“My ideal boyfriend have to love me no matter what.”

A comparative study of errors in English subject-verb agreement in Swedish students’ writing in Spain and in Sweden
Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of a third language’s possible effect on learners’ second language acquisition. There is research how a first language affects the acquisition of a second language and that research has shown that a first language does affect the learning of an additional language in different ways. Even though it is proven that languages do influence each other in learning processes there is very little previous research that studies if and how a third language can be affected by or affect a learner’s second language. To investigate possible differences in error-making, the first research question is to investigate what kind of errors the students make. The most common errors that students make are when subject-verb agreement is noncontiguous. The second research question is to see if Swedish students who know Spanish make different errors in English subject-verb agreement than Swedish students who do not know Spanish. This study finds that there are slight differences in how Swedish students who know Spanish and students who do not know Spanish make errors with English subject-verb agreement. The difference is that the students who know Spanish make fewer errors with noncontiguous subject-verb agreement, especially in relative clauses and with coordinated verb phrases. The fact that these students make fewer errors with noncontiguous subject-verb agreement may be an indication that they have a greater understanding of this grammatical feature.

Key words: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), first language (L1), second language (L2), third language, transfer, subject-verb agreement, error analysis, contiguous/noncontiguous subject-verb agreement
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1. Introduction

English is the biggest second language (L2) in the world today and in a world that keeps becoming smaller and that has approximately 6000 languages, there is a need for knowledge of common languages. In Sweden today, we are constantly exposed to the English language and to many of us it has become a natural part of our daily lives. Children growing up in Sweden probably learn a great part of their English outside the classroom and the fact that the learning of English takes place both outside and inside the classroom contributes to the fact that English can nowadays be called a second language to Swedes (Saville-Troike 2006: 8 ff.). There is much research on how Second Language Acquisition (SLA) takes place and to what extent a learner’s first language (L1) affects the acquisition of the second language (L2). A person’s L1 has been considered to be a major influential factor as to how learners make errors in L2 and all errors that language learners made were related to language structure in the learners’ L2. This view has somewhat changed and now it is known that L1 affects SLA learners’ L2 but that this takes place in a very complex way. It is difficult to predict in what ways L1 affects L2 since there are many factors that contribute to learning a language, such as age, motivation, aptitude and personality for example. However, a few particular errors have been shown to be rather common among SLA learners who have different first languages. One thing that many Swedish learners have difficulties with is the English subject-verb agreement in third person singular. There are different explanations as to why Swedes seem to find English subject-verb agreement difficult but one reason might be that this type of grammatical feature does not exist in Swedish (Källkvist & Petersson 2006). In Spanish, on the other hand, subject-verb agreement is very frequently used since all verbs are conjugated according to their subject. Therefore it would be interesting to see if there is a difference in how students who know Spanish and students who do not know Spanish make errors with English subject-verb agreement. That is, to see if an understanding of subject-verb agreement in Spanish may affect Swedish students’ error-making with agreement in English. Almost all research that investigates how different languages affect each other refers to how students’ first language influences other language learning. To the best of my knowledge, there is almost no research on how foreign language learning gets affected by or affects L1 and L2. This is why studies are needed that can help to fill this research gap. Today, almost all Swedish students in high school study an additional language to Swedish and English, which means that they study at least their L1, an L2 and a third language simultaneously. Therefore it is important to extend the knowledge in how students’ foreign language learning may affect or be affected by previous language knowledge so that students can learn how to benefit from simultaneous language learning. Hopefully, this essay may serve as a small example that different language learning processes might have an effect on each other and increase the knowledge of how a foreign language can affect SLA.
1.1 Aim and scope

The aim of this study is to investigate if Swedish students who live in Spain and know Spanish make different errors with English subject-verb agreement than Swedish students who live in Sweden and do not know Spanish. If there are differences, it would be interesting to see if there are any patterns that may indicate that the students’ knowledge of Spanish affect their error-making with English subject-verb agreement. Since there is evidence that an L1 affects the learning of an L2 it might also be possible that a foreign language has an influence on learning an L2. Therefore it would be interesting to see if Spanish as a foreign language can affect the learning of English as an L2. The overall purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of how a third language may affect SLA and, to investigate this, the following questions will be asked:

- What kind of errors do the students make with subject-verb agreement?
- Does the error-making with English subject-verb agreement differ between students who know Spanish and students who do not know Spanish?
- Among the students who know Spanish, are there any similarities in error-making with English subject-verb agreement between those who take an English A course and those who take an English C course?
2. Background

In this section, different background information will be accounted for and discussed within the different areas the study falls under. Spanish subject-verb agreement as well as English subject-verb agreement will be presented and explained.

2.1 Spanish Subject-Verb Agreement

Agreement is when a word adjusts its form and is conjugated according to another word, and in subject-verb agreement the finite verb is conjugated according to its subject. In Spanish, all verbs are conjugated according to the subject and these subjects are different grammatical persons and numbers. Also, there is subject-verb agreement in all tenses (Gómez Torrego 1998: 262). There is no similar grammatical feature in present-day Swedish. There are three persons, the first person that involves the speaker, the second person that involves the hearer and the third person that involves any others. Every person has one singular and one plural form (Yule 2006: 75 ff.). The following shows examples of each person with verbs in the present tense in Spanish:

\[
\begin{align*}
canto &= \text{I sing}, \\
cantas &= \text{you sing}, \\
canta &= \text{he/she sings}, \\
cantamos &= \text{we sing}, \\
cantáis &= \text{you sing and} \\
cantan &= \text{they sing.}
\end{align*}
\]

We can see that all verbs have different verb endings. For example, in the first person the ending -o is added to the stem of the verb to indicate that it is first person singular who sings and in the fourth example -amos is added to the stem of the verb to show that it is first person plural who sings. The fact that verbs always need to be conjugated according to their subjects means that the subject and the verb of a phrase are dependent on each other. If person or number changes the verb has to change too in order to use subject-verb agreement correctly (Gómez Torrego 1998: 262). Normally, it does not involve great problems to conjugate verbs according to their subjects for learners of Spanish. Still, there are a few examples where errors have been shown to occur with more frequency, for example with separated subjects, subjects that take either the plural or the singular and agreement in subordinated clauses (see section 2.2). Subject-verb agreement might be affected by its placing in a phrase and by different verbs, for example. The reason why this may create difficulties is that each case needs to be considered individually when conjugating.
the verb according to the subject. To know about all different cases and exceptions requires rather extended knowledge of the Spanish learner (Fält 2000: 390 ff.).

