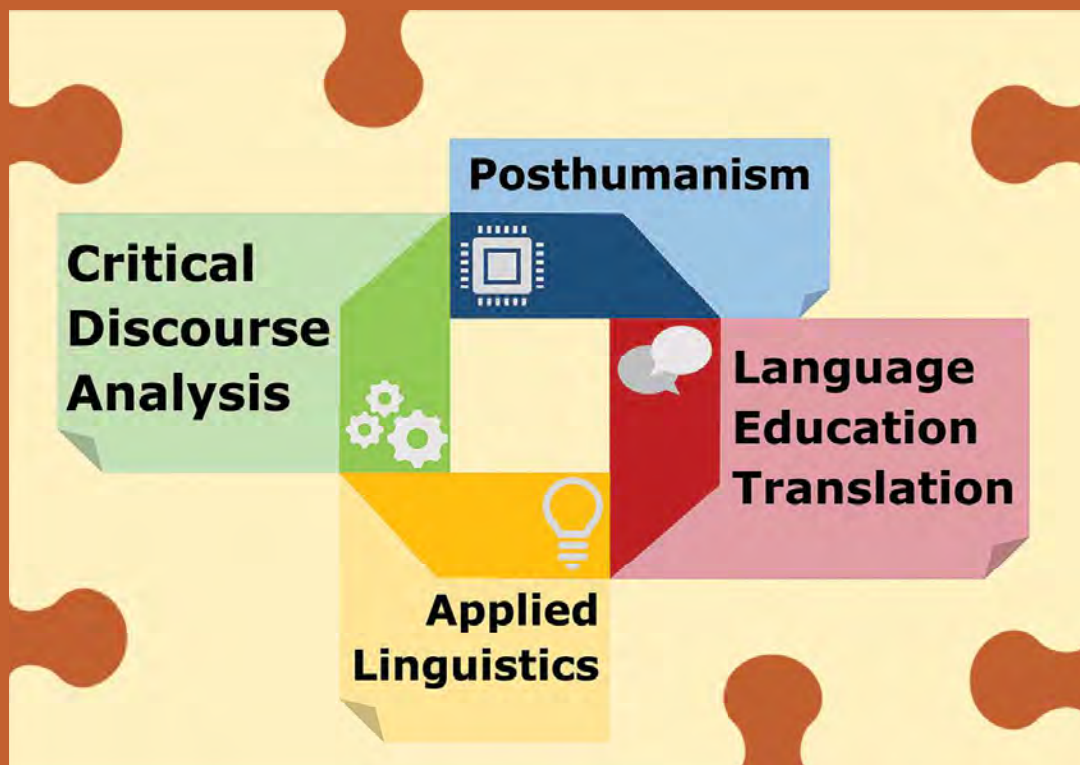


Ana Montoya-Reyes /  
Anabella Barsaglini-Castro /  
Estefanía Sánchez-Barreiro (eds.)

# A Multidisciplinary Approach to Applied Linguistics and Education

Building Knowledge in  
Foreign Language Teaching, Translation,  
Critical Discourse Analysis and Posthumanism



Ana Montoya-Reyes / Anabella Barsaglini-Castro /  
Estefanía Sánchez-Barreiro (eds.)

## A Multidisciplinary Approach to Applied Linguistics and Education

This book offers a collection of papers tackling aspects in the fields of Applied Linguistics, discourse analysis, teaching and translation. The contributions cover topics of special interest to scholars and researchers in these fields, such as language acquisition through the exploration of different L2 learners' experiences; translation studies, including the difficulties of finding suitable equivalences between legal systems; critical discourse analysis applied to the discourse of intimate partner violence against women; post-humanism; and stylistic variation in contemporary English. The volume also highlights the increasing interdisciplinarity between computer science and linguistics, as evidence of the new path this interaction is leading to. The book is a resource for researchers and general users interested in the computer branch and its contribution to Linguistics.

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## A Multidisciplinary Approach to Applied Linguistics and Education

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# 3 Exploring grammatical gender acquisition in L2 Spanish: Difficulties and didactic recommendations

Anastasiia Ogneva and Tamara Gómez Carrero

**Abstract:** This chapter compares gender assignment of real Spanish nouns by second language learners (L1 English  $n = 26$ , L1 Russian  $n = 26$ ) and by native Spanish speakers ( $n = 26$ ). Participants completed an acceptability judgement task with 40 sentences with Spanish determiner phrases which were grammatical or ungrammatical, with masculine and feminine nouns with transparent or opaque endings. Our results show that (1) the L1 Russian group is more sensitive to gender incongruencies than the L1 English group, suggesting that the presence of grammatical gender in the L1 facilitates the perception of gender incongruencies; and that (2) noun morphology facilitates gender acquisition in L2 Spanish, as both groups of participants rated non-matching determiner phrases with transparent nouns more accurately than opaque nouns. Based on the results of this study, this work also provides didactic recommendations in order to improve the teaching of grammatical gender for learners of Spanish as a second language (L2).

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, grammatical gender, L2 teaching, didactic recommendations

## 1 Introduction

L2 acquisition is a complex process that is notably different from L1 acquisition. Whilst children receive a lot of exposure to their first language in a naturalistic context, L2 learners' exposure to the target language varies both quantitatively and qualitatively depending on various factors (Chenu and Jisa 2009). Moreover, L1 acquisition frequently occurs without explicit instructions while, in order to learn a second language, instructions are reported to be useful and even necessary (Cook 2008). The overall outcome of L1 and L2 acquisition is also different: children normally achieve perfect L1 mastery, whereas L2 learners are unlikely to reach a full language competence in all linguistic domains.

