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TITLE: Difficulties That Korean and Spanish Learners of English as a Foreign Language Encounter When Learning the Language

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Barcelona, 11 de Juny de 2020



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Barcelona, a 11 de Juny de 2020

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the differences between Spanish and Korean learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), focusing on some aspects of language learning that can be challenging when learning English. The participants of this study were 10 Spanish and 10 Korean learners of English, who were individually asked about some linguistic aspects related to vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonetics. These features were selected taking into account the L1 of the learners. All of the participants were sent a questionnaire in which they had to rate the difficulty of the English items under study and the results were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Findings show that, in general, the Spanish participants found learning English easier than the Korean participants, and that English pronunciation was the most challenging aspect for both groups.

Keywords: L1 (first language), L2 (second language), difficulty level, participants, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina las diferencias entre estudiantes españoles y coreanos que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera, centrándose en algunos aspectos que pueden ser complicados al aprender inglés. Los participantes de este estudio fueron 10 españoles y 10 coreanos, todos estudiantes de inglés, a los cuales se les preguntó individualmente acerca de algunos aspectos lingüísticos relacionados con el vocabulario, la morfología, la sintaxis y la fonética. Estas características lingüísticas fueron seleccionadas teniendo en cuenta la lengua materna de los estudiantes. Todos los participantes recibieron un cuestionario en el que tenían que especificar el nivel de dificultad de los aspectos en cuestión. Los resultados del estudio demuestran que, en general, para los participantes españoles el aprendizaje del inglés fue más fácil que para los participantes coreanos, y que la pronunciación inglesa fue lo más difícil para ambos grupos.

Palabras clave: L1 (primer idioma), L2 (segundo idioma), nivel de dificultad, participantes, inglés como lengua extranjera.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are many studies related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and foreign language acquisition. It is a field in which a lot of research can be done since there are many aspects of language that can be explored and that allow for further investigation. Some studies have focused on how a second language is learned, focusing on aspects such as acquiring new vocabulary or reading in the L2. Due to the influence of the L1, acquisition of an L2 can be easier or harder. In fact, if the L2 resembles the L1, acquisition tends to be easier than if the languages are more distant. The present study takes into consideration Korean and Spanish and it compares them to English in terms of Second Language Acquisition.

A little bit of background information is necessary in order to understand why these three languages, Korean, Spanish and English, share similarities and differences. On the one hand, Spanish is a Romance language and English is a Germanic language, but they share a common ancestor which belongs to the Indo-European language family; hence why there are some resemblances in these languages in terms of vocabulary or morphology. On the other hand, the origin of the Korean language is not quite clear, but some linguists have said that it belongs to the Altaic language family (Georg, Michalove, Ramer, Sidwell, 1999). This language family, unlike Romance and Germanic languages, is not an Indo-European language. For this reason, there are not many resemblances between Korean and English since their origins are different. The aim of this study is to compare which aspects of English are harder for two groups of participants, one of them with a Korean L1 and the other with a Spanish L1. It is interesting to make this comparison because the fact that many have English as their L2 does not imply that its acquisition is always easy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Language differences: Korean or Spanish L1 & English L2

To begin with, it needs to be taken into account that there are many differences between these three languages. Some aspects of English might be harder or easier to learn depending on someone's L1. Spanish and English use the same writing system, the Latin alphabet. Even though Spanish has accent marks for stressed vowels, it has the same vowels and consonants as English. However, Korean has a different writing system from English. The Korean alphabet is called *Hangul* and each syllable is made of two to four characters "that represent each of 24 phonemes" (Wang, Koda, Perefetti, 2003, p.133). In Korean there is a set of ten vowels and a set of fourteen consonants, and syllables and words are formed by combining both. Korean's writing system is considered alphabetic, which means that it consists of symbols or letters that represent the pronunciation of a word (Wang et al., 2003). Pae & Sevcik (2011) argue that the key differences between English and Korean can be found in their writing systems, their syntactic word order of sentences, their phonological differences, and the omission of the subject or the object in a sentence. These are the main key factors that make English different from Korean and, perhaps, these could be factors with a possible high difficulty level for learners.

