analysis only on the most recurrent mistakes in terms of language. The categories analyzed were Wrong word (W.W), Missing word (MW), Pronunciation (P), Conjugation (C), and Word order (WO). In the second stage, we will analyze other issues that we grouped under the category of coping strategies. These allowed participants to nourish the conversation whenever they wanted to avoid making any mistake, or just have extra time to organize their ideas.

Analyzing the data, we uncovered the participants' most common issues when they interacted in the foreign language in each of the sessions. The following chart shows them from the most to the least common:

Mistake	Total number of occurrences
Wrong Word	189
Missing Word	80
Pronunciation	60
Conjugation	55
Word Order	21

In terms of wrong words, the most common were:

- Overusing the definite article *the*:

*The Santa Fe mall is near **the** my home*
*they think that **the** Latinos*
*I usually listen in **the** interview*
*I go to **the** Villavicencio*
*in **the** Spain **the** people are cold*
*I like **the** Wonder Woman*
***the** motivation is this belief about yourself*
***The** Thor is good*
*It's a different **the** Marvel series on Disney Plus.*
*I watched **the** She-Hulk.*

*Yes and **the** She-Hulk is a lawyer.*
*I like **the** romantic or action movies*
***The** Santa Ana, Magdalena has the Light Castle tradition.*

- Mixing the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*. But especially the preposition *in*:

***in** other time*
***in** Christmas*
***in** my rest day*
***in** the moment*
*music playing **in** the speakers*
*I haven't visited **in** Candles Day*
*But **in** the other hand*

- Confusing pronouns and adjectives:

*they are attached by **their self***
*The house is **from them***
*the history about **them** fathers*
*the parents **from her***
*the parents **of him***
*he's very proud of **he***
*The money is **you**. The money **me**.*

In terms of missing words, the most recurrent issue was the omission of the pronoun it:

*I don't know if **is** true*
*Yes and **is** different for me with that but **is** good*
***is** necessary to know where you come from*
***is** not my house*
***is** awful*
***Is** difficult*
***is** pretty good*
*I don't know if **is** possible to do activities with fireworks at the moment*

In terms of pronunciation, we noticed issues like:

- Wrong syllable stress in words like:

Chi**nese* (instead of *Chi**nese)
Ja**panese* (instead of *Japa**nese)

Ko*rean* (instead of *Ko****rean***)
ob*jectives* (instead of *ob****jec****tives*)
*catalo****ged*** (instead of ***ca****taloged*)
*di****ffi****culty* (instead of ***di****fficulty*)

- Difficulty pronouncing vowel sounds that do not exist in Spanish like /ʌ/, /ɔ/, /æ/, /ɜ/, /ɪ/, and /ʊ/.
- Confusion in pronouncing some consonant sounds like /s/, /z/, /h/, and difficulty pronouncing the sound /θ/ which is virtually nonexistent in Spanish.

In terms of conjugation, learners often struggled with the correct form of the third person and the present simple tense. Some examples of these are:

*my boyfriend **have** the Cineco Card*
*this **explain** what you asked me at the beginning*
*that strength from inside that maybe **motivate** you*
*what **happen** is that*
*they **is** from Spain*
*the only department that **have** "esmeraldas" here in Colombia*
*my mother **was** work in a small town*
*inspiration sometimes **help** me to continue*
*he **say** that.*

In terms of word order, we noticed some issues, for instance:

*Because it's the complement that **have all the countries around us***
*For me, learning Dutch is the **thing most stressful***
*we touched some **topics very useful***
music high volume
rice green

It is noticeable the three categories on top and the three at the bottom had a slight difference in use among them. Participants used these coping strategies as a resource to go on with the conversation and express their ideas as accurately as possible. The strategies involving the use of Spanish were a last resource since their proficiency and the aim of the

session was to use English as much as possible to foster improvement in speaking. The chart below shows the use of each coping strategy by all nine participants.

Coping Strategy	Total number of times used
Repetition	53
Hesitation	52
Self-monitoring	50
Clarification	36
Translanguaging	35
Literal Translation	23

Discussion

This section is divided into two parts, first interpreting the findings and then their correlation to the concepts in the literature review. The concepts are listed based on the different issues found in the data analysis. The interpretation included all categories in the section on mistakes and coping strategies.