2.2 English Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement differs in English and in Swedish: in English the subject can be singular or plural and the verb needs to be conjugated accordingly while, in Swedish, the same subject-verb agreement does not exist. In English, in the present tense indicative with lexical verbs and primary auxiliaries, there is always subject-verb agreement with the third person singular but in past tense this only occurs with the verb ‘be’ (see Biber et al. 1999: 180). Here are two examples of subject-verb agreement in the present tense: She sings and They sing. As can be seen in the first example, with she the verb takes the third person singular –s while third person plural does not. In the English language, third person singular is the most important agreement and this singular subject takes a singular verb (Greenbaum & Quirk 2010: 214 ff.). However, there are three kinds of subject-verb agreement in English, grammatical concord, notional concord and concord of proximity. Grammatical concord is the general rule for subject-verb agreement where a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb and it is the head of a noun phrase that decides which number the verb needs to have (Greenbaum & Quirk 2010: 214-215). Two examples of grammatical concord are:

My son watches TV
My sons watch TV.

When using notional concord the verb agrees with the meaning of a subject rather than its form, for example, if a subject can be seen as a unity it can take the third person singular subject-verb concord.

(1) “King prawns cooked in chili, salt and pepper was very much better, a simple dish succulently executed.” (Biber et al.1999: 187)

Concord of proximity means that the verb agrees with the noun that is closest to it even if it is not the head of a noun phrase. This can result in the fact that the verb agrees with a singular subject when the head of the noun phrase is a plural noun. One example of concord of proximity found in Biber et al. (1999: 189) is

(2) “[One] of the [girls] have got bronchitis.”
According to Thagg-Fisher (1985), there are some cases when subject-verb agreement poses problems for Swedish learners of English and these cases are used to categorize the students’ errors in this study. There are eight categories that provide difficulties with subject-verb agreement for the students. The categories will be briefly presented and exemplified with my own examples. Also, the subject and the verb will be marked in bold to make it easier to see the subject-verb agreement in each category. The first category is called “contiguous errors”, which means that the subject and the verb are in immediate contact (Thagg-Fisher 1985:11), for example: She is nice. The second category is called “relative clauses”. In relative clauses a relative pronoun separates the subject and the verb. Still, it is the head of the noun phrase that dictates the agreement (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 363-364), as the following example illustrates: The girl who sings. Then there is the category “coordinated verb phrases”. Here two verb phrases (or more) share the same subject and they are coordinated by the word and (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 277): He needs to clean the house and buy dinner before work. The fourth category, “intervening adverbials”, is when an adverbial is an intervening element between the subject and the verb (Thagg-Fisher 1985: 63): He often eats pizza. The fifth category is called “coordinated subjects” and here one verb has two subjects and the verb should therefore be in plural (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 273-274): My sister and me like to bike. In the category “intervening postmodifier” the head of the noun phrase is modified by a clause. Often, there is an intervening relative clause that describes the head (Thagg-Fisher 1985: 63-65), for example: The girl who sings is from London. Relative clauses are not to be confused with relative clauses as intervening postmodifiers. Difficult nouns can create difficulties with subject-verb agreement and one of the most common nouns that causes difficulties is people. People is a plural noun and therefore the verb needs to be in the plural (Thagg-Fisher 1985: 74-75): People are nice in general. The last category is called “there as formal subject”. These sentence structures have changed form in order to put the notional subject in the end of the sentence, so called end weight, to emphasize the subject. Instead of putting the subject before the verb there is used as formal subject and replaces the notional subject, still, it is the notional subject according to which the verb should be conjugated (Greenbaum-Quirk 1990: 424-425). Here is an example to illustrate this: There are many girls attending this course. In cases like these the user needs to know about each specific case to know how use subject-verb agreement correctly, and a learner who does not have the knowledge of these different cases makes errors (Svartvik & Sager 1986: 342 ff.).
3. Previous Research

This section will begin with a brief discussion of second language acquisition (SLA) and then the focus will be on how different languages may affect each other and errors in language learning, which falls under SLA and transfer (Kellerman & Sharwood Smith. 1986). Finally, I will present two studies on Swedish English learners’ error-making and difficulties with English subject-verb agreement.

3.1 Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of what, how and why a learner acquires additional languages to the mother tongue (Saville-Troike 2006: 2-3). The term acquisition means that a learner’s development in the second language is gradual and used naturally in different situations that require communication. Acquisition differs from learning since learning is when a student consciously learns certain features such as grammar and vocabulary, for example. (Yule 1996: 190 ff.). SLA has been a source of interest for a long time but before the 1960s most studies were made to help teachers develop their language teaching methods. In the 1960’s SLA was studied from a behaviouristic, theoretical point of view but today SLA is considered to be theory neutral. Another change is that SLA investigations went from focusing on the teaching process to focusing on the learning process and this change was the beginning of SLA research as we know it today (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991: 5). It was believed that old habits that students had learned could get in the way of new habits and that learners’ first language would affect the learning of a new language negatively if two language features in both languages did not correspond. Then, there would be negative transfer (also called interference) and errors could be made. On the other hand, if two language features correspond in L1 and L2, the transfer would be positive (Ellis 1986: 20 ff.). Still, negative transfer meant errors, and errors had a central role in research. The current perception was that they should be avoided. This view, with its methods, was criticized for not giving a full picture of learners’ knowledge in their second language and that it thus is difficult to make generalizations about learners’ SLA from empirical studies of only learners’ errors. Because of this, the relevance of the L1’s influence on SLA in research diminished considerably (Ellis 1986:30 ff.). However, the view of errors changed to become of a more descriptive character and language transfer was re-examined. The new aims were to study more precisely when knowledge from an L1 to an L2 is more likely to be used (Ellis 1986: 32 ff.). Also, errors were viewed as sources of information rather than something that should be avoided. With this change, the method of Error Analysis became more qualitative than quantitative and started to be frequently used again (Gass & Selinker 2001: 118-119). Another object of current research on SLA learners’ error-making is what factors have contributed to making errors. Some
factors that have been proven to influence error-making are, for example, situational factors, linguistic input, linguistic output, learner differences, learner processes (Ellis 1986: 16). One factor that is particularly relevant for this study is learner differences. Learner differences are described differently by different researchers, but here only the linguistic perspective will be accounted for. Linguists claim that the major differences between learners are their identity and their relationship with their L1 and L2 (Saville-Troike 2006:5). Transfer is another important factor that affects error-making in an L2 and that is relevant for this study (Ellis 1986: 7).