Many studies related to L2 learners involve participants whose L1s share cognates with the L2, such as English and Spanish, and this can facilitate the learners' language skills. In addition, many studies "have focused on learners whose L1 and L2 share similar orthographic systems and lexical features" (Kang, Kang & Park, 2012, p.156), for instance English and Spanish. Pae & Sevcik (2011) mention that within Romance languages, learners can establish relations between their L1 and the L2 they are learning because both languages share the same origin or a similar one. Regarding the spelling of English words, it is argued in Ramón's study that Spanish learners do not usually find it very difficult when a given word in the L2 resembles the form of the same word in the L1. Because of the cognates between these two languages, it is easier for Spanish learners to write a word in English if there is resemblance with the Spanish equivalent than if

there is not. However, not all cognates work between Spanish and English. Sometimes “false friends” might appear, causing Spanish learners to translate a certain word in the wrong way. For instance, the English word “actually”, meaning “in fact” is very often translated in Spanish as “actualmente”, which means “nowadays” (Ramón, 2009). In addition, it is also very common for Spanish learners to encounter difficulties when forming the plural of words, especially in the beginner stages, and they tend to add “-s” to all English words. For instance, instead of “men” and “women” they might write “*mans” and “*womans” because they are following the rules of their L1 (Ramón, 2009). Perhaps because the languages are more similar some learners tend to transfer their L1 rules to the L2.

Wang et al.’s study compares the effects that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with an alphabetic L1, Korean, and a non-alphabetic L1, Chinese, have on reading in English. The Korean alphabet, *Hangul*, “relies heavily on phonological information”, that is why when it comes to English L2 literacy acquisition it is important to take into account reading skills in one’s L1, since these will have an effect on the L2 (Wang et al., 2003, p.143). Even though Korean has a different writing system from English, phonology seems to be useful for ESL learners. The results of Wang’s study show that ESL learners whose L1 is alphabetic develop a better knowledge of English words than those learners whose L1 is a non-alphabetic language (Wang et al., 2003). In addition, Pae & Sevcik (2011) mention that, “English has a wider phonological repertoire than Korean” (p. 60). Although Korean has some sounds that do not exist in English, like the sound of vowels “eu” (으) and “eo” (어), English has sounds that occur in a wider variety of contexts, like the vowel /i/ in “wind” which is pronounced differently from the /i/ in “smile”. In Spanish, words tend to be pronounced in the same way that they are written, unlike English. Therefore, the difficulty level of English pronunciation could be considerable in the case of Spanish ESL learners.

In terms of sentence structure, English and Spanish are subject-verb-object (SVO) languages, and nouns are usually found in final position. Furthermore, Spanish verb forms need to be inflected in relation to each person and number, which means that, just

like in English, there needs to be subject-verb agreement (Benedet, Christiansen & Goodglass, 1998). However, Korean is a subject-object-verb (SOV) language, and verbs are the ones that occupy the final position in a sentence. Also, unlike Spanish and English, Korean does not require subject-verb agreement. Kim & Kim (2013) mention in their study that some L2 learners at a beginner level produce SOV sentences in English because they are following the Korean sentence pattern of their L1. Yeni-Komshian's study results reflected that the structure of the Korean language in which "the verb is more prominent than the noun" had an influence on the learning of English as an L2 (2001, p. 283). According to this study, Korean children have been found to acquire verbs earlier than English children. On the other hand, Korean is a language in which sometimes sentences do not carry a subject because it can be omitted, as well as objects (Pae & Sevcik, 2011). In order to understand utterances, Korean speakers are forced to rely on the context in which communication is taking place. In addition, due to the sentence structure in Korean, listeners have to wait until the speaker finishes the sentence since the verb that carries the important information is placed at the end. Dropping the subject also takes place in Spanish, where according to Benedet et al. (1998), "Spanish speakers make extensive use of pro-drop forms, forcing the listener to use the verb inflection to decipher the subject of a sentence" (p. 315). This, however, does not happen in English, since the subject always has to appear in the sentence.