Overusing the definite article "the"

Overusing the definite article *the* is a particular phenomenon that seems to occur mostly in EFL learners whose native languages also have articles in them. Most modern Indo-European languages make use of articles, especially those from Western Europe, and Spanish is one of those. Overusing the definite article *the* has been a matter of interest for researchers for quite some time and there are two well-established categories for the use of the definite article *the*, the generic and the non-generic use. According to García Mayo (2008) "Generic uses refer to cases where the definite article is used to mean either a species, a race, or people of a nation (*The German is very athletic/The Germans are very athletic*). All other uses are considered nongeneric". It turns out that the non-generic uses are the ones that learners struggle the most with. John A. Hawkins (1978) developed the Location Theory to explain eight uses of the non-generic *the* in English, but this theory was later collapsed by Liu and Gleason (2002) into four uses:

- **Cultural:** *the* is used with a noun that is a unique and well-known referent in the speech community.
- **Situation:** *the* is used when the referent of a first-mention noun can be sensed directly or indirectly by the interlocutors or the referent is known by the members of the local community.
- **Structural:** *the* is used with a first-mention noun that has a modifier.

- **Textual:** *the* is used with a noun that has been previously referred to or is related to a previously mentioned noun.

Based on these four non-generic uses of definite article the many researchers like Liu and Gleason (2002), García Mayo (2008), and Isabelli-García and Slough (2012) carried out studies with EFL learners who speak different native languages and all of them agreed in their conclusions that the non-generic use of the definite article *the*, EFL learners struggle the most with is the Cultural one because, even if we do not realize it at first, the uniqueness we attribute to something also depends on our culture and our language, meaning that an English speaker may not use a definite article where a Spanish speaker would think one is needed due to some kind of cultural uniqueness.

Also, Master (1997) found out that most EFL learners seem to follow a trend of three stages as their proficiency increases in the language. At first, when they are at a basic level, they seem to omit the definite article in many cases where it is needed. Then, when they are at an intermediate level, they seem to overuse the definite article. Lastly, when they are at an advanced level, they use the definite article more accurately and seem to find a balance in its use. Therefore, he proposed that EFL learners at a basic level should focus first on vocabulary that is usually accompanied by the definite article until word meanings are clear instead of being overwhelmed by grammar rules they would not understand. Then, when they are at an intermediate level, they can use repetition exercises that will help them focus for as long as they need on the particular dynamics of the articles. Lastly, when they are at an advanced level, they should take advantage of their own mistakes to self-assess the proper use of the definite article in their speech and improve from there.

The results of these studies aligned with our findings and our participants who were low-intermediate EFL learners who still struggled to decide whether they were supposed to

use the definite article or not. They had sufficient English proficiency to know that the definite article the has a particular role in speech, but they were still unsure of how to use it properly and, they ended up using it where it was not needed.

Mixing the prepositions: in, on, and at

The prepositions *in, on, at*, and their uses as prepositions of time and space have always been slightly difficult to understand for Spanish speakers. The notion of space tends to be more complicated to understand, because, in an everyday conversation in Spanish, all three of them could be translated as the preposition *en*.

The literal translation (from Spanish to English) of the preposition en is in. However, Spanish speakers will also use the preposition en to mean on and at in some cases. For example, the sentence the computer is **on** the table could be translated as el computador está **en** la mesa or also as el computador está **sobre** la mesa which would be less common, unless you wanted to be very specific, and the sentence I am **at** the park could be translated as estoy **en** el parque or also as estoy **por** el parque. However, there are other words in Spanish like sobre and por that work as a translation for on and *at*, respectively. Spanish speakers will still go for en most of the time. This results in an understandable overuse of the preposition in for many EFL learners who speak Spanish as a native language.

The preposition *at* tends to be problematic too because it is too abstract and seemingly unnecessary for Spanish speakers whose proficiency in English is not very high. Many Spanish speakers will often wonder why it is necessary to use *at* instead of *in* if the objective is simply to communicate your location based on a reference point since the preposition *en* in Spanish (*in* in English) serves the same purpose.

Lastly, the preposition *on* is apparently the easiest to grasp because, as a preposition of place, it works when there is contact and that is something that visually does not need much explanation. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the prepositions in, on,

and at, can show up in particular expressions or collocations that do not follow the same basic rules of time and place, making it even harder for learners to decide which one they have to use in many cases.

In studies focused on these prepositions, researchers like Flores (2013) concluded that:

> Concrete senses like the spatial sense generally cause less difficulty to the students than the temporal sense and other senses that are more abstract. That is because concrete senses are more semantically transparent than abstract senses, thus causing less difficulty for learners. (p.62)

As for Todorova (2023), she concluded that "the three prepositions are often mixed up among themselves, largely due to the influence of the learners' mother tongue" (p. 55). These statements aligned with our findings because our participants struggled more with the prepositions in, on, and at when they had to be used in contexts where they were not communicating a sense of place but a sense of time or a specific expression. This shows that low-intermediate learners can grasp the spatial use of these prepositions with a certain ease, but they will still have issues with more abstract meanings they can convey, especially in expressions where no rules are followed and it is just a matter of memorizing them as they are.