3.2 Transfer – how L1 affects L2

Transfer (also called crosslinguistic influence) means that the learner uses features such as grammar and sounds from L1 when producing L2 and it has a history of being one of the primary focal points of SLA research (Yule 2006: 167). L2 learners’ language production has been shown to contain many errors that can be traced both to the learner’s L1 and L2 and it might seem to be a system of its own, called interlanguage. Many researchers consider interlanguage to be the basis of a learner’s L2 production (Yule 2006: 167). Transfer has been considered to be something a learner has to overcome in order to acquire an L2 and how L1 affects L2 was the main focal point of SLA research. As stated above, the significance of transfer in SLA has somewhat changed. In current research researchers disagree on how L1 affects L2. Some researchers believe L1 is very important and others minimize the effect L1 has on L2 in SLA (Ellis 1986: 19). However, the fact that L1 has some influence on L2 is generally accepted, but nowadays it is taken into account that two languages need a certain degree of similarity for transfer to take place (Ellis 1986: 33). Whenever errors are made due to transfer it is called interference. What has changed is the view of interference factors that are now considered to be multiple, complex and a valid object of research (Ellis 1986: 39 ff.). For example, L1 interference is considered to be a learner strategy in the process of acquiring a second language and when learners do not know how to communicate something in the L2 it is probable that they will resort to their L1 knowledge to solve the problem (Ellis 1986:37 ff.). Errors are manifestations of transfer since they show what a learner knows, to some extent, and they may indicate what factors have contributed to making the error or what strategies learners might have used to avoid errors (Ellis 1986: 35 ff.). Further learner strategies to take into consideration in transfer are avoidance, over-use and facilitation. Avoidance is when SLA learners try to avoid using language features in their L2 that do not exist in their L1. For example, a study has shown that Chinese learners of English made fewer errors with relative clauses than Persian learners, and that this was due to the fact that the Chinese learners avoided using relative clauses when writing. Over-use is when a learner over-uses a certain language feature in comparison to how frequently a native speaker of that language would use it. A common case of over-use that can be found amongst learners of English is to overgeneralize the English regular past tense inflection -ed with irregular past tense verbs, for example readed. Finally, facilitation means that a learner’s L1 facilitates the learning of the L2, it is also called positive
transfer. Some examples of the effects of facilitation that can be observed are a reduced number of errors and correct use of different corresponding language features at an early stage of the SLA process (Ellis 1994: 302 ff.). As mentioned above, reduction of errors in SLA can, however, depend on various different factors. Except from the strategies mentioned above markedness may also have an effect on transfer. It refers to the way in which a word is changed to get a certain meaning (Ellis 1994: 28 ff.). An unmarked word is the norm and is considered to be neutral and in its base form, while a marked word is changed and not seen as the norm (Greenbaum & Quirk 2010: 214 ff.). Markedness affects SLA because learners seem to avoid transfer of marked forms to a much greater extent than unmarked forms, especially if the form is unmarked in L1 (Ellis 1994: 28 ff.).

3.3 Having problems with English subject-verb agreement is a fact

Studies from previous research have shown that English subject-verb agreement with third person singular provides difficulties for Swedish learners. Källkvist & Petersson (2006) carried out a study that challenges the belief that the concept of subject-verb agreement is simple and easy to understand for Swedish students. Källkvist & Petersson (2006) had students formulate rules to explain this grammatical feature after having seen a few examples of English subject-verb agreement. The students’ ability to grasp and correctly understand the concept is surprisingly low, which shows us that Swedish students do have problems with English subject-verb agreement. 59% of the 14-years old participants and 54% of the 17-year old participants that could not formulate correct rules regarding English subject-verb agreement in a simplified way using adequate terms by looking at example sentences with get and gets. Also, in the study Källkvist & Petersson (2006) reach the conclusion that the rules of subject-verb agreement are complex and not easy for students to fully understand. Some reasons that the study has found why Swedish L2 learners of English find this grammatical feature difficult are that the third person singular morpheme –s is similar to the plural –s for nouns and the genitive –s, which may cause confusion. Also, it may be difficult for students to identify the subject in cases when it is separated from the verb. What is more, transfer from Swedish to English may affect students’ difficulties with English subject-verb agreement (Källkvist & Petersson 2006: 130-131).

Another investigation of students’ errors with subject-verb agreement is Thagg-Fisher’s study *The Sweet Sound of Concord* (1985) in which she investigates university students’ error-making with English subject-verb agreement and what is the source of the errors. The study is conducted on university students taking English courses and she looks at different language features that can affect students’ error-making with English subject-verb agreement.

Her conclusion is that errors occur in all categories where subject-verb agreement occurs. The case where the fewest written errors are made is when subject-verb agreement is contiguous and when grammatical concord coincides with notional concord (see Greenbaum & Quirk, section...
There are various deviations from the rules of grammatical concord that cause difficulties for Swedish English learners. The sources of errors that Thagg-Fisher has found are formal, syntactic or notional factors that, in turn, are linked to the subject noun phrase or the context in which the error is found (Thagg-Fisher 1985: 186-187). This means that errors are caused by difficult subject nouns, subject-verb noncontiguity (see section 2.2), overgeneralization of the third person singular –s morpheme, interference from Swedish and slips (Thagg-Fisher 1985: 187 ff.).
4. Design and gathering of data

The analysis will consist of two parts. The first part will be quantitative and answer the question what kind of errors the students make. This part of the analysis will be quantitative and statistics will be used to draw tables of the frequency of errors found. The second part of my analysis will be qualitative and answer the second question if the students’ errors differ. Error Analysis will be used to analyze how students make certain errors and to get information about their error-making with subject-verb agreement.

4.1 Methods and restrictions

The first part of the study is quantitative and therefore statistical methods will be used in order to summarize gathered facts and information about the students’ errors in a compressed way (Essaiasson et al. 2003: 393 ff.). This method will be used to answer the question what kind of errors the students make.

Furthermore, to answer the second question, if the students’ errors differ, the qualitative method Error Analysis will be used. Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005: 54 ff) describe Error Analysis in *Analyzing Learner Language*. Error Analysis is used to get information about learners’ language and to predict what different errors may be made by different learners and why this is. According to Corder (Corder 1974, in Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005:57) there are different steps when carrying out an Error Analysis:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors
5. Error evaluation

These are also the steps that will be followed in this study. The collected sample is, firstly, 30 essays that were collected during my school placement at the Swedish School (El Colegio Sueco), in Fuengirola, Spain. The remaining 45 were collected from a Swedish Upper Secondary School in Uppsala, Sweden. The students were given the instructions that they were not allowed to use any forms of dictionaries or grammar checking programs. They were also given a title for their essays, “My ideal boyfriend/girlfriend” and the approximate length of the text (200 words). The title was chosen so that the students would write in the third person singular in order to provide more examples of subject-verb agreement in English. The study will be restricted to investigate the specific research question of errors students make with English subject-verb agreement in the
third person singular and the third person plural. All cases with third person will be analyzed in categories, such as “coordinated subjects” or “contiguous” errors. After having collected the samples an identification of errors will be carried out by studying and categorizing students’ errors and mistakes with subject-verb agreement and here the categorization is based on Thagg-Fisher’s (1985) classification (see section 2.2). What is more is that the study is restricted to analyze absolute errors. This means that only the grammatically right form of the verbs will be accepted (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005: 59).