Korean is a language that lacks articles, which are highly used in English and also in Spanish. Articles in Spanish are very frequently used and they are very important because they carry information about number and gender (Benedet et al. 1998). Instead of articles, Korean makes use of particles, but they are used to indicate direction, the subject of the sentence or the direct object, among others. Ko, Ionin & Wexler (2009) investigated how learners with an L1 that does not have articles acquire their semantic meaning in the L2. One of the findings of their study was that Korean learners tend to overuse the article "the". Ko et al. (2009), suggest that this is a common error that happens to learners because they are not able to trace back this piece of knowledge to their L1 since there is a lack of it. As a consequence of this, when Korean ESL learners encounter English articles

they have to study them and their meanings from scratch, perhaps making this part of the language of greater difficulty compared to other factors.

Lastly, verb forms are different in every language and they are very often one of the most complicated aspects to learn in an L1. When learning an L2, they can become a difficulty for learners since they vary from language to language and, sometimes, they do not resemble the forms of one's L1. According to Ramón (2009), "The Spanish learners showed problems with the correct use of some English verbs" (p. 154). It is argued in Ramón's study that problems with verb forms might be related to the fact that some verbs in Spanish can make reference to a "broader semantic field" (p. 154). Some Spanish learners tend to overgeneralise the use of certain verbs in English which may result in a linguistic error. In general, this seems to be of high difficulty level for, at least, Spanish learners of English.

2.2. Language learning strategies and L2 exposure

Along the lines of Wang et al.'s study, Kang et al. (2012) wanted to take into consideration those learners whose L1 and L2 are more distant, like English and Korean. In relation to vocabulary knowledge, Choi (2013) makes a distinction between breadth vocabulary and depth vocabulary. Breadth vocabulary "refers to the number of words known", and depth vocabulary "is defined as how well the learner knows a word" (Choi, 2013, p. 422). The findings of Kang et al.'s (2012) study have demonstrated that, compared to vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth is more important in Korean EFL learners in relation to reading comprehension (2012). So, what plays a more important role when Korean EFL learners are reading in English is how well they know a word, instead of how many words they know in a text. When learning new L2 vocabulary, there are many different strategies that learners can make use of. In the case of Spanish learners of English, it seems that the most efficient way to learn new words is with the "keyword method" (Sagarra & Alba, 2006). This method consists on linking an L2 word to an L1 keyword that resembles the one in the target language, either in form or in pronunciation, and then "constructing a mental image or a sentence to connect the

keyword with the L1 word” (Sagarra & Alba, 2006, p.229). Jeon (2007) investigated vocabulary learning strategies of Korean learners of English. It is argued in the study that Korean high school students strongly depend on repetition methods when it comes to reading and writing new words, avoiding this way “deeper strategies such as creating a word’s mental image and connecting a word to a personal experience” (Jeon, 2007, p.42). Another finding was that most Korean high school students rely on memorisation techniques when acquiring L2 vocabulary. Lee (2007) also analysed vocabulary learning strategies, but he focused on Korean university students. The results of his study show that the vocabulary learning strategies most used by Korean university students are those which are less “cognitively demanding”, such as verbal and written repetition. Strategies that are more “cognitively demanding”, such as the keyword method, are said to be used less often by these learners (Lee, 2007, p.164). Considering that different learning strategies are used by the different learners when learning new L2 vocabulary, this could result in a factor of considerable difficulty level because, depending on which one the learners use, new words will be retained and learned better than others.