"It" is missing

Using the pronoun *it* can be confusing for EFL learners because of the role it takes in English, which are: proform, empty, and anticipatory (Meehan et al., 2017). In most cases, there is no need to use any pronoun equivalent to *it* in Spanish because the language "allows the omission of the subject (Sujeto Tácito) or the complete absence of an explicit subject (Sujeto Impersonal), English does not. On the contrary, sentences with no explicit subject in English are considered ungrammatical" (Meehan et al., 2017, p. 35). This confusion also

leads to another very common speaking issue we noticed in our participants' interventions, which is pronouncing *it's* as *is*. Since they cannot tell the need for *it*, in most cases, this translates to the omission of the pronoun from the contraction *it's = it is > is*.

Pronouns

Participants showed in some of their interventions that it is common for them to get confused using pronouns in English, considering Spanish has similar pronouns for each of the categories that might be used in daily speaking. Handayani and Cenderato (2023) confirm that, in the Indonesian context, the students still made mistakes when they had to use the pronouns in speaking or writing. Participants' knowledge related to pronouns may be consolidated. There is confusion just because the use of pronouns in Spanish is marked in their daily use and so they do this transfer when using in English. The same happened in the Indonesian context "The confusion still emerged and caused errors. From the test, 46.02% of the students wrote mistaken answers in many pronouns whereas, 53.98% wrote the correct answer." (Handayani & Cenderato, 2023, p. 4) It is evident that the participants relied on their native language (Spanish) in some phrases they said, since they were not coherent in English but they would have been in Spanish. For instance, "*The house is **from them,** the parents **from her**".* These do not have an accurate meaning in English since the preposition *from* is used to express the origin of something. Although participants wanted to express the ownership of the house, it would have been more appropriate to say "The house is *theirs"* emphasizing the possession rather than the origin. Another example can be found in a phrase like "*the parents **of him**"*. Comprehending these phrases is not complicated, however, it is not a conventional way to express the idea. Here, the error appears by using possessive adjectives. Spanish speakers struggle with this because the pronouns *he*, *she*, *it*, *you (singular)*, *they*, and *you (plural)* all share the same singular possessive adjective, the word *su (*which becomes *sus* if talking in plural*).* English, on the other hand, has a distinct possessive

adjective for each pronoun. This generates confusion in speakers to some extent when they are just starting to grasp how possessive adjectives in English work.

Syllable stress and sounds in English

Struggling to learn new pronunciations is common in foreign language learning. As Spanish native speakers, the participants of this research presented pronunciation issues with syllable stress and certain sounds of English. Language learners struggle with syllable stress "due to the unavailability of a similar stress system in their native language" (Karjo, 2016, p. 207). Both English and Spanish speakers understand the concept of syllable stress. However, in Spanish, some words have *tildes* (accent marks) in their written forms, which help to differentiate them from similarly written words and/or to know how they should be properly pronounced. The lack of *tildes* in English, for instance, is a clear example of a different stress system that can make the learner feel lost when acquiring new vocabulary and although *tildes* in Spanish work in just some words and not all of them, this system serves as a guide to learn how to pronounce a great deal of words. Therefore, if you try to guess syllable stress based on your knowledge of *tildes* in Spanish, it will not help at all.

For this reason, "explicit teaching of stress placement 'rules' is also needed to provide learners with sufficient knowledge of English word stress placement" (Karjo, 2016, p. 207) as well as teaching the basics of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Most EFL learners rely exclusively on listening to improve their speaking, but listening is not reliable enough, especially because our ears are not used to sounds that are not common in our native language. Therefore, we need other ways to break them down and fully comprehend them. Consciously learning about the stress placement rules of English and the International Phonetic Alphabet can help learners construct that new "stress system" they need to navigate the English language pronunciations.

Regarding those difficulties with specific sounds of English, there are a variety of reasons why some sounds, more than others, represent a certain degree of complexity for Spanish speakers. For example, some participants of this research tended to omit the /s/ at the end of syllables which would generate confusion in conversations because the S at the end of a word can modify its meaning in English. “The omission of /s/ at the end of a syllable is common, even among educated speakers” (Espejo, 2016, p. 112).

The sound /h/ in English is confusing for many Spanish speakers because “in Spanish, the letter *h* is always mute, whether it appears at the beginning or in the middle of words” (Afonso, 2021, p. 20) and there are very few exceptions to this rule. However, the opposite happens in English, where most words starting with *H* require an aspirated /h/ sound.