The analysis will start by introducing tables and statistics that describe each group’s errors in a quantitatively to see what kinds of errors the students make. To answer the question if the students make errors differently, the second part of the analysis will analyze why errors may have been made, in a qualitative way. Previous research will be considered but, due to the nature of the study and results, the concepts from previous research will be discussed when they are relevant. Finally, an error evaluation will be made in the conclusion in order to evaluate the students’ errors and see if the error-making differs between the Spain groups and the Sweden groups (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005: 62 ff.). Also, possible similarities in error-making between the two Spain groups will be compared. This is done in order to control if both Spain groups’ errors differ from Sweden A’s and Sweden C’s errors in the same way. If there are similarities, it is more probable that the Spain groups make errors differently because they have different language knowledge than the Sweden groups, which may increase the reliability of the study.

The method of Error Analysis is criticized for not giving a complete picture of students’ language skills since it only focuses on the errors. This criticism is valid since errors are the only focus in this method. What is more is that in order to make generalizations, extensive research is needed, and maybe even research that gives a fuller picture of students’ language knowledge that includes students’ strengths and not only weaknesses. This study may not be able to form a sufficient contribution to make generalizations about students’ errors regarding subject-verb agreement in English. However, it might be able to give a small insight into how different languages in language learning affect each other using the example of Spanish’s influence on English.
5. Material

The material used in this study is a sample of learner language of 75 student essays that consist of approximately 200 words each. All essays are found in Uppsala Learner English Corpus (ULEC). ULEC is a corpus where Swedish junior and senior high school students' essays are gathered and studied by researchers and university students who want to study learners' errors in written English. The essays may vary in length but most of them are approximately 200 words. The majority of studies carried out are done by teacher students with the purpose of analyzing different aspects of English learners' language. ULEC contains approximately 136 000 words and all essays are anonymous and codified (see Johansson & Geisler 2009). Here is an example of one code for each essay in the corpus:

\(<D\ 20110210><G\ DESC><Y\ 3><K\ C><P\ S><S\ F><A\ 18>\)

Johansson & Geisler (2009: 182) explain what the codes refer to “D = date of composition, G = genre/register, Y = school year, K = level of English course in senior high school, P = type of program in senior high school, S = gender and A = age.” Some codification is necessary in order to carry out comparative studies but students’ anonymity is of great importance due to ethical concerns.

Most studies that use the ULEC material have the aim to investigate results of certain grammar teaching and junior and senior high schools students’ English grammar knowledge. Errors are often identified and analyzed and, also, sometimes compared to different English courses, different programs in senior high school or to different age groups (see Johansson & Geisler 2009: 183-185). In my study I have chosen to gather half of my ULEC material from the Swedish School in Fuengirola (El Colegio Sueco), Spain. It is a Swedish school where the majority of students in senior high school lives with Spanish families and speak Spanish in their everyday life. They also study Spanish at level 4 or higher in senior high school, which means that they have a rather high theoretical Spanish knowledge. That is, they have studied Spanish grammar, for example, for at least four years. The reason for choosing this group of students was to compare it with students in a Swedish senior high school and see if the two groups make different errors with English subject-verb agreement.

5.1 Selection and participants

There are two classes from the Swedish School in Fuengirola (Colegio Sueco) where the students study Spanish at level four and speak Spanish in their daily lives. Also, there are two classes with students who have not studied any Spanish or who have studied it below level four and, most importantly, who have never lived in a Spanish speaking country. The four groups are called
Spain A, Spain C, Sweden A and Sweden C. Spain A consists of 12 students and they all live in Spain and study English A in a Swedish senior high school. Spain C consist of students who live in Spain and study English C. This group consists of 18 students. Sweden A has 20 students who live in Sweden and study English A in senior high school and in Sweden C there are 25 students who live in Sweden and study English C. These four groups were selected because they have different language knowledge. Their errors with English subject-verb agreement will be compared to see if there are differences.

5.2 Ethical concerns

The students who participated in the study are anonymous. The only information the students were asked to fill in when writing their essays was their age, sex and if they study English in level A or C, this is due to ethничal concern of protecting the students’ integrity. Previous to the writing, all students were informed about ULEC, what would happen to their essays, the topic of the essays and that participation was optional.

Also, considering the reliability of the essay the students were not allowed to use any aids, such as dictionaries or grammar checking programs, during their writing. However, it is impossible to eliminate the risk completely of students using aids when they were writing since they used computers with internet connection. They were supervised during the whole task.
6. Presentation and Discussion of Results

This study intends to investigate if and how error-making might differ between the two Spain groups and the two Sweden groups. First, there will be a presentation of the four groups’ overall results and then, there will be a presentation of each group’s results to see what kind of errors they make with subject-verb agreement. This will be followed by a comparison that will be made between all four groups’ errors in the different categories. Lastly, Spain A will be compared to Spain C in order to see if they have any similarities in their error-making in comparison to the two Sweden groups. The two last sections will investigate if the students’ errors-making differ.

6.1 Overall results

In this section, the overall results of all four groups of students will be presented and briefly discussed in order to get an overall view of the occurrences of subject-verb agreement and what kinds of errors the students have made.

Table 1. Summary of the four groups, their total occurrences of subject-verb agreement and the total number of each group’s errors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Total nr of students</th>
<th>Total nr of errors</th>
<th>Total nr of occurrences</th>
<th>Total % of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain A</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain C</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden C</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at Table 1 we can see that the occurrences of subject-verb agreement in the different groups differ. We can see that Spain C and Sweden C use subject-verb agreement more than students who take the A course. What is also clear is that the students in Sweden have more occurrences of subject-verb agreement than the students in Spain. However, this is probably due to the fact that both classes in Sweden are bigger than both classes in Spain. Since the classes are of different sizes, the numbers in Table 1 may be confusing. In fact, Spain A has used subject-verb agreement an average 14 times while the average for Sweden A is 11 times. The average Spain C student has used subject-verb agreement 13 times and, the average Sweden C student, 14 times.

If we look at the error percentage of all four groups we can see that the major difference is between the A groups and the C groups, which is expected. This may tell us that students who take the English C course feel more secure using subject-verb agreement since they both do it to a greater extent and they also make fewer errors.
To summarize the overall results we can see that there is no real difference in occurrences of English subject-verb agreement between the four groups of students. However, there seems to be a slight difference in how the Spain groups make errors in comparison to the Sweden groups. Spain C has the lowest percentage of errors of all four groups. Also, as expected, there is a notable difference between the A groups and the C groups, which might be due to the fact that English C students have better knowledge in how to use subject-verb agreement correctly.