Another aspect to have in mind when learning an L2 is the exposure to the target language. By being exposed to the language, learners can have an opportunity to practice. According to Weil (2008), “Korean students who socialise with non-Koreans benefit from more opportunities to pick up new vocabulary” (p. 38). The results of this study showed that those Korean learners who had a more proficient level of vocabulary were the ones who socialised with native American speakers and other international students. In addition, learners with more vocabulary are said to be more proficient in the L2. By being exposed to the target language, learners are not only exposed to new vocabulary but they also have a chance to practice their output, which is the message they produce. Pae & Sevcik (2011) mention that EFL students in Korea get limited exposure to English because it is a language lowly spoken in their country. In opposition, ESL learners who reside or study in English-speaking countries can be exposed to the L2 on a daily basis. Llanes & Muñoz (2014) make a distinction between naturalistic settings and classroom settings. In a naturalistic setting learners are exposed to language on a daily basis while they are at work, in school or in social situations because most of the speakers in that

context are native speakers of the target language. In a classroom setting, the focus is on language itself rather than on the message carried out by language. Spanish learners usually get exposure to English in a classroom setting from a very young age, but that does not always imply proficiency in the language. Llanes & Muñoz (2014) also mention that naturalistic settings are more beneficial than classroom settings for all learners of an L2 regardless of their L1.

2.3. Research questions

- In comparison to Spanish learners, is it harder for Korean learners to learn English because it is more distant from their L1?
- Which are the linguistic features of English that both groups of learners find more challenging when learning the language?

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

A total of 20 participants took part in the present study. 10 were Spanish and the other 10 were Korean, all of them learners of English. These participants were told that they would be part of a research project related to Second Language Acquisition and that their answers would remain anonymous.

Among the 10 Korean participants, 60% of them were female and 40% were male. Their ages went from 20 to 36 years old. Regarding their level of English, 10% had a beginner level, 50% of them had an intermediate level and the remaining 40% had an advanced level. The age in which they began to learn English went from 5 to 21 years old. All of the Korean participants had Korean as their mother tongue, but the majority of them learned other languages as well, such as Japanese or Spanish. On average, 70% of these participants were exposed to English between 0 and 1 hour on

a daily basis, whereas the other 30% were exposed to it between 1 and 5 hours. Finally, 70% of the participants used English to communicate sometimes, 20% of them used it often and only 10% of them used it all the time.

Among the 10 Spanish participants, 90% of them were female and 10% were male. The ages of the Spanish participants went from 19 to 25 years old. In relation to their level of English, 20% of them had an intermediate level and 80% of them had an advanced level. These participants started learning English between the ages of 0 and 7 years old. Their mother tongue was Spanish, Catalan, or both at the same time and they mentioned to have learned other languages, such as Italian, French, German and Korean. 70% of these Spanish participants were exposed to English more than 5 hours a day and the other 30% was exposed to it between 2 and 5 hours. Regarding their use of English to communicate, 70% of them used it often, 20% used it only sometimes and 10% of them used it all the time.

3.1.2. Instrument

A questionnaire was used to carry out this study. The first part of the questionnaire contained a few questions in order to get some background information about the participants. These questions were related to general aspects such as the participants' mother tongues, their level of English, the age in which they started learning the language and the hours of exposure to it. The information previously stated about the participants of the study was extracted from this first part of the questionnaire. It was important to have this first part related to the background information of the learners because some of the aspects asked, like their level of English, could have an impact on the final results of the study. The questions in relation to the study were placed on the second part of the questionnaire. For this section, the main differences between the participants' L1s and English were considered, since language differences tend to play an important role on language learning. The questions focused on some features related to morphology, vocabulary, syntax and phonetics that work differently in English and in Korean or Spanish. Each language was analyzed separately and a comparison with English was made in relation to these features that have been

mentioned. First, Korean was compared to English and the main differences between the two languages were listed. Then, the same was done with Spanish. Once each language had been compared to English in terms of linguistic features, a list of the most relevant differences was made. After this, the questions that were going to be asked in the questionnaire were selected and those that were less relevant were removed, such as those features that were limited to only one of the two languages. Then, the questions were written down in a Word document and later on they were transferred to a Google Forms document.

The questionnaire contained 10 *Likert scale* questions in which the participants had to tick a number according to how difficult they found each aspect asked in each question, 1 being “very easy” and 7 being “very difficult”. There was also a multiple choice question related to input and output in which the participants had to choose between A (input) or B (output) according to the one they found easier. At the end there was an open question where the participants could talk about all the aspects they found difficult with no space limit. The full questionnaire can be found attached in the Appendix section; Appendix 1 contains the questionnaire as the participants received it and Appendix 2 contains the questionnaire with a brief explanation about why each question was asked.