Grammatical difficulties constitute one of the most frequent problems for L2 learners. In fact, grammatical gender in Spanish has been an area of interest for researchers who study the acquisition of L1 and early and late bilinguals (Alarcón 2011, 2020; Fernández Fuertes et al. 2016, 2019; Montrul et al. 2008), and it is reported to be one of the most persistent challenges in second language

acquisition (SLA) (Ellis, Conradie and Huddleston 2012; Grüter, Lew-Williams and Fernald 2012). In this process, L2 learners are not only supposed to identify the gender of nouns but also to learn how each gender (masculine and feminine) affects other elements of an utterance and the way it modifies the sentence. One of the main questions SLA has attempted to answer is whether L2 adult learners are able to achieve full competence in those grammatical features of their target language that are absent in their native language and whether the presence of these characteristics in their L1 facilitates the acquisition in the L2 (Gómez Carrero and Ogneva, forthcoming).

Two main theoretical proposals explain the syntactic variability in the L2 learners' grammar. According to one of them, the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (Hawkins and Chan 1997), adult L2 learners who are past the critical period (Lenneberg 1967) are not able to access Universal Grammar (UG). Therefore, L1 and L2 acquisition are claimed to be fundamentally different. Another proposal, the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996), suggests that the acquisition of L1 and L2 shares some similarities. That is why L2 learners are able to acquire the features of the target language even though they are absent in their L1.

In this chapter, we explore grammatical gender acquisition in L2 Spanish by speakers of two different L1s: English, which does not have grammatical gender, and Russian which has a three-gender system. In particular, two issues are taken into consideration: (1) does the presence of this feature in the learners' L1 help them acquire it in the L2? (2) do noun endings (noun morphology) help L2 learners to identify grammatical gender in Spanish and correctly establish the agreement? The results of this study serve to propose didactic recommendations for the teaching of grammatical gender in L2 Spanish.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background of the study including a description of the grammatical gender systems in Spanish, English and Russian, as well as a review of previous studies focused on gender acquisition in L2 Spanish. In Section 3, we describe research questions and the methodology of this study. Section 4 presents the data and the main results. In Section 5, we interpret the results before concluding this chapter with some didactic recommendations in Section 6 and conclusion remarks in Section 7.

## **2 Theoretical overview**

### **2.1 The grammatical gender system in Spanish**

In Spanish all nouns are classified as either masculine or feminine (Harris 1991). In some languages, grammatical gender is based on the semantic characteristics,

which depend on the meaning of the referent, or on the formal characteristics of the noun which include phonological and morphological features. In Spanish, gender assignment is based on a combination of both types of features (Corbett 1991). Therefore, animate nouns are assigned grammatical gender in accordance with the biological sex of their referents, as in (1). For example, nouns referring to masculine entities, as in *chico* [boy], are masculine, and nouns referring to feminine referents, such as *chica* [girl], are feminine. However, this is not always so straightforward for nouns that refer to animals, for instance, the noun *ardilla* [squirrel] is always feminine, even though it refers to a male squirrel. In some cases, the gender of animate nouns is also determined formally: masculine nouns end in -o (1a), and feminine nouns end in -a (1b). In other cases, as in *hombre* [man] or *mujer* [woman], the gender of the noun is identified through the meaning.

(1) a. *el chico*

the<sub>SP masc</sub> boy<sub>SP masc</sub>  
[the boy]

b. *la chica*

the<sub>SP fem</sub> girl<sub>SP fem</sub>  
[the girl]

SP = Spanish; fem = feminine; masc = masculine

Nouns with non-semantic referents or inanimate nouns are assigned gender exclusively based on their formal characteristics. In this case, gender assignment is reported to be an arbitrary phenomenon which does not have a direct correlation either with the meaning or with the form of the noun. For instance, *domicilio* [address] and *residencia* [residence] have similar meanings but different forms, whereas *libro* [book] and *libra* [pound] share similar phonological forms but refer to different entities (Harris 1991). In Spanish, masculine is reported to be a default or unmarked form (Harris 1991; Roca 1989).

Inanimate nouns in Spanish are transparent or opaque. The gender of *mesa* [table] or *barco* [boat] is determined phonologically (see example 2). Although there are quite a few exceptions in this rule that may cause difficulties for L2 learners (e.g., *mano* [hand] is feminine and *problema* [problem] is masculine), previous studies report that most noun endings in Spanish correlate with gender. Teschner and Russel (1984) found that 99.87 % of nouns ending in -o are assigned masculine gender and 96.3 % of nouns ending in -a are feminine. Opaque nouns frequently end in a consonant or in -e and can be either masculine or feminine (see example 3), which can be problematic for L2 learners. Previous research suggests that there is a certain correlation between the consonant ending

and the noun gender in Spanish: -d, -ción, -sis, -itis are assigned feminine in 98 %, whereas -l, -r, -n, -s are associated with masculine in 96 % (Teschner and Russel 1984).

- (2) a. *la mesa*  
the SP fem table SP fem  
[the table]  
b. *el barco*  
the SP masc boat SP masc  
[the boat]
- (3) a. *el coche*  
the <sub>SP masc</sub> car <sub>SP masc</sub>  
[the car]  
b. *la leche*  
the <sub>SP fem</sub> milk <sub>SP fem</sub>  
[the milk]

Gender is expressed through agreement with the rest of the elements of the phrase, such as determiners and adjectives, as in example (4) (Corbett 1991, 2006). So, the gender acquisition process involves gender assignment, which is lexical and is manifested syntactically through agreement with the rest of the elements of the phrase or of the sentence.