The sound /θ/ is also hard to grasp for Colombian Spanish speakers. It is very common in Spain due to a phenomenon called “ceceo” where the consonants *S, Z,* and *C* (before an *E* or an *I*) are pronounced as /θ/. However, in Latin America, the sound /θ/ is almost nonexistent because of a similar “fashioned” phenomenon called “seseo” where *S, Z,* and *C* (before an *E* or an *I*) are pronounced as /s/. Therefore, Colombian EFL learners tend to pronounce /z/ as /s/ because it does not exist in their variation of Spanish (Coe, 2001) and to approximate the /θ/ to /t/ when they see the consonant combination *th* in a word because they do not know the difference between the two sounds well enough to articulate them properly (Ercan & Kunt, 2019).

Vowels are quite hard to acquire for EFL learners depending on their native languages. Spanish, for example, only has five vowel sounds (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/) while English has twelve basic vowel sounds (/i/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɑ/, /ɒ/, /ɔ/, /ʊ/, /u/, /ɜ/, /ə/) and arguably more if we start looking at different varieties of the language. Reasonably, this “is one of the salient reasons why Spanish speakers frequently find it grueling to produce all English vowel sounds properly” (Silva, 2022, p. 143). It also clarifies in a way why many

Spanish speakers tend to approximate the vowels that they do not know how to articulate to the ones they already know how to articulate.

The participants of this research struggled particularly with the sounds:

- /ʌ/ which in Spanish is located between the /o/ and the /a/.
- /ɔ/ which in Spanish is located between the /o/ and the /a/.
- /æ/ which in Spanish is located between the /e/ and the /a/.
- /ɜ/ which in Spanish is located between the /e/ and the /a/.
- /ɪ/ which in Spanish is located between the /i/ and the /e/.
- /ʊ/ which in Spanish is located between the /u/ and the /o/.

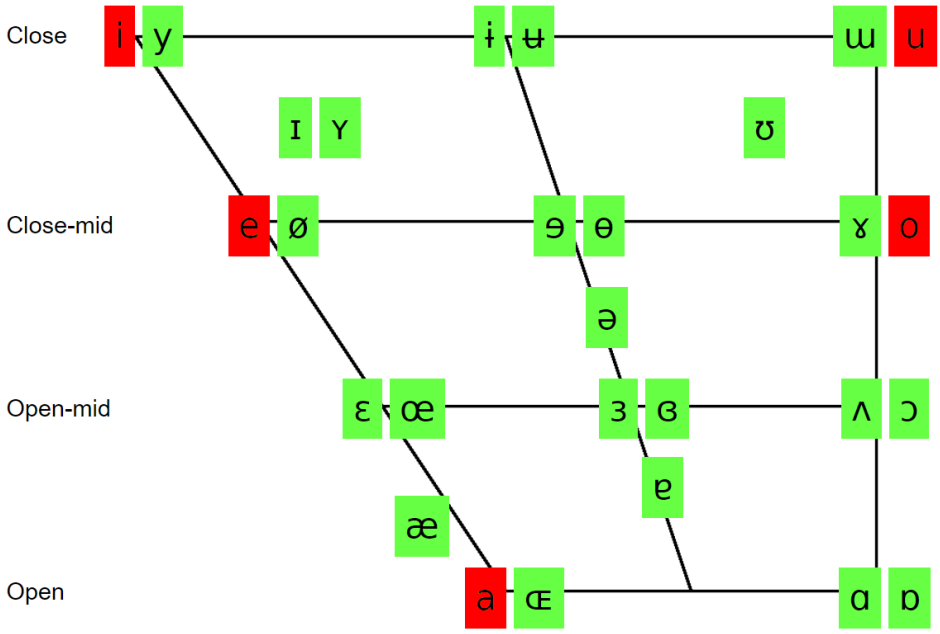


Figure 1. General IPA vowels trapezoid where the five vowel sounds of Spanish have been marked red for reference. From "Interactive IPA Chart", https://www.ipachart.com/.

Conjugations

Different teaching approaches suggest that, unlike some decades ago, grammar should not be an essential part of learning a language. It is more than enough to take into account just some aspects of it to have fluent and accurate communication. As Listia and Febriyanti

(2020) stated, “Learning a new language is a bit different, the students may experience some slips, errors, false beginnings, and several ungrammatical or ambiguous sentences”. In terms of conjugation, participants of this research showed similar issues with conjugating in the third person and the present simple conjugation. Spanish and English have different rules and ways to conjugate verbs in relation to the subject and tense. Ciesielkiewicz and Márquez (2015) stated that the wrong use of verb forms originates from “the difficulty that students face when using infinitives or gerunds and the scarcity of the rules that they could apply to distinguish the use of both forms". For example, in terms of the past tense, the statement *“The last series that **watch me**”* is a way to express oneself in Spanish and is a very common sentence emphasizing an object. However, this expression is not used in English because its structure does not have a clear meaning. A better option would have been *“the last series that I watched…”.*