3.1.3. Procedure

After creating the questionnaire, the participants were contacted. Some of them were contacted directly via Email and text message, while others were contacted through friends and acquaintances. First, they were asked whether they wanted to participate in the study or not, then the questionnaire was sent to them. Since the questionnaire was a Google Forms document, the participants just had to click on the link they received in order to fill in the questions. This also facilitated the return of the questionnaire since all the answers were accumulated in the “responses” section and graphics were automatically created by Google Forms. Two separate documents were created with the same questions, one in English for the Korean participants and one in Spanish for the Spanish participants. This was done to keep the Korean learners’

responses in a separate document from the Spanish learners' ones and not get them mixed. The Spanish participants were the fastest ones to fill in the questionnaire since all of them answered the questions as soon as they received the link; it only took one day to get their answers back. However, the Korean participants took longer to fill in the questionnaire; it took a total of three weeks to collect all the answers. After having collected the answers from all the participants, the data was transferred and put together into a Word document and some graphics were created so that the numbers could be analysed.

3.2. Results

In order to analyse the data results, 11 tables were used. Each table is a bar diagram in which two colours were used to represent each group of participants. The light orange bars represent the Korean learners and the red bars the Spanish learners. These results will be later interpreted in the discussion section.

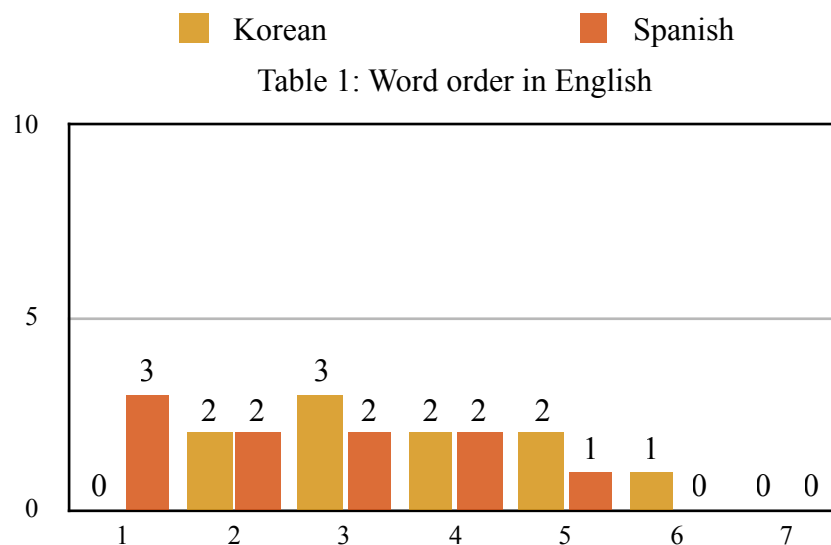
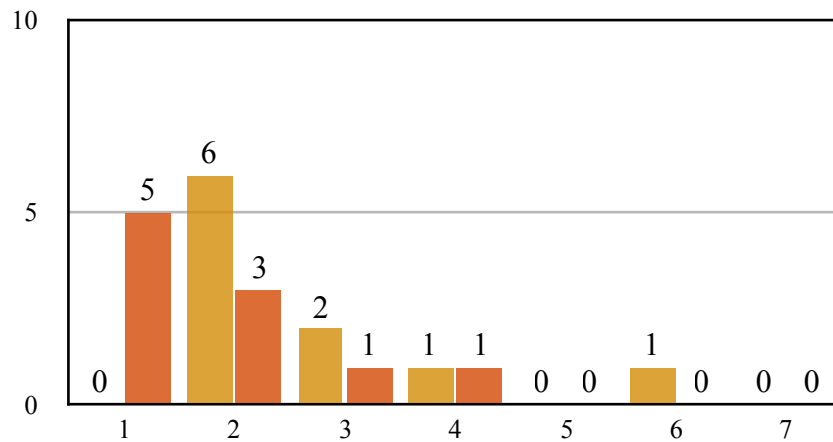


Table 1 shows the results regarding word order in an English sentence. 30% of the Korean participants placed their answers on the difficulty level of 3, another 20% of them marked number 2 and the other 20% marked number 4. The remaining 30% marked 5 and 6. Regarding the Spanish participants, 30% of them placed the difficulty level of this feature in number 1, and 70% of them placed it between 2 and 5.