- (4) a. *el cajón blanco*  
the <sub>SP masc</sub> drawer <sub>SP masc</sub> white <sub>SP masc</sub>  
[the white drawer]  
b. *la nariz pequeña*  
the <sub>SP fem</sub> nose <sub>SP fem</sub> small <sub>SP fem</sub>  
[the small nose]

## 2.2 Grammatical gender in English and Russian

In English, nouns can be classified as feminine or masculine according to the biological sex of the referents, e.g., man/woman. Also, agreement is present in personal pronouns (he/she). Yet, inanimate nouns are not classified in terms of grammatical gender.

Russian, on the other hand, is a three-gendered language, where nouns are masculine, feminine or neuter. Gender is expressed in noun endings and appears on singular adjectives, demonstratives, participles, pronouns and verbs in the past (see example 5). Gender values are not distributed equally in Russian. Masculine nouns constitute around 46 % of all nouns, feminine nouns are 41 % and neuters are only 13 % (Corbett 1991). Russian gender can be predicted based on the



phonological form of the nouns in the nominative singular: nouns that end in non-palatal consonants are masculine (e.g., *gorod* [town]), nouns ending in stressed [á] are feminine (e.g., *nogá* [leg]) and nouns ending in stressed [ó] are neuter (e.g., *oknó* [window]). However, in some cases, the phonological form of the nouns is opaque. For example, nouns ending in unstressed vowels [a] or [o], those which are not in stressed positions, are pronounced as [ə] and can be either feminine (*ručke* [pen]) or neuter (*derev* [tree]). Another opaque case are those nouns ending in palatalized consonants which can be masculine (*den'* [day]) or feminine (*len'* [laziness]).

- (5) a. *krasivyy gorod*  
beautiful<sub>RU masc</sub> town<sub>RU masc</sub>  
[a beautiful town]
- b. *malen'kaja devočka*  
small<sub>RU fem</sub> girl<sub>RU fem</sub>  
[a small girl]
- c. *bolšoje okno*  
big<sub>RU neu</sub> window<sub>RU neu</sub>  
[a big window]
- RU = Russian; masc = masculine; fem = feminine; neu = neuter

### 2.3 Gender acquisition in L2 Spanish

Previous studies have shown that in L1 Spanish acquisition, gender is a relatively easy feature, and children acquire it by the time they are 3–4 years old (Hernández-Pina 1984; Pérez-Pereira 1991; Mariscal 2009; Ogneva 2021a, 2021b). As claimed by Alarcón (2014), gender agreement errors are not common in native Spanish speakers' production. However, Eddington and Hualde (2008) suggest that occasionally even Spanish natives establish wrong agreements. For example, a problematic case for native speakers is when feminine nouns beginning with a stressed /a/ are preceded by masculine determiners, as in (6). The scholars found that incorrect pronominal modifiers are sometimes used in these cases, as illustrated in (6) (Eddington and Hualde 2008: 4).

- (6) a. *Echa todo el agua fría*  
pour all<sub>SP masc</sub> the<sub>SP masc</sub> water<sub>SP fem</sub> cold<sub>SP fem</sub>  
[pour all the cold water]

instead of

- b. *Echa toda el agua fría*  
pour all<sub>SP fem</sub> the<sub>SP masc</sub> water<sub>SP fem</sub> cold<sub>SP fem</sub>  
[pour all the cold water]

Although gender agreement errors are highly infrequent in L1 speakers, L2 learners continue experiencing problems with grammatical gender even at advanced levels. Ruiz Martín (2004) suggests that many English-speaking learners of L2 Spanish continue experiencing problems with gender agreement even when other grammatical structures which are frequently considered more complex (e.g., the subjunctive mood or the past tenses) are already acquired. Moreover, the author mentions that many learners claim that they do not remember receiving explicit instructions on grammatical gender assignment or agreement.

Previous studies on grammatical gender acquisition in L2 have addressed this issue with diverse methodologies (corpus studies, picture description, grammaticality judgements, online data, etc.) and with language pairs which differ in terms of their gender features. SLA research claims that L2 learners acquire concord, i.e., gender agreement between the determiner and the noun, before gender agreement between the noun and the adjective (Bruhn de Garavito and White 2002; Montrul et al. 2008). Regarding the importance of noun morphology, there is a consensus among researchers that transparent nouns (e.g., *la casa* or *el armario*) are acquired earlier than opaque nouns (e.g., *la nariz* or *el coche*) (Bates et al. 1996; Franceschina 2001; Sekerina et al. 2006; Alarcón 2011) even for some L2 learners, endings are not treated in the same way (Camacho and Kirova 2015). Furthermore, in processing tasks, L2 learners rely on gender transparency as well (Foote 2014; Montrul et al. 2014).

Besides, studies have shown the default status of masculine (Harris 1991). For example, White et al. (2004) and González et al. (2022) claim that learners of L2 Spanish tend to use masculine when the gender specification of a noun is not yet fully acquired. Batiukova (2018), in a corpus-base study, found that Russian-speaking learners of L2 Spanish had problems with identifying feminine gender and with establishing agreement with it, e.g., *motos*<sub>SP fem</sub> *tan hermosos*<sub>SP masc</sub> [very beautiful motorcycles]. Regarding the masculine form, difficulties emerge when the noun is opaque or irregular, such as *la*<sub>SP fem</sub> *coche*<sub>SP masc</sub> [the car] or *las*<sub>SP fem</sub> *programas*<sub>SP masc</sub> [the programs]. Similarly, in Ogneva's (2022) study, Russian-speaking learners of L2 Spanish presented difficulties with feminine gender and especially with opaque feminine nouns (e.g., *leche* [milk]). Noun frequency has also been reported as an important factor in gender acquisition. Martoccio (2022) contends that the gender of low-frequency nouns is especially difficult for English-speaking learners of L2 Spanish with an intermediate level.