Regarding the conjugation of the third person, Spanish has different and more complex conjugation rules in comparison to English. Therefore, learners do their best to internalize and learn to discriminate between the different rules of both languages. For this reason, at the beginning and sometimes even after learning English for a while, they will struggle with the way the rules of each language operate, which may lead them to have issues at the moment of speaking. This is evident in several participants’ interventions during the sessions. For example:

- *my boyfriend **have** the Cineco Card*
- *this **explain** what you asked me at the beginning*
- *that strength from inside that maybe **motivate** you*
- *the only department that **have** “Esmeraldas” here in Colombia*
- *inspiration sometimes **help** me to continue*

Participants use of coping strategies

Coping strategies are a vital part of the learning process. In this research, for example, they helped learners recover from momentary setbacks to maintain a conversation flowing. For this reason, it is important to encourage learners to use coping strategies and also analyze how we can facilitate the EFL learning process by relying on coping strategies as helpful learning tools.

Our findings showed an interesting tendency regarding coping strategies that is worth noting. As seen in the Findings chart, the first three most used coping strategies (Repetition, Hesitation, and Self-monitoring) demonstrate the learner's intention to keep going on their own even if that means: stuttering a bit, taking a couple extra seconds to think or correcting themselves almost immediately. No help is sought by the learners when using these coping strategies as they clearly want to communicate independently.

On the other hand, the remaining three coping strategies in the same chart (Clarification, Translanguaging, and Literal Translation) represent a lifeline for the learners. When they decide they cannot fully convey a message while speaking, they will cope whether it be: asking directly for help, making use of Spanish for a second before turning back to English, or directly translating something from Spanish to English even if it sounds unnatural.

This shows a mechanism that helps learners to cope with their struggles as they speak. It is very meaningful, as it sheds some light on what happens in learners' minds as they attempt to actually use the language. This is as important of a finding for educators as it is for learners because, in this way, EFL learners can gain awareness of the nature of learning a language and therefore embrace it to boost their performance.

Coping strategies can help learners "have a high metacognitive awareness to address their weaker points easily, and take precautions accordingly to be more successful" (Tanyeli

& Kuter, 2013, p. 21) to develop some sort of "automatization process" as Schmenk (2006, as cited in Abdel Razeq, 2014) proposed, where low achievers will stop relying entirely on their educators and become high achievers who are aware of the fact that they play an important and active role in their learning processes and thus reaching autonomy.

Word Order

As has been stated in previous sections. Participants' performance relies mainly on the amount of knowledge in the L2 at the moment of communication. In addition, the use of the set of rules and norms of the L2 at the moment of speaking is a determining factor since it makes a clear difference. Analyzing participants' speaking, it was evident they handle a range of vocabulary and norms that permit them to communicate. However, some sentences can be considered word order errors if we make a comparison to the way a native speaker would express these different ideas. Corder's (1971) interpretation will be based upon 'what a native speaker of the target language would have said to express *that* meaning in *that* context, i.e. it is a translation equivalent' (p. 154). Based on this statement, and considering what native speakers could say in the different samples. It is possible to conclude that the ideas expressed by participants are comprehensible but not completely accurate. Examples of those sentences are listed below (in brackets what a native speaker would say):

- Because it's the complement that **have** all the countries around us (Because it's the complement that all the countries around us **have**.)
- For me, learning Dutch is the **thing** most stressful (For me, learning Dutch is the most stressful **thing**.)
- We touched some **topics** very useful (We discussed/ touched some very useful **topics**.)
- Music high volume (High volume music)
- Rice green (Green rice)

To close off the Discussion section we will now look at the link between our interpretation of the findings and the concepts in our Literature Review.

Coping strategies to convey a message

Somsai and Intaraprasert's (2011) strategies to convey a message were a very interesting lens to analyze our participants' spoken interventions. Following their proposed continuous and discontinuous strategies and the coping strategy categories proposed in this research (Repetition, Hesitation, Self-monitoring, Clarification, Translanguaging, and Literal Translation), we believe the only purely discontinuous coping strategy from the ones we applied in this research is Hesitation because it requires the conversation to stop for a short period while in all the others the learner does not give up speech at any moment to hold onto the ongoing conversation.