■ Korean ■ Spanish

Table 2: Lack of honourifics in English

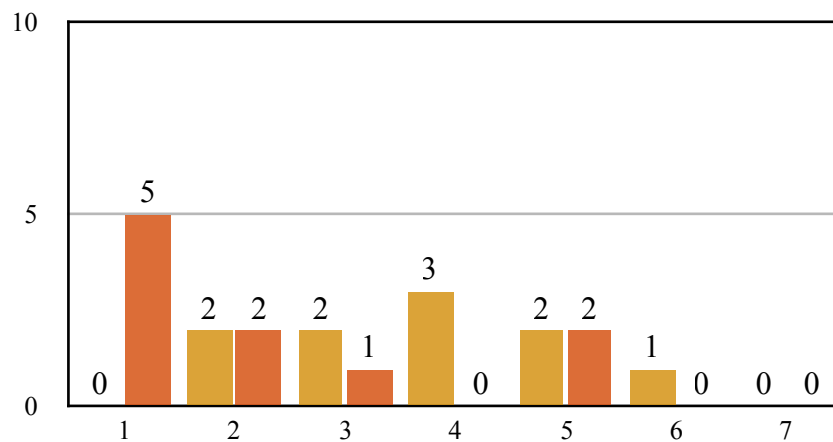


The results on Table 2 are related to the lack of honorifics in English. 60% of the Korean learners placed its difficulty level on 2, 30% of them marked numbers 3 and 4, and the 10% left placed it on 6. The difficulty levels 1 and 2 were marked by 80% of the Spanish learners, and the 20% left placed it on 3 and 4.

In Table 3, the results related to plural forms in English can be seen. 30% of the Korean participants placed their answers on 4, and 40% of them chose numbers 2 and 3. The remaining 30% of them gave this factor a difficulty level of 5 and 6. Regarding the Spanish participants, 50% of them chose 1 as their answer, 30% of them marked numbers 2 and 3, and the 20% left marked 5.