SLA research has widely discussed whether L2 learners are able to fully acquire features of the target language that are absent in their L1. In accordance with the

Failed Functional Features Hypothesis, Hawkins and Yuet-hung Chan (1997) and Franceschina (2005) concluded that English-speaking late bilinguals of L2 Spanish and French are less accurate in producing and perceiving grammatical gender. Therefore, their problem with this feature seems to be due to the maturation constraints, and thus late bilinguals are not able to access the UG. Montrul et al. (2008) and Alarcón (2011) explored comprehension and production of gender in early and late Spanish bilinguals who are native speakers of English. Results of both studies report that early and late L2 learners performed well in comprehension, but the latter were less accurate in production.

Other studies have investigated acquisition of a three-gendered language, such as German, by natives of Italian, Afrikaans and English (Ellis et al. 2012). Although the results of this study show that the gender assignment pattern is similar across the three groups, they differ in terms of gender agreement. Specifically, the L1 Italian group outperformed the rest of the L1 groups, suggesting that the presence of gender features facilitate the acquisition of German grammatical gender. In the same line, Gómez Carrero and Ogneva (forthcoming) investigated the acquisition of L2 Spanish grammatical gender by speakers whose native languages differ in terms of this feature (English and Russian). The authors contend that although both groups are sensitive to gender incongruencies in Spanish, the Russian group was significantly better than the L1 English group when judging structures which involve gender incongruencies. Kirova (2016), on the other hand, presented an opposite outcome. In a grammaticality judgement task and a picture-naming task, two groups of Spanish L2 learners were compared: L1 Russian and L1 English with low and advanced proficiency. The results of her study showed that both groups of participants performed similarly and, therefore, are in line with the full access proposal.

### **3 Research questions and methodology**

This study aims to explore the acquisition of grammatical gender in L2 Spanish by adult native speakers of English and Russian, and based on the results of this research, to propose didactic recommendations in order to improve the teaching of this grammatical feature. With these two issues under consideration, we attempt to answer two research questions:

- (1) Does the presence or absence of grammatical gender in the learners' native language affect the acquisition of this feature in L2 Spanish? Based on previous studies (Ellis et al 2012; Gómez Carrero and Ogneva, forthcoming), the presence of grammatical gender in the native language facilitates the

acquisition of gender in the L2. Thus, participants can differentiate correct from incorrect forms.

- (2) How does noun morphology affect the acquisition of gender in L2 Spanish? In accordance with previous studies (Bates et al. 1996; Franceschina 2001; Sekerina et al. 2006; Alarcón 2011; Foote 2014; Montrul et al. 2014), L2 learners use the ending of the noun to assign gender so that transparent endings, as in (2), repeated here as (7), are facilitators in the process of Spanish gender acquisition.

- (7) a. *la mesa*  
the<sub>SP fem</sub> table<sub>SP fem</sub>  
[the table]  
b. *el barco*  
the<sub>SP masc</sub> boat<sub>SP masc</sub>  
[the boat]

### 3.1 Participants

Three groups of participants were tested in this study: a Spanish monolingual group which acted as a control group, and two L2 Spanish learner groups. The control group consisted of 26 adults (mean age = 30.46), while the L2 Spanish learner groups were divided into 26 L1 English-L2 Spanish adults (mean age = 30.46) and 26 L1 Russian-L2 Spanish adults (mean age = 31.76). They all completed a Language Background Questionnaire (LBQ) which informed us about their linguistic profiles and in which the L2 Spanish learners reported their language proficiency levels in written and oral comprehension and production. Regarding the L2 learners, for this study, we have only selected those participants who reported an upper-intermediate to advanced proficiency in the four skills and who have grown up in monolingual homes.

### 3.2 The acceptability judgement task

Apart from the LBQ and once the informed consent form was signed, the three groups performed an untimed acceptability judgement task (AJT) on Google Forms. The participants had to evaluate Spanish sentences on a 4-point Likert Scale in which the edges indicated 'completely wrong' and 'completely right'. An example of an item is presented in (8).

El vela luminoso nos da mucha luz \*

1      2      3      4

completamente incorrecta      completamente correcta

The AJT consisted of 80 sentences in Spanish. Half of them were grammatical and ungrammatical sentences with subject-verb agreement errors (e.g., *\*los niños va al parque por la mañana* [children go to the park in the morning]) which served as fillers. The remaining 40 structures were experimental sentences. All experimental sentences contained a determiner phrase consisting of a determiner, a noun, and an adjective, and which could be placed in subject or object position within the sentences. As in Table 1, the experimental determiner phrases were organized into eight conditions.

**Table 1:** Experimental conditions and examples

Conditions			Examples
Congruent	Masculine	Transparent	<i>El libro nuevo</i> the <sub>SP masc</sub> new <sub>SP masc</sub> book <sub>SP masc transp</sub>
		Opaque	<i>El sol amarillo</i> the <sub>SP masc</sub> new <sub>SP masc</sub> sun <sub>SP masc opaque</sub>
	Feminine	Transparent	<i>La mesa cara</i> The <sub>SP fem</sub> expensive <sub>SP fem</sub> table <sub>SP fem transp</sub>
		Opaque	<i>La nariz roja</i> The <sub>SP fem</sub> red <sub>SP fem</sub> nose <sub>SP fem opaque</sub>
Non-congruent	Masculine	Transparent	<i>La plato sucia</i> The <sub>SP fem</sub> dirty <sub>SP fem</sub> dish <sub>SP masc transp</sub>
		Opaque	<i>La cinturón negra</i> the <sub>SP fem</sub> black <sub>SP fem</sub> belt <sub>SP masc opaque</sub>
	Feminine	Transparent	<i>El playa sucio</i> The <sub>SP masc</sub> dirty <sub>SP masc</sub> beach <sub>SP fem transp</sub>
		Opaque	<i>El llave dorado</i> The <sub>SP masc</sub> golden <sub>SP masc</sub> key <sub>SP fem opaque</sub>

Note. SP = Spanish; fem = feminine; masc = masculine; transp = transparent ending; opaque = opaque ending.