6.1.1 The four groups’ individual errors with subject-verb agreement

In this section, the results of each group will be presented separately in order to provide a fuller picture of their use and error-making with subject-verb agreement in the different categories.

6.1.1.1 Spain A

Spain A is the smallest one out of all groups in the study, they have the lowest number of occurrences and the highest percentage of errors.

Table 2. Spain A’s errors and correct use of English subject-verb agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>% of correct use</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contiguous</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated verb phrases</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening adverbial</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening postmodifier</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People as subject</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There as formal subject</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, “contiguous” is the category with most subject-verb agreement occurrences among this group of students (for explanations of categories see section 2.2). Since contiguous subject-verb agreement is often easier to conjugate correctly than noncontiguous it is surprising that the students make 13% errors in this category. Cases where the subject-verb agreement is contiguous and there is notional concord are when students tend to make few errors, still, Spain A has the highest number of errors in this category. One explanation might be that contiguous subject-verb agreement is more commonly used than other, more complex, structures.

If we look at the errors made in the category “relative clauses”, we see that the error percentage is only 11%. Moreover, we can see that the students have used relative clauses considerably fewer times than structures with contiguous subject-verb agreement. With “coordinated verb phrases”, on the other hand, it appears that the students make errors rather frequently. In 43% of all occurrences of coordinated verb phrases Spain A makes errors. This
may tell us that they find it difficult to agree both verbs with subject, since the last verb and the subject are noncontiguous.

By looking at Table 2, Spain A do not appear to have difficulties using subject-verb agreement correctly if there is an intervening adverbial between them. Looking at coordinated subject, however, it is clear that the students do not know how to use subject-verb agreement correctly. This may be because they conjugate the verb only according to the last subject, also called concord of proximity.

It does not seem to be uncommon that the students have intervening postmodifiers and when they use them they seem to have little difficulties with subject-verb agreement. Here the students seem to understand that the head of the noun phrase is semantically singular or plural and therefore are able to conjugate the verb accordingly.

There are only two occurrences with people as subject and subject-verb agreement. In of these cases the students have made an error and conjugated the verb according to a singular subject.

Errors can be expected in cases when there functions as a formal subject in existential constructions (see Greenbaum & Quirk, section 18.31), however, as we can see in Table 2 the students have used it correctly in all four cases.

6.1.1.2 Sweden A

Sweden A consists of 20 students. The percentage of errors made by this group is similar to the error percentage of Spain A.

Table 3. Sweden A’s errors and correct use of English subject-verb agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>% of correct use</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contiguous</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated verb phrases</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening adverbial</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening post modifier</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People as subject</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;There&quot; as formal subject</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the errors made where subject-verb agreement is contiguous, we can see that this group of students makes rather few errors even though the number of occurrences is quite high. This may tell us that the students know how to conjugate the verb according to the number of its subject when there is grammatical concord. The error-making in relative clauses is a bit more frequent, even though most students use subject-verb agreement correctly. However, with coordinated verb phrases the students seem to have difficulties since in 64% of all occurrences subject-verb agreement is incorrect.
Another category where errors are frequently made is subject-verb agreement with intervening adverbials. Here the students have made errors in 50% of the occurrences. In this category the subject-verb agreement is noncontiguous, which can bring difficulties for the students.

Also, in Sweden A, coordinated subjects have contributed to difficulties among the students. There is only one case of subject-verb agreement with coordinated subjects and there the verb is incorrectly conjugated. As coordinated subject, subject-verb agreement with an intervening postmodifier is also noncontiguous but considerably fewer errors are made in the latter category.

The two last categories do not occur in any of the students essays from this group and therefore I will not discuss these categories further here.

6.1.1.3 Spain C

Spain C is the group with the lowest total number of agreement errors even though they have the second highest number of subject-verb agreement occurrences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>% of correct use</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contiguous</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated verb phrases</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening adverbial</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated subjects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening post modifier</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peolpe as subject</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;There&quot; as formal subject</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we look at Table 4 we see that the category with most occurrences of subject-verb agreement is, as expected, the “contiguous” category and that very few errors are made in this category. It is probable that this group of students feels secure in conjugating the verb according to the number of its subject.

Even though many Swedes who are learning English find subject-verb agreement difficult in coordinated verb phrases, Spain C seems to know how to use subject-verb agreement correctly most times. Maybe this can be explained by the fact that the students are familiar with subject-verb concord in Spanish and might have a deeper understanding of it that they can apply when they produce English as well, so called facilitation. Also, the students mostly use English subject-verb agreement in a correct way with intervening adverbials. Even though the students have made more errors in the category of intervening adverbials they use English subject-verb agreement correctly in 87% of the cases.

The category of “coordinated subjects” is a category where this group of students has difficulties with subject-verb agreement. There are only five occurrences with coordinated subject
but in all of these the students have made agreement errors. In this category, subject-verb agreement is noncontiguous and may also mean difficulties for the students since subjects are separated as well. The students might conjugate the verb according to the subject that is closest to the verb.

If we look at the students’ errors with intervening postmodifiers we can see that there are not many errors made in this category. Even if the subject and the verb are noncontiguous, many times, the students seem to know according to what subject they should conjugate the verb.

There are only two occurrences of people as subject and the students have made errors in both these cases. It is clear that the group in general has found it difficult to know how to agree the subject and the verb with the plural noun people.

In the last category, “there as formal subject”, there is only one occurrence and the student has handled subject-verb agreement correctly.

### Sweden C

As is evident from Table 1 Sweden C makes rather few errors, even though it is the largest group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>% of correct use</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contiguous</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated verb phrases</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening adverbial</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated subjects</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening post modifier</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People as subject</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There as formal subject</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expected, this group of students has the highest number of occurrences of contiguous subject-verb agreement and only 4% of these cases are errors. This shows us that the group knows the rules for English grammatical concord. With the second category “relative clauses”, however, 16% are errors, which may be due to the fact that the subject and verb are noncontiguous.

Looking at the students’ errors with coordinated verb phrases, we can see that in almost a third of all occurrences they make errors. This category, as we have seen, often means difficulties since it is subject-verb noncontiguity and the students may find it difficult to know what subject according to which they should conjugate the verb. Intervening adverbials also makes the subject and the verb noncontiguous and this is probably the explanation why the students have made errors here as well.
There is only one occurrence of subject-verb agreement with a coordinated subject and the student has handled subject-verb agreement correctly.

In order to use subject-verb agreement correctly in a phrase with an intervening post modifier, it is necessary to know which noun is head of the noun phrase. If we look at the groups’ errors with intervening postmodifiers we can see that there are a few errors made here and a possible explanation to this may be that some students did not know which noun was the head.