Hesitation, as a discontinuous coping strategy to convey a message, was one of the most used coping strategies by the participants of this research, being used 52 times in total by all 9 participants and taking second place among all the others. However, when we compare this number to the use of continuous coping strategies (which equates to all the other categories), it does not look as big, meaning there is a good amount of continuous coping strategies used to convey a message, especially Repetition (first place) and Self-monitoring (third place) which learners used to keep the conversation going which demonstrates a will to speak the target language by any means necessary.

The use of coping strategies was also studied by Kondo and Yang's (2004) research: preparation and positive thinking. The use of coping strategies displayed by the participants of this research plus the context of the class is a good example of positive thinking. Learners do not feel pressured to use the language perfectly and do not fear making mistakes because the class turns into a conversation about different topics. This makes them feel at ease and more secure about their English-speaking skills. Feeling comfortable in an English classroom

is key to improving on speaking. Realizing you are capable of having a conversation and consciously learning about coping strategies can also be considered preparation as Kondo and Yang (2004) proposed, because it helps learners to be ready not just for a particular class, but for the English-speaking world in general. The more learners are aware of their skills and how to improve on them, the more autonomous they can become.

Learning from your mistakes

Comparing our mistake categories (Wrong Word, Missing Word, Pronunciation, Conjugation, Word Order) to the mistake categories proposed by Edge (1989) we noticed that our Wrong Word, Missing Word, and Conjugation categories aligned with the errors category he proposed because the majority of mistakes that make each of those categories (overusing *the*, mixing *in*, *on*, *at*, confusing *pronouns* and missing the pronoun *it*) had been corrected in several occasions during each recorded session as well as in prior sessions.

The mistake categories Conjugation and Word Order are more in line with Edge's (1989) Attempts category because some of the structures the participants needed to use at certain points of the conversation had not been studied in depth before, however, the participants still tried to convey a message even if they did not specifically know how to do so.

Lastly, the Pronunciation category is more under Subandowo's (2017) reasons for pronunciation mistakes, particularly the difficulty in pronouncing sounds that do not exist in the speakers' native language as well as the difficulty in distinguishing sounds from the native language and the target language. These two reasons were clearly present in the participants' interventions when they struggled to articulate some sounds because they did not exist in Spanish and others. After all, they could not differentiate them properly from Spanish to English.

Native language as an aid

As Rivera and Mazak (2017) stated, there are instances in which using a language different from the target language in the classroom can be beneficial and the participants of this research demonstrated this. The translanguaging coping strategy used by the participants was very important in their interventions even if it was not used all the time because it worked as a plan B for the learners. Feeling you can rely on your native language without being judged boosts your confidence as a learner and makes you feel more comfortable as you speak until you get to a point where you can start using English only.

Additionally, as de los Ríos and Seltzer (2017) stated, nowadays EFL teaching has turned more towards prioritizing the learner than English itself, meaning learners can express their cultural background and way of being thanks to the language instead of trying to become a “perfect” native English speaker. In this order of ideas, Translanguaging helps the learner find the best of both worlds: the cultural background they were born with and the culture of the English-speaking world.

Conclusion

As seen in this research, several factors are significant in the process of speaking a foreign language. Sometimes, the smallest of details can be of great importance to improve the outcome of learning, meaning nothing should be overlooked.

A change of paradigm is required, where learners do not see mistakes as a negative aspect of the learning process but as an opportunity for improvement. In the speaking process of our students, these *mistakes* give us insights into the processes and dynamics that take place in the mind of someone learning a language different from their native one. Our main takeaway from this study was a resignification of what a mistake is, while it may be seen as a flaw in students' performance; the data analysis and theoretical review allowed us to understand a deeper meaning as to how students are learning or acquiring the English language.

We also understand the value the mother tongue. Sometimes, students are not allowed to use the mother tongue in the EFL classroom. However, the opportunity to use it not only brings the possibility of not failing in communication but also allows the learner to feel like they are truly in a bilingual and comfortable environment to use their native language whenever they consider it necessary. In other words, what can be considered negative, can turn into an opportunity to understand more about the learning process and help out the learners who are struggling with a foreign language.

Coping Strategies are necessary in the learning process if a learner intends to grasp the language faster and more accurately. Learners can be taught that these strategies should not be regarded as cheating themselves but as tools ready to be used at any time they need.

Participants showed difficulties mainly with Wrong Words and Missing Words but this is an expected process for language learners since according to their level of proficiency

those issues still need to be mastered. What catches our attention is the use of coping strategies because they allow them to make up for setbacks related to language use and to get by the conversation. Students mostly used Repetition, Hesitation, and Self-monitoring. All of them are used as a strategy to speak successfully.