Conditions are organized into three major groups: (1) congruency, (2) gender and (3) morphology. Within the congruency condition, 20 sentences were congruent, that is, all the elements of the determiner phrase agree in gender; the other 20 were non-congruent, so the gender of the noun was different from the gender shown by the determiner and the adjective. Within the congruency group, there was a balanced number of masculine and feminine nouns. Finally, as for the condition that concerns us the most for the purpose of this study, the morphology condition, included canonical or transparent Ns – the Ns ending in -o for masculine and -a for feminine – and non-canonical or opaque Ns, that is, the Ns ending in a consonant or in a vowel different from -o for masculine Ns or -a for feminine.

As in Gómez Carrero and Ogneva (forthcoming), nouns were [-animate] to make sure that semantic gender was not involved, and they belonged to the inner and outer core types (Harris 1991). Thus, no examples such as *la mano* [the hand] or *el programa* [the program] were included because their endings could indicate canonical masculine gender (*mano*) or canonical feminine gender (*programa*) although grammatically they had the opposite gender value. Besides, nouns appeared once along the task. The frequency of the experimental items was obtained from the *Corpus del Español Now corpus* (Davies 2016), and no significant differences were found when comparing masculine and feminine nouns ( $t(38) = 1.348; p=.17$ ). The adjectives could be repeated along the task, and they were always presented in prenominal position.

## 4 Results

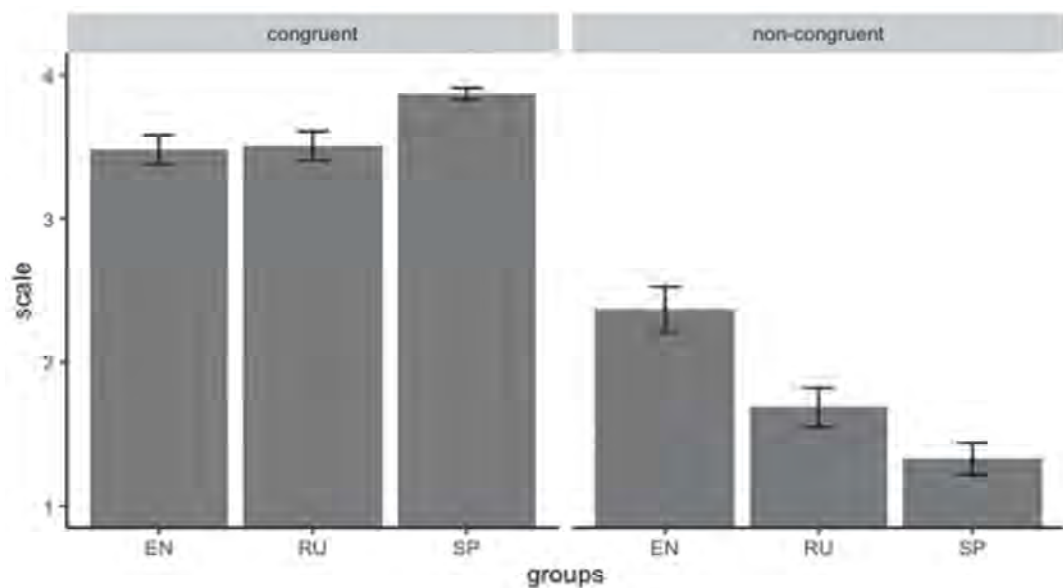
The results from the present study are organized in terms of the two issues under consideration: (1) the perception of gender incongruencies by participants whose L1s differ in terms of the presence of grammatical gender; and (2) how gender morphology (transparent versus opaque nouns) may affect this perception.

A mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the EZ package (Lawrence 2011) in R was performed on the average rates of the three groups. In it, congruency, gender and morphology were included as within-subject factors and group as a between-subject factor. For the purpose of this study, only the results from the congruency and the morphology conditions will be discussed.

Regarding the congruency condition, the mixed ANOVA reported an interaction between congruency and group ( $F(2,75)=30.00, p<.001$ ), meaning that each group performed differently when rating congruent and non-congruent determiner phrases. This interaction was further explored with a post-hoc comparison using Tukey's Honest Significance Difference (HSD) (Hothorn, Bretz

& Westfall 2008), which indicated that, while the control group performed almost at the ceiling when rating the congruent determiner phrases ( $M=3.86$ ;  $SD=0.21$ ) and differed significantly from the other two groups ( $p<.001$ ), the L1 English and the L1 Russian groups showed the similar patterns when evaluating the congruent items, with no significant differences between them ( $p=.87$ ) (L1 English:  $M=3.47$ ;  $SD=0.51$ ; L1 Russian:  $M=3.50$ ;  $SD=0.51$ ).