There are two occurrences with people as subject and as regards subject-verb agreement one of these cases is correct, the other is not. In subject-verb agreement with people the verb takes the plural since people is a plural noun (see section 2.2) and some students may not know this and conjugate the verb in the singular instead.

The final category is subject-verb agreement with “there as a formal subject”. Here Sweden C has made errors in 40% of the cases. Because of the subject’s placement in there constructions some students might find it difficult to identify the real subject and make agreement errors.

6.2 Comparison of the errors made by all four groups in each category

Now, we have now looked at all the four groups and their errors as regards subject-verb agreement in English. This section contains of a comparison of the different groups’ errors in the different categories and it aims to investigate if there is a difference in error-making between the four groups.

Table 6. The errors of the different student groups categorized into sub-groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sp A errors</th>
<th>Swe A errors</th>
<th>Sp C errors</th>
<th>Swe C errors</th>
<th>Percentage out of all errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contiguous</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated verb phrases</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening adverbial</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated subjects</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening post modifier</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People as subject</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There as formal subject</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows us what errors are more common among all four groups of students. The three most common errors are, surprisingly, contiguous errors, errors in relative clauses and errors with coordinated verb phrases. Even though the number of errors is relatively low in the other
categories, the percentage of errors made is rather high in comparison to the first three categories.

### 6.2.1 Contiguous errors

As we can see, the contiguous errors constitute 42% of all cases with subject-verb agreement. It is surprising that the students make many errors in this category since subject-verb agreement is grammatical and the subject and the verb are not separated. Still, the “contiguous” category has the highest percentage of errors. Spain A has the highest error percentage and Spain C has the lowest. Both Sweden A and Sweden C make rather few errors in cases where the subject and the verb are contiguous.

Most contiguous errors that are made are cases with third person singular and where the students have not used the marked form by not adding the subject-verb agreement –s morpheme. A typical example looks like this:

(1) His body, that’s just amazing cause he **exercise** at the gym every day. (Female student, aged 16, Spain A)

These errors are rather spread out among the students and they might be made because the students avoid using the marked form that ends with the third person singular –s morpheme.

The second most common error in this category is with the verb **have** in third person singular, as can be seen in the example below:

(2) I want him to have a body which is very trained, he **have** to be tall, have green-brown eyes… (Female student, aged 16, Sweden C)

The students also make a few errors with agreement of third person plural subject and a singular verb, for example:

(3) He also needs too have good grades…also accept my parents, because they **means** the world to me (Female student, aged 18, Sweden C)

In example 3 the student has the third person singular –s morpheme with a plural subject, this can be seen as an overuse of the –s morpheme.

To summarize the category of contiguous errors we can see that Spain A has made most errors and Spain C has made fewest errors.

The most common error is when the students have simplified the structure and used the unmarked form without the third person singular –s morpheme.
6.2.2 Errors with relative clauses

The error percentage in this category diverges from the general pattern in that both C groups generally make fewer errors than the A groups. Spain C has the lowest percentage of errors and Sweden C has the highest.

The most common errors found in this category are made with a singular subject and the verb in plural, as in the example below:

(4) I would love a girl who \textbf{want} to hang out with me as much as possible… (Male student, aged 18, Sweden C)

In this example the noun \textit{girl} is singular, still, the verb is plural and a subject-verb agreement error is made. Difficulties with cases like this may be explained by the fact that the subject and the verb are noncontiguous and the students do not know according to which subject they should conjugate the verb. What is more, students may not know to whom \textit{who} refers.

All groups have also made errors with subject-verb agreement in relative clauses when the subject is plural and they have added the third person singular –s morpheme to the verb, for example:

(5) I think that it’s the small things that \textbf{counts}. (Female student, aged 16, Sweden A)
(6) From time to time she tells me kind words which \textbf{makes} me feel warm from the inside. (Male student, aged 17, Spain A)

In conclusion, we can see that since relative clauses are used rather frequently and that there are few errors made in this category. The error percentage is still quite low in most cases. The group that stands out the most is Sweden C. This is because they make most errors in this category, which diverges from the pattern that both C groups generally have a lower error percentage than the A groups. It is probable that errors in this category are made because the subject and the verb are noncontiguous.

6.2.3 Errors with coordinated verb phrases

All four groups’ error-making differs in this category and most groups have a rather high percentage of errors, with the exception of Spain C. Even though Spain C has used coordinated verb phrases almost as many times as Sweden C they make considerably fewer errors. Both C groups use coordinated verb phrases more frequently than the two A groups, which may tell us that the C groups may be more secure in using more complex sentence structures. Spain A’s error percentage in this category is lower than Sweden A’s percentage. Still, most errors with
coordinated verb phrases are similar, regardless of which group made the error. A typical subject-verb agreement error with coordinated verb phrase may look like the following example:

(7) My ideal man is tall, dark-heared and **have** muscular. (Female student, aged 17, Sweden C)
(8) …she’s home taking care of the house, and **make** sure that the kids have someone with them if they are sick… (Male student, aged 17, Spain A)

Just as we can see in these examples, in many of the cases where the students have made errors with coordinated verb phrases there are often additional intervening elements involved, such as subject complements, as in the examples above. Noncontiguous subject-verb agreement often provides difficulties and this may make it more difficult to agree the verb with the right subject because there are two intervening factors.

To summarize the results of this category we can see that most groups make errors rather frequently, with the exception of Spain C that makes quite few errors despite frequent use of coordinated verb phrases. In structures like this, the subject and the verb are noncontiguous, which, as expected, makes subject-verb agreement difficult for students.

### 6.2.4 Errors with intervening adverbials

There is a difference in frequency of the four groups’ subject-verb agreement errors with an intervening adverbial. However, the difference is mainly between the two A groups. Spain A has used intervening adverbials to a very limited extent, which also explains the group’s few errors in the category. The Sweden A group, on the other hand, has a few cases where intervening adverbials are used and, as we have seen, they make errors in 42% of the times. This shows us that even though they are correct most of the times they have some difficulties with using subject-verb agreement in these cases. As we can see in the examples below, intervening adverbials separate the subject and the verb:

(9) For example he opens the door to me… or he just **say** that he loves me before he goes to work. (Female student, aged 16, Sweden A)
(10) Trust is almost everything in a relationship, I know because I always had a problem trusting people and it just **get** so difficult! (Female student, aged 18, Spain C)

Both Spain C and Sweden C have a rather low error frequency with intervening adverbials. The two groups’ number of occurrences with intervening adverbials does not differ much in how their error percentage is in relation to each other in comparison to other categories. The low error percentage may be due to the fact that intervening adverbials also occur in Swedish and that the students are familiar with the structure.
To conclude the discussion of the four groups’ errors in this category we see that the two groups that differ the most are Spain A and Sweden A. The former has zero errors and two cases with intervening adverbials while Sweden A uses structures with intervening adverbials more frequently and, as expected, also makes more errors in this category. The two C groups’ performance in this category is rather similar, both tend to use structures with intervening adverbials and both have a rather low error percentage.