Overall, the main objective a learner should have in mind when learning English as a foreign language is communication, instead of attempting to use the language in a perfect manner making no mistakes at all. Understanding the role of the learners' native language helped us conclude that the challenges in the learning process are not hindrances but opportunities to learn. The more a learner focuses on communication, the less they look at their own mistakes and allow themselves to use coping strategies that will help them improve.

Implications

This section aims to highlight aspects regarding pedagogical implications we considered important based on the main aspects that arose from this study. Thus, we reflected that coping strategies training, use of Spanish in the class, and perception about mistakes are prominent to take into account in EFL classes.

EFL learners must be taught the importance of coping strategies to learn any foreign language. Non-native English speakers normally learn English with a deep desire to achieve a very important goal; it can be professional, personal, academic, or cultural. In many cases, they need to do it fast, so they end up hurrying the learning process trying to absorb all they can carelessly. As with all things, learning something takes time and everybody learns in different ways. If students were given more realistic expectations and tools to learn English from the start, their learning process would not be as frustrating. Taking some time to learn strategies would speed up the learning process instead of slowing it down as many would believe. A learner who knows about learning processes and who is aware of the way they

interpret new information is a learner who is prepared to be autonomous. However, if you do not see the importance of strategies in learning and decide to start learning a language without properly understanding the underlying processes. In that case, you will likely stumble on various occasions which can easily frustrate you. Sometimes the fastest way to move forward is to take a step back.

Nowadays the use of the mother tongue (Spanish in the Colombian context) has been introduced in the EFL classroom and got great acceptance from both learners and teachers because it brings a familiar and sort of more relaxed environment. Learners' performance can be affected by the pressure of only using the target language inside the classroom leading them to avoid speaking when they do not feel sure about their level or knowledge about the topic matter during the class.

According to Cummins (1998):

> Conversational fluency in the home language tends to erode. This is frequently exacerbated by the temptation for teachers to encourage students to give up their first language and switch to English as their primary language of communication; however, the research evidence suggests that this retards rather than expedites academic progress in English.

Spanish use inside the classroom can be considered a strategy students use to go on whenever their English knowledge is limited, evocating a natural way to use both languages as a bilingual person may do. This does not imply they are making mistakes but it is a way to move on and accomplish their communicative goals.

EFL educators should reconsider what is a mistake. Historically, traditional education has had an impact on numerous generations of EFL learners, making them believe mistakes when speaking English in an EFL classroom were a sign of failure and not part of a process. Mistakes are much more complex than they look and analyzing them can be beneficial in the

classroom to understand why they happen. Additionally, the perception EFL learners have about mistakes has to change. Mistakes have to be seen as opportunities for improvement. Without mistakes, there would not be room for learning.

Limitations

Taking into account our research required us to record our participants' voices, we consider this influenced each one of them to a different degree depending on their English proficiency. We noticed, for example, that some of them would make some mistakes that they normally would not make when we were not recording our sessions so clearly there was more at stake for them knowing we would base our research on their interventions. This is a common aspect of interviewing in qualitative research, participants may undergo stress or anxiety. However, we also consider that, even if there was a slightly additional nervousness to them, this also helped our research because we could see how our participants coped in a seemingly "high-stakes situation".

The access to relevant information for our research was also a challenge. Even though Spanish is one of the most spoken languages in the world, it is worth remembering each variety of Spanish is unique on its own, meaning some of the research we found to nurture our research would not always align completely even if it was carried out in a Spanish speaking context. Research from Spain or other Latin American countries would have results that did not match all the criteria we were looking for. Colombian Spanish (as any other variety of Spanish) has a set of particularities when spoken that must be understood from the root to analyze how the learning process of English might be affected by it.

Further Research

Identifying, categorizing, and analyzing the errors of non-native English speakers is a very complex task because we cannot simply generalize and put them all in the same bag. The most frequent errors of non-native English speakers who grew up speaking Mandarin,

Russian, French, etc., are certainly not the same most frequent errors of non-native English speakers who grew up speaking Spanish (or, more specifically, Colombian Spanish in this case). Thus, further research in a more local context to gain some more insights into this area would be particularly interesting, especially considering we also noticed a lack of sources that would talk about it more in-depth.

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Appendix

A. Consent Form template.

Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to

- I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interventions in class being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the document.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalization I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

_____

Signature of participant

Signature of researchers

We believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

_____ _____

Signature of researcher Signature of researcher

Taken from:

https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/assets/pdf/Participant%20consent%20form%20template.pdf

B. Transcript excerpt.

Student:
Yes. In my…town- in my town, em, have the activity- have the- have the activity, eh, have the activity…beginning- beginning to the Novena? Eh, have the…plays- plays music at the- how do I say "bocinas"?

Teacher:
Speakers.