■ Korean ■ Spanish

Table 3: Plural forms in English



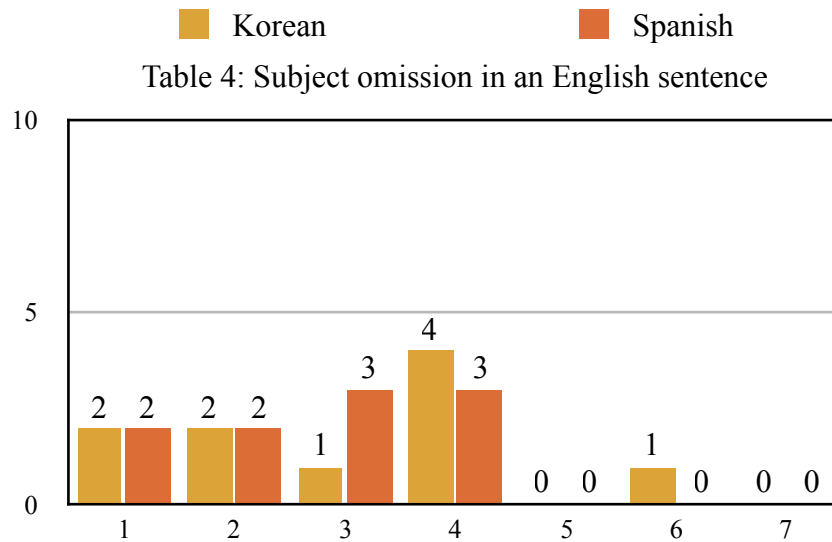
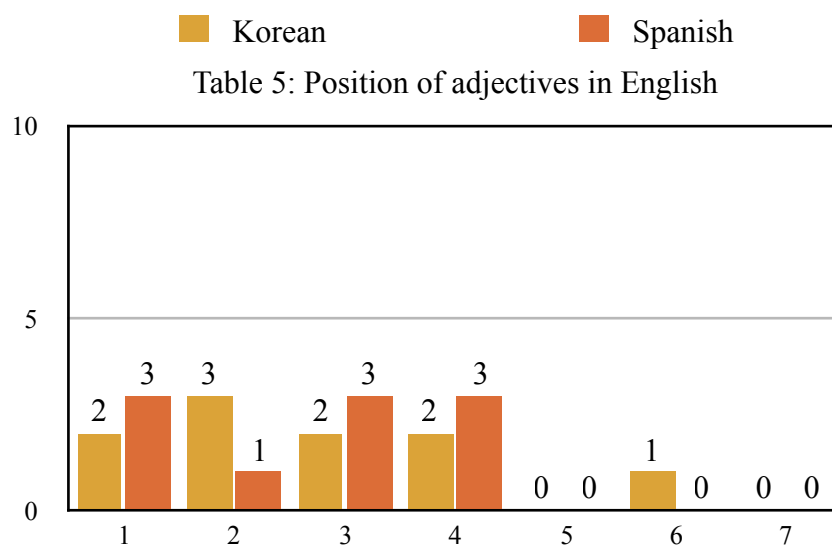


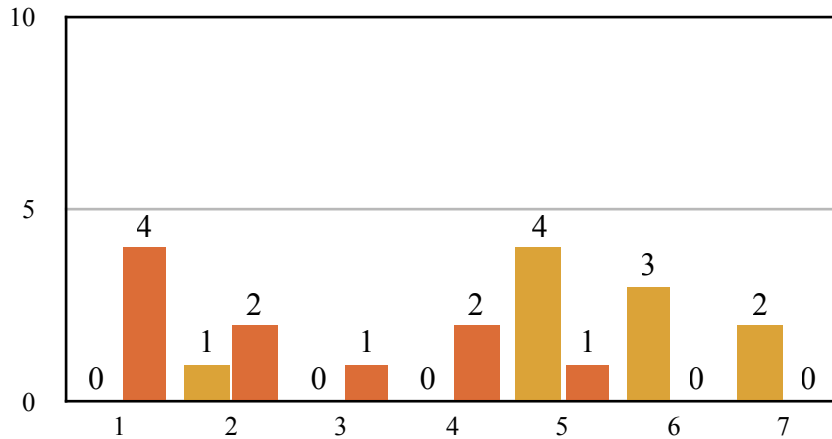
Table 4 shows the results related to subject omission in an English sentence. 40% of the Korean learners placed its difficult level on 4, 50% of them placed it between 2 and 3, and the 10% left placed it on 6. For this factor, numbers 3 and 4 were chosen by 60% of the Spanish learners, followed by numbers 1 and 2 which were marked by the other 40% of them.

In Table 5, the results related to the position of adjectives in an English sentence can be seen. 30% of the Korean participants placed their answers on 2, 60% of them chose numbers 1, 3 and 4, and the remaining 10% marked 6. The difficulty level of 1, 3 and 4 was chosen by a total of 90% of the Spanish learners, and the 10% left chose number 2.



■ Korean ■ Spanish

Table 6: Use of articles in English

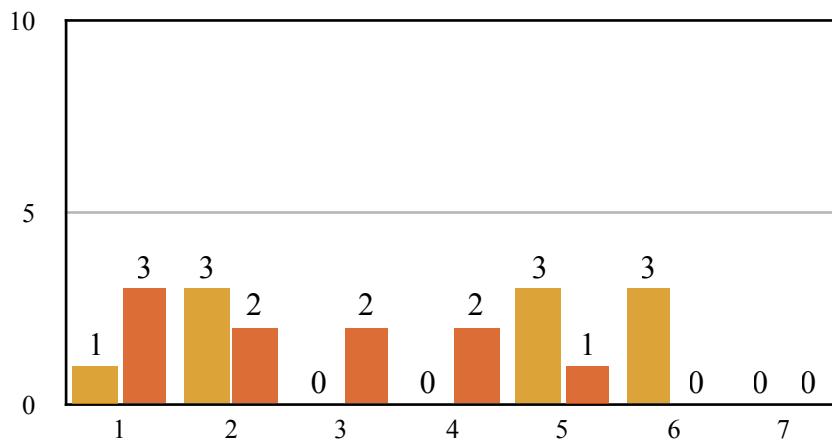


The results on Table 6 are related to the use of articles in English. 40% of the Korean learners placed its difficulty level on 5, followed by 30% of them who marked 6 and 20% of them who marked 7. The remaining 10% chose 2. Regarding this factor, number 1 was selected by 40% of the Spanish learners, the other 40% of them chose numbers 2 and 4, and the 20% left marked 3 and 5.

Table 7 shows the results regarding subject-verb agreement in English. 90% of the Korean participants placed its difficulty level on numbers 2, 5 and 6, and the remaining 10% of them placed it on 1. This feature was given a 1 by 30% of the Spanish learners, followed by a 60% who chose numbers 2, 3 and 4, and the 10% left who marked 5.

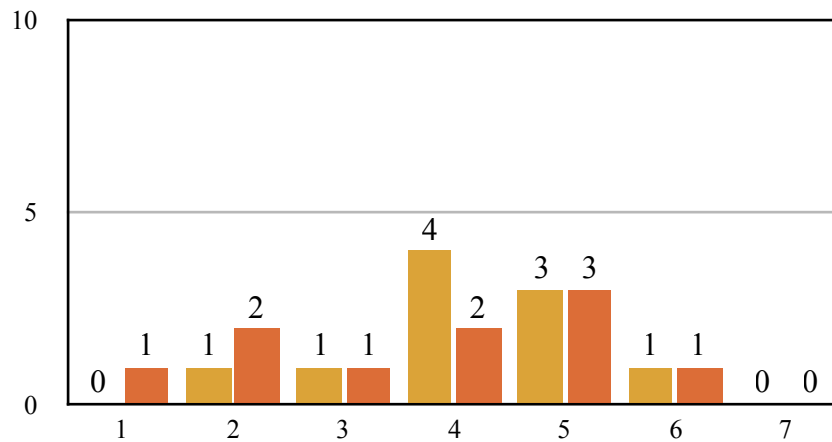
■ Korean ■ Spanish

Table 7: Subject-verb agreement



■ Korean ■ Spanish

Table 8: Verb forms in English

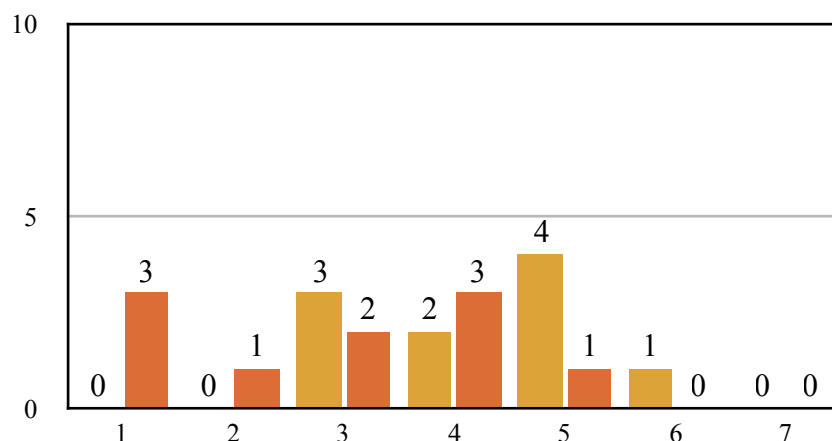