In the case of the non-congruent determiner phrases, that is, where there is no gender agreement between the noun and the rest of the elements of the phrase, the post-hoc comparison (Tukey's HSD) revealed significant differences between the three groups ( $p<.001$ ). In this case, the L1 Spanish group gave the lowest rates to non-congruent items ( $M=1.32$ ;  $SD=0.56$ ), followed by the L1 Russian group ( $M=1.68$ ;  $SD=0.71$ ), leaving the L1 English group to the last position, ( $M=2.36$ ;  $SD=0.79$ ), being the ones that gave the highest rates to the non-congruent determiner phrases. The results from the ratings given to the congruent and non-congruent determiner phrases are represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Congruency condition mean rates per group

Regarding the morphology condition, that is, whether there is an effect of the ending of the noun on how they perceive and rate congruent and non-congruent determiner phrases, the results from the mixed ANOVA reported an interaction between morphology and group ( $F(2,75)=7.04$ ;  $p=.001$ ), and a three-way interaction between morphology, congruency and group ( $F(2,75)=7.90$   $p<.001$ ). Therefore, the three groups performed differently when they encountered

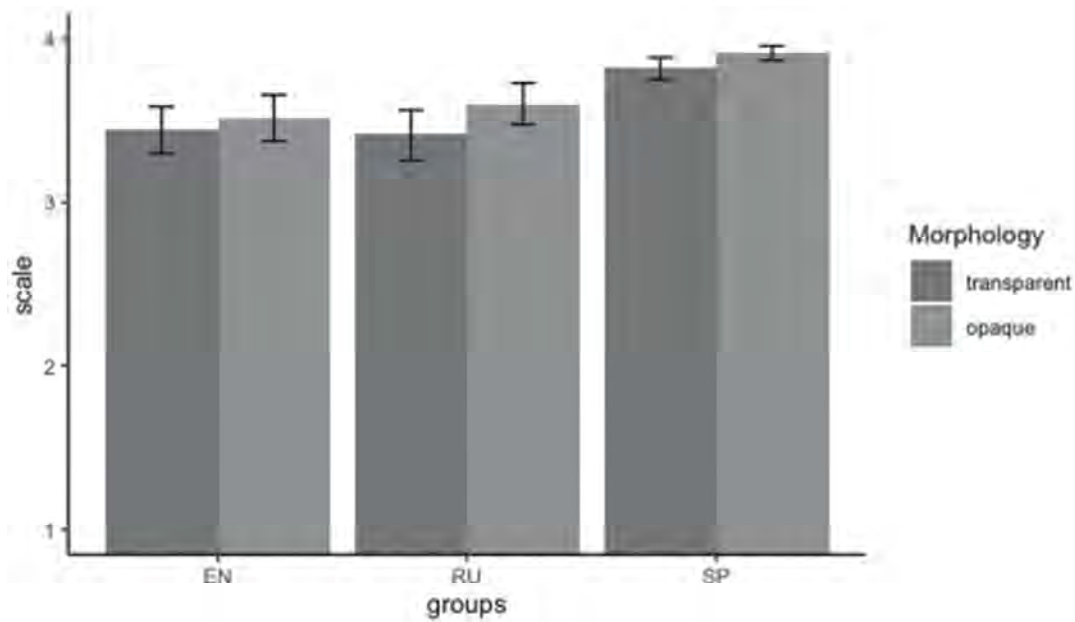
transparent nouns in congruent or non-congruent contexts compared to opaque nouns in the same contexts.

To explore these interactions further, we have first compared the average rates that the three groups gave to transparent and opaque nouns within congruent determiner phrases (e.g., *el libro*<sub>transp</sub> *nuevo* versus *el sol*<sub>opaque</sub> *amarillo*) by performing a within-subjects ANOVA. In this case, significant differences have been reported between opaque and transparent nouns when the evaluations from the three groups have been put together ( $F(1,75)=10.41$   $p=.001$ ), being the opaque nouns the ones with the highest scores ( $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ; versus transparent Ns:  $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=0.49$ ). In a comparison between groups, the post-hoc comparison revealed no significant differences ( $p=.40$ ).

The same analyses have been conducted for the non-congruent determiner phrases (e.g., *la plato*<sub>transp</sub> *sucia* versus *la cinturón*<sub>opaque</sub> *negra*). In this case, the within-subjects ANOVA revealed significant results when comparing opaque and transparent nouns within non-congruent determiner phrases in general, without group distinction ( $F(1,75)=55.41$   $p<.001$ ). In this case, the opaque nouns in non-congruent determiner phrases are given higher scores than the transparent nouns in non-congruent DPs (opaque:  $M=1.91$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ; transparent:  $M=1.67$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ). Besides, a between-subjects ANOVA comparing the three groups in terms of morphology within the non-congruent determiner phrases revealed significant differences between them ( $F(2,75)=15.22$   $p<.001$ ). In order to determine these differences, a post-hoc test (Tukey's HSD) comparison was performed within the opaque condition and within the transparent condition. The results from the post-hoc comparison revealed significant differences between the three groups when comparing their evaluations of opaque nouns in non-congruent contexts (L1 English versus L1 Russian:  $p<.001$ ; L1 English versus control group:  $p<.001$ ; L1 Russian versus control group:  $p=.006$ ).

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to obtain a more detailed analysis of the evaluation given by each group to the opaque nouns versus the transparent Ns within the congruent DPs (e.g., *el libro nuevo* and *la mesa cara* versus *el sol amarillo* and *la nariz roja*). In this case, significant differences have only been found in the case of the control group ( $t(102)=-2.34$ ;  $p=.02$ ) having the opaque nouns the highest scores. On the contrary, the L1 Russian group and the L1 English group do not show any significant differences when comparing opaque and transparent nouns in congruent determiner phrases (L1 Russian:  $p=.06$ ; L1 English:  $p=.46$ ). However, in the same line as the control group, they evaluated the opaque Ns more positively than the transparent ones. A summary of the mean rates can be found in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 2.