6.2.5 Errors with coordinated subjects

This category stands out from the other categories in that coordinated subjects are hardly used in the four groups. All groups seem to have difficulties when they use coordinated subjects since the error percentage is 100% in all groups but Sweden C. The divergent figures might be explained by the fact that the overall usage of coordinated subjects is very low. Spain C is the group that has used it the most (five times), but, they have made errors in all these cases. Examples 11 and 12 illustrate errors with coordinated subjects:

(11) Me and my girlfriend is having the same kind of humor, we laugh about the same things… (Male student, aged 16, Spain A)

(12) I don’t have a type of look that I go for but I admit that the dark hair and the olive skin makes my knees a bit weak. (Female student, aged 18, Spain C)

Difficulties may occur in this category since there are two subjects and students may only include the subject closest to the verb. We can also see that the students make subject-verb agreement errors by only conjugating the verbs according to the subjects closest to the verb.

To summarize, we can see that the students have all been rather restrictive in using coordinated subjects and three of the groups make errors in 100% of the cases. This seems to be mainly due to the fact that they have agreed the verb to the last of the two (or more) subjects.

6.2.6 Errors with intervening postmodifier

All groups use structures with postmodifiers and they also make rather few errors in this category. Sweden A has the highest error percentage of 20% and both C groups have an equally low percentage of errors of 8%. Spain A’s error percentage is 11%, which means that it is more similar to the two C groups’ than Sweden A’s error-making.

Most errors are made when the postmodifier is a relative clause:

(13) The first three things that I notice about a boy is his hair, eyes and his smile. (Female student, aged 17, Sweden A)
Relative clauses are noncontiguous and the intervening postmodifiers are often rather long. This is probably a reason why students find it difficult to find the right subject.

Another common postmodifier is to have a prepositional phrase, as in the example below:

(14) The most important things for me in a guy is that he is trustworthy… (Female student, aged 18, Spain C)

In this example, there are two prepositional phrases for me and in a guy and both of these are between the head of the noun phrase and the verb, which complicates subject-verb agreement. The student who made the error may have made it because she did not know according to what subject to conjugate the verb and therefore she might have used proximal concord. This means that she might have used the noun closest to the verb and made a subject-verb agreement error.

To summarize, we have seen that all groups have used intervening postmodifiers and that they make rather few errors with subject-verb agreement in this category. Sweden A, however, has a slightly higher error percentage than the other groups, but it is still not very high.

The postmodifier that causes most problems for all groups is when it consists of a relative clause.

6.2.7 Errors with people as subject

As we can see the plural noun people causes difficulties with subject-verb agreement for the students. Sweden A has no occurrences of people as subject and the other three groups have used it twice each and two of these groups have made errors in 50% of those times. Spain A and Sweden C have one correct case of subject-verb agreement each while Spain C has no correct cases in this category.

As already mentioned, people is a noun that can only take the plural (see section 2.2). However, in some cases, it can be counted for as a collective noun and take the singular. This is when it refers to people of a certain nationality (see Svartvik & Sager section 162 D). Here follows two typical examples of error-making with people:

(15) …but he wouldn’t care about what other people thinks about it. (Female student, aged 16, Spain A)

(16) But sometimes the way that people looks is an important thing to. (Female student, aged 18, Sweden C)

Difficulties for Swedes with the noun people are very common, and this may be due to interference. People is often translated as folk in Swedish and is considered to be one unit and is therefore treated as singular. It is the same with the Spanish translation gente. Errors are made because in English people is treated as a plural, which may be something that students do not
know. Also, due to the Swedish translation of *people* interference may be a factor why errors are made.

6.2.8 Errors with *there* as formal subject

There are not many cases where *there* is formal subject and the occurrences and errors of this category differ from other categories. Spain A is the group whose use of *there* as formal subject is the second most frequent one, but then they are the smallest group and they make fewer errors in this category than any other group. Spain C has made zero errors but, on the other hand, they have only used *there* as formal subject once. In the texts of Sweden A there is no case where *there* is the subject.

Sweden C is the largest group and the group that uses *there* as formal subject most frequently. Still, they make errors in 40% of the cases. Example 17 illustrates an error that Sweden C has made:

(17) Because I think there is beautiful persons who are in the way I have just explained from every single corner of earth. (Male student, aged 18, Sweden C)

Subject-verb agreement in cases with *there* as formal subject can cause difficulties for English learners. In these cases the notional subject comes after the verb. So, if the notional subject is singular the verb needs to be in the singular. However, in informal speech, if students use the contracted form *there’s* the verb is conjugated in the singular even though the notional subject is plural. This example illustrates such a case (Greenbaum & Quirk 2010: 426):

There’s some letters here for you to read.

In conclusion, we can see that the results of this category somewhat differ from other categories. Spain A has the highest number of occurrences and zero errors in subject-verb agreement with *there* as formal subject. Spain C also has zero errors but they have only used this structure once. Sweden C, however, has most occurrences and out of those times 40% are errors. To some extent, the difficulty with this category is the placement of the real subject and the fact that it is placed after the verb.

6.3 Similarities in results between Spain A and Spain C

In this study, there are learner differences and one of these differences is that two of the groups know Spanish. Here we will see what similarities the results of Spain A and Spain C have. As can be expected, Table 1 shows us that there is no real similarity between Spain A and Spain C in what error percentage they have in general with subject-verb agreement. Instead, Table 1 shows
us that both A groups seem to make a similar number of errors. The two C groups’ errors differ somewhat more than the A groups’, Spain C has made the lowest number of errors out of all groups and the difference between Spain C and Sweden C is three percent.

If we continue by looking at all groups’ separate tables we see that the number of times each group has used subject-verb agreement in the different categories does not show an obvious similarity between Spain A and Spain C either. The pattern here corresponds more to the results in Table 1.