Student:
Speakers? Yes, Coach. Speakers, um, in all town, yes? Uh, be- beginning to the 5:00 AM. The music, eh, "villancicos"?

Teacher:
Christmas carols.

Student:
Christmas…

Teacher:
Carols.

Student:
Carols. Christmas carols, eh, in the speakers.

Teacher:
For all the town at 5:00 AM? My goodness, they don't sleep.

Student:
Is the…how do you say "despertador"?

Teacher:
Alarm clock.

Student:
Is the alarm clown the town. It's the traditional that the music, eh, Christmas carols in the…in the center of town.

Done with: https://www.descript.com/ free version

C. Coping Strategies chart excerpt.

COPING STRATEGIES					
			Use of Spanish		
Hesitation [H]	Repetition [R]	Self-monitoring [SM]	Translanguaging	Literal translation	Clarification
1 *I don't…how to say…I don't look the bag*	1 *in my rest day is- is…I prefer the movie home, movie at home.*	1 *in my rest day is- is…I prefer the movie home, movie at home.*	1 *Eh, no, eh, "bueno".*	1 *The- the plan…if it's my friend, is- is better the cinema,* *If I am hanging out with my friends, the cinema is better.*	1 *how do I say "por lo menos"?*
2 *In the- in the moment, the Cine Colombia, I don't…how to say…I don't look the bag*	2 *The- the plan…if it's my friend, is- is better the cinema,*	2 *I don't…how to say…I don't look the bag*	2 *Yes. If- if I don't…"requiere revisar".*	2 *In the- in the moment, the Cine Colombia, I don't…how to say…I don't look the bag* *At the moment, Cine Colombia doesn't check your bag.*	2 *Um…for example, in- in December, how do we say "estreno"?*
3 *Eh…depend of the…plan?*	3 *it's good for the…meeting with…meeting with…with them?*	3 *Is the be- is the most…"taquillera"? Is the most famous- movie around the world.*	3 *Is a lawyer and the- the…in the lawyer firm…"firma"? Office.*	3 *but in- in- in all case don't…don't…don't it.* *but it's not like that in all cases*	3 *how do we say "juntar"?*
4 *it's good for the…meeting with…meeting with…with them?*	4 *five the…price? Five- five percent the price?*	4 *Is a lawyer and the- the…in the lawyer firm…"firma"? Office.*	4 *She-Hulk is the de- "defensor" of hero- heroes.*		4 *how do we say "discriminada"?*
5 *I…I lear- I learned the…I ler- I le- I learned- I learned about the…about the…how do we say "lealtad"?*	5 *The last series, eh, that watch- watch me is-*				5 *I…I lear- I learned the…I ler- I le- I learned- I learned about the…about the…how do we say "lealtad"?*

D. Mistakes chart excerpt.

MISTAKES				
Word Order [WO]	**Conjugation [CG]**	**Wrong Word [WW]**	**Pronunciation [P]**	**Missing Word [MW]**
1 *it's good for the… meeting with… meeting with…with them?* Meeting them **is good**.	1 *Eh…my boyfriend have the Cineco Card.* My boyfriend **has** the Cineco Card.	1 *it's good for the… meeting with… meeting with…with them?* **Meeting ~~with~~ them** is good.	1 b**ag** /bæg/	1 *five the…price? Five-five percent the price?* **Fifty** percent **of** the price.
2 *The last series, eh, that watch- watch me is-* The last series that **I watched was-**	2 *Eh…depend of the… plan?* **depends** on the plan.	2 *I go to the cinema the…Wednesday* I go to the ciema **on** Wednesday.	2 f**a**m**ou**s /eɪ/ /ə/	2 *Is…is easy go to the cinema.* **It's** easy go to the cinema.
3 *No it's possible that the smart girl* A beautiful girl **can't be smart**.	3 *The last series, eh, that watch- watch me is-* The last series that **I watched was-**	3 *five the…price? Five-five percent the price?* **Fifty** percent **of** the price.	3 s**eri**e**s** (*pronounced almost like "serious"*) /ɪ/ /iz/	3 *Yes, is good.* Yes, **it's** good.
4 *Loyalty…loyalty value.* Loyalty…**the value of loyalty**.	4 *she have the powerful that Hulk made.* she **got** the Hulk's powers.	4 *one…one time in the week.* **once a** week.	4 c**ou**s**i**n /ʌzə/	4 *Um, more or less seven…seven pesos?* More or less seven **thousand** Pesos?
		5 *The Santa Fe mall is near the- the my home.* The Santa Fe mall is near **~~the~~** my home.	5 bl**oo**d (*pronounced like "blonde"*) /ʌ/	5 *Is the be- is the most…"taquillera"?* **It's** the most "taquillera"?