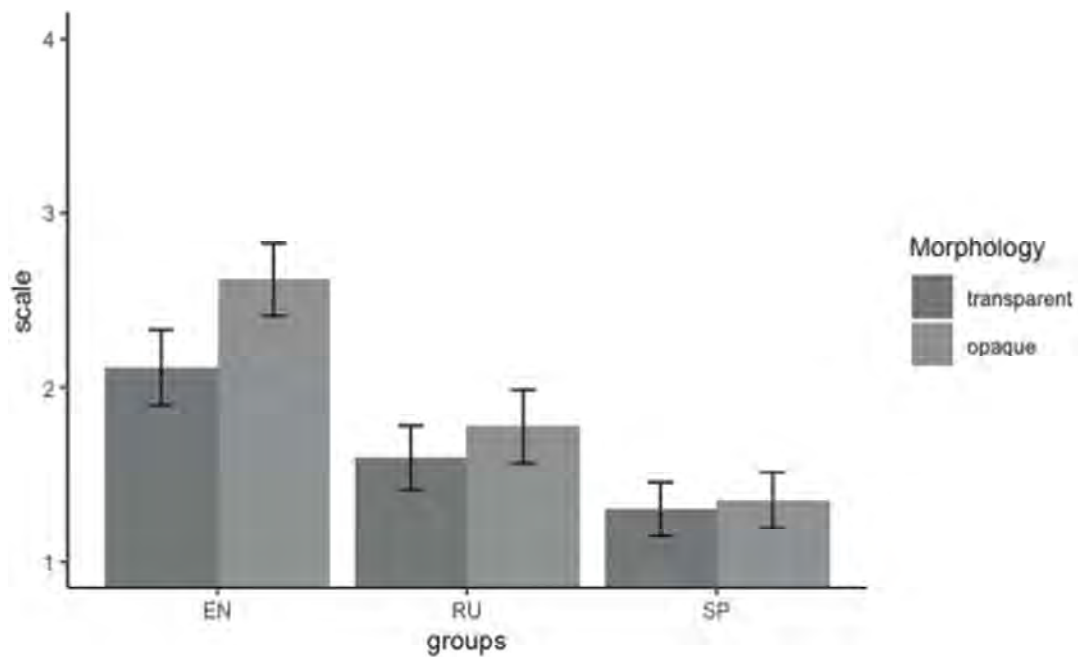




**Figure 2:** Mean ratings of the morphology condition in congruent DPs

The same post-hoc comparisons were conducted in the case of the transparent nouns within the non-congruent condition. In this case, the results only revealed differences between the L1 English group and the other two (versus L1 Russian:  $p < .001$ ; versus control group:  $p < .001$ ), while no significant differences were found between the L1 Russian and the control group ( $p = .06$ ).

A paired-sample t-test was also conducted in order to compare transparent and opaque nouns in the non-congruent determiner phrases within each group. Results from the paired-sample t-test reported significant differences in the evaluation of opaque and transparent nouns in non-congruent determiner phrases only in the case of the L1 English group ( $p = .001$ ). The L1 English group as well as the L1 Russian and the control group gave lower scores to non-congruent determiner phrases in which there was a transparent noun (e.g., *la plato sucia*). Although the three groups showed the same pattern when facing non-congruent determiner phrases, it is the L1 English group that relied the most on the transparent ending of the noun as a cue in the evaluation of gender incongruencies. A summary of the mean rates can be found in Table 2 and represented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Mean ratings of the morphology condition in non-congruent DPs

**Table 2:** Mean ratings of the morphology condition per group

		<b>Control group</b>	<b>L1 English</b>	<b>L1 Russian</b>
Congruent	<b>Transparent noun</b> <i>El libro nuevo</i> <i>La mesa cara</i>	$M= 3.81$ $SD= 0.25$	$M= 3.44$ $SD= 0.51$	$M= 3.41$ $SD= 0.55$
	<b>Opaque noun</b> <i>El sol amarillo</i> <i>La nariz roja</i>	$M= 3.91$ $SD= 0.15$	$M= 3.51$ $SD= 0.50$	$M= 3.60$ $SD=0.46$
Non-congruent	<b>Transparent noun</b> <i>La plato sucia</i> <i>El playa sucio</i>	$M=1.30$ $SD=0.55$	$M=2.11$ $SD=0.77$	$M=1.59$ $SD=0.66$
	<b>Opaque noun</b> <i>La cinturón negra</i> <i>El llave dorado</i>	$M=1.35$ $SD=0.58$	$M=2.61$ $SD=0.74$	$M=1.77$ $SD=0.75$

## 5 Discussion

The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) how the presence or absence of gender features in the L1 affect the perception of gender congruent and non-congruent determiner phrases; and (2) how morphology may act as a cue to perceive the lack of gender agreement. In order to accomplish the aim of this study, we have collected experimental data from three groups of participants: one control group

and two L2 Spanish adult groups whose L1s differ in terms of grammatical gender (i.e., English has no grammatical gender while Russian has a three-way gender system with masculine, feminine and neuter). They all performed an untimed AJT in which they had to evaluate a set of Spanish sentences which contained a determiner phrase formed by a determiner, a noun and an adjective.