However, if we look at the comparison of all groups’ errors in the different categories we can see a few similarities between Spain A and Spain C. The results of Table 6 tell us that Spain A has made fewer errors than Sweden A, and Spain C has made fewer errors than Sweden C in the categories “errors with relative clauses” and “errors with coordinated verb phrases”. These are both categories where the subject and the verb are noncontiguous, which often means difficulties with agreement for learners of English. If students know how to use subject-verb agreement in cases like these they may have a rather good understanding of subject-verb agreement. Still, both Spain A and Spain C have made some errors in these two categories. Moreover, they do not generally make fewer errors than Sweden A and Sweden C in the other categories. But, if we look at Table 6 we can see that Sweden A and Sweden C have not made fewer errors than Spain A and C in any of the categories. This can be an indication that the two Spain groups have a slightly better understanding of English subject-verb agreement than the two Sweden groups. Even so, similarities of results in two of eight categories are not enough to draw general conclusions that the Spain groups of students generally have a greater understanding of subject-verb agreement than the students who do not know Spanish. Also, it is difficult to know why the students in the Spain groups make fewer errors than the Sweden groups in some cases. Factors such as motivation, age and learner differences have also been proven to affect students’ learning. However, it can be a small indication that the Spain groups find it slightly easier to apply the rules of subject-verb agreement in some of the categories. If this is due to additional language knowledge or a better knowledge of English is difficult to tell from a study this size. A more extended study is needed.
7. Conclusions

In Swedish, there is no subject-verb agreement, but in Spanish however, there is agreement with every verb in both tenses. English has subject-verb agreement only with third person singular in present tense indicative with primary auxiliary verbs and with lexical verbs. Studies show that Swedish English learners often have difficulties with English subject-verb agreement, which may be explained by the fact that it does not exist in Swedish. SLA studies how language learners in general acquire an additional language to a first language and a method that is often used to do this is Error Analysis. In Error Analysis the researcher looks at errors to get information about learners’ language and to investigate why errors are made. One reason that has shown to have an influence on why students make errors is transfer. Transfer is the interplay between a language that the learner already knows and a language that a learner is under the process of acquiring, and how the L1 affects the L2 in this process. Most research in transfer studies how L1 affects L2 and there appears to be little research on if and how a third language can affect the learning of an L2. This study is one of the first that has the aim to increase the understanding of a possible influence which a third language may have on an L2. To investigate such an influence, this study has looked at errors to see if there is a difference in error-making in English subject-verb agreement between Swedish students who know Spanish and students who do not. To investigate this, the first research question, what kind of errors the students in the four groups make, needs to be answered. The overall occurrence of English subject-verb agreement does not differ considerably between the four groups. However, there is a notable difference in error-making between the two groups studying English A and the two groups that study English C, whether they live in Spain or in Sweden. The difference between the A courses and the C courses is expected since the students have different levels of English. The two A groups’ error percentage is quite similar, but, Spain C makes slightly fewer errors than Sweden C.

If we continue by looking at each group’s performance separately, we can see that Spain A has a high number of subject-verb agreement occurrences. The categories where Spain A has had difficulties are the noncontiguous categories. However, there are two categories that often provide difficulties because they are noncontiguous where Spain A has made rather few errors. These categories are coordinated verb phrases and intervening postmodifiers. Sweden A, on the other hand, seems to have difficulties with most categories that are noncontiguous with the exception of relative clauses. While Sweden A is the group with the highest error percentage, Spain C has the lowest error percentage. Spain C has some difficulties with categories that are noncontiguous but they make relatively few errors with coordinated verb phrases and relative clauses. Sweden C’s results are rather similar to Spain C’s but Spain C has a lower error percentage. Sweden C seems to have slightly more difficulties than Spain C with noncontiguous subject-verb agreement. By looking at each group, we can see that learners’ differences bring
differences in errors. The two Spain groups seem to have slightly fewer difficulties with subject-verb agreement than the Swedish groups. If this is because they know Spanish subject-verb agreement or because their level of English is higher is difficult to say, but we can still see that there is a slight difference between the Spain groups and the Sweden groups.

To answer the second question if there is a difference in the error-making between the groups, the results of all groups’ error-making have been analyzed and compared. If we look at the groups’ errors in the different categories, we see that the percentage of errors differs in the different categories and that it is difficult to see a clear pattern that is consistent in all categories.

To begin with, we can see that Spain A has the highest error percentage in cases where subject-verb agreement is contiguous and Spain C has the lowest error percentage. In the categories where subject-verb agreement is noncontiguous Sweden A tends to have the highest error percentage and Spain C tends to have the lowest percentage of errors. However, this pattern somewhat differs within each category. In the category of “Relative Clauses” Sweden C has the highest percentage of errors and Spain C the lowest. Because of this, the category somewhat diverges from the pattern that the two C courses make fewer errors than the A courses. Spain C is the group that stands out in the category of “Coordinated verb phrases” because they make considerably fewer errors here than any other group. “Coordinated verb phrases” is a category where most groups make errors rather frequently. The results of the category “Intervening Adverbials” are the opposite of coordinated verb phrases since the biggest difference in error-making here is between Spain A and Sweden A. Sweden A has a higher error percentage but Spain A has very few occurrences of intervening adverbials, which is probably why they make no errors in this category. In the category “Coordinated subjects” all groups have very few occurrences. Spain C has the highest number of occurrences but Sweden C is the only group with an example of correct usage of subject-verb agreement in this category. Another category where C groups have the lowest percentage of errors can be found is “Intervening postmodifiers”. Sweden A uses this structure fewer times than the other groups but the students also make more errors in this category. What is more, Sweden A has no occurrences of people as subject or there as formal subject. The other groups, however, have a few cases each where these two structures are used, but the error frequency is high in both categories. Also, in these categories, the C groups do not make fewer errors than the A groups. Spain C makes 100% errors while Sweden C and Spain A make 50% errors and Spain A has the highest number of occurrences in the category “There as formal subject”.

As already mentioned, there is no clear error pattern of the four groups in each category. Still, when considering the answer to last question, if there any similarities in between Spain A and C, we can see a tendency that Spain A and C make slightly fewer errors than the Swedish groups in general. Also, the two Spain groups tend to have somewhat fewer errors in cases where subject-verb agreement is noncontiguous. There are two similarities between the Spain groups and that is that they make fewer errors in the categories “Relative clauses” and “Coordinated verb phrases”.

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Since these categories are noncontiguous, this may be an indication that they may have a slightly better understanding of English subject-verb agreement than the Sweden groups. This may be due to the fact that they are used to conjugate verbs according to its subject from Spanish. It is difficult to prove that it is additional language knowledge that affects the learning of an L2 in a study of this size. However, it has been shown that there are some differences in error-making between the groups of students that know Spanish and the groups that do not Spanish.

The fact that the students who know Spanish and those who do not know Spanish make errors with subject-verb agreement differently makes it interesting to see what results a similar but larger study would get. Since there is very little previous research that investigates the influence of a third language, it is an area that needs to be studied further. If the results would show tendencies of different error-making between students with different language knowledge, eventually, it might be possible to draw general conclusions about a third language’s influence on an L2. Knowledge about such an influence could be something that can be used to help students get a deeper understanding for languages in general and also for specific language features. This information could also help language teachers in planning and carrying out lessons in a way that helps students learn how to use previous or additional language knowledge when they are acquiring new languages.
Literature