As for the first issue under consideration, participants had to evaluate sentences in which there was gender agreement between the elements of the determiner phrase (gender congruent) and sentences in which there was no such gender agreement (gender non-congruent). Results revealed that when facing congruent DPs, all groups can perceive the grammaticality of the determiner phrase, although the L1 English and the L1 Russian groups differ from the Spanish native speakers. This difference is more prominent when they have to evaluate sentences with gender incongruencies. In this case, the significant differences found between all three groups indicate that a hierarchy on how they perceive gender incongruencies can be established (control group > L1 Russian > L1 English). Thus, in line with Ellis (2012) and Gómez Carrero and Ogneva (forthcoming), it seems easier for the L1 Russian group to perceive gender incongruencies, to an almost native-like level, because the presence of grammatical gender in the L1 facilitates the perception of gender incongruencies. This does not occur in the case of the L1 English group, who lacks this grammatical property in their L1, so they do not show such sensitivity to gender incongruencies. Yet, this does not mean that they are not able to identify non-congruent determiner phrases; in fact, they do so but they do not show so much sensitivity to non-congruent determiner phrases as the L1 Russian group does.

Concerning the second issue under consideration, whether the morphology of the Spanish noun (transparent endings versus opaque endings) can help or hinder the process of gender acquisition in Spanish, or whether they are better at perceiving gender congruent and non-congruent determiner phrases, results indicate different patterns depending on the grammaticality of the determiner phrase. In the case of the congruent contexts, all groups performed similarly, that is, they gave higher rates to the sentences which included opaque nouns (*sol*, *pared* [sun, wall]). In this case, morphology does not play a role since they are able to discern in which determiner phrases there is gender agreement. Yet, morphology does play a role in the case of gender non-congruent contexts, since both L2 groups were better at evaluating the transparent nouns in non-congruent determiner phrases than the opaque nouns in the same context. In the case of the L1 English group, this difference is significant and more prominent; thus, it seems that L1 English speakers rely on the morphology to identify the structures

in which there is no gender agreement (Franceschina 2005; Montrul et al. 2008; Alarcón 2010, 2011, 2020).

## **6 Didactic recommendations**

As it has been shown in previous research and confirmed in the present study, grammatical gender is a feature that causes difficulties in the L2 acquisition. Therefore, it is crucial that L2 teachers have a well-informed understanding of how to best present and teach this feature. Efficient and explicit instructions will minimize the difficulties that learners may have when acquiring grammatical gender in L2 Spanish. We have found that L1 speakers of Russian and English show different results in the grammaticality judgement task, and thus, it is very important to know and be aware of the characteristics of the learners' linguistic profiles to adapt to the diverse teaching strategies. The didactic recommendations we propose will be based on three main points: (1) biological and grammatical gender distinction; (2) noun morphology and frequency; (3) grammatical gender activities in comprehension and production.

### **6.1 Biological and grammatical gender**

The distinction between biological and grammatical gender is an important issue to address when teaching L2 Spanish. Especially, when a teacher deals with a classroom of learners whose L1 lacks a gender feature, for example, English natives. Therefore, the instructor should make an explicit reference that gender in Spanish is assigned considering two different criteria: (1) the gender of animate nouns is assigned according to the biological sex of their referents; (2) the gender of inanimate nouns is assigned arbitrarily.

As we have previously mentioned, in English the gender distinction is based on the biological gender and is only expressed in personal pronouns (he/she). Thus, it is important for L2 learners to be aware of a different gender system of the target language.

### **6.2 Noun morphology and ending frequency**

The present study and previous research have shown that noun morphology plays an important role in the process of gender acquisition in L2 Spanish since it facilitates the perception of gender incongruencies in non-congruent contexts. It is important that L2 teachers make an explicit reference to noun endings and its combination with determiners and adjectives.

Similarly, some studies claim that L2 learners can develop metalinguistic awareness, that is, they can think about the target language (Montrul et al. 2008).

Therefore, teachers can present some statistical data on the frequency of noun endings, especially referring to the non-canonical nouns. For instance, L2 learners can be informed that 99.87 % of all nouns ending in -o are masculine, and those ending in -a are feminine in 96.3 % (Teschner and Russel 1984). It also seems reasonable to introduce the most frequent exceptions, such as *mano*, *sofá*, *problema*, etc.

Furthermore, when explaining grammatical gender in L2 Spanish, teachers should be as specific as possible. So, our recommendation is to avoid vague terms, as 'many' or 'the majority' and, instead, precise frequency information should be provided.

### 6.3 Comprehension and production activities

According to Montrul et al. (2008), L2 learners make more mistakes in oral production than in comprehension. Therefore, one of the recommendations is that when teaching gender, instructors are to start with comprehension-related activities rather than with production. This would minimize the communication anxiety that some L2 learners experience when learning the target language, which was reported to be a significant factor in L2 learners' difficulty (Alarcón 2011).

## 7 Conclusion

To summarize, this study has investigated the acquisition of grammatical gender in L2 Spanish by speakers of two different L1s: English which does not have grammatical gender and Russian which has a three-gender system. Their data have been compared to a control group consisting of L1 Spanish speakers. Our main aim was to find out whether the presence of grammatical gender in the learner's L1 helps them to acquire this feature in the L2 and whether noun morphology helps L2 learners to identify grammatical gender in Spanish. This way, we can have more information about how L2 Spanish adults perceive Spanish grammatical gender based on their profiles, and with these data, we have been able to propose some didactic recommendations from which both learners as well as instructors of Spanish as L2 could benefit.

Although this study contributes to the SLA research, some issues have been found and should be addressed and improved in future studies. For example, language transfer has not been taken into consideration in the task design, specifically in the case of gender congruency between Russian and Spanish nouns. This variable can have an effect on the evaluation of the experimental structures and has to be controlled in future research.

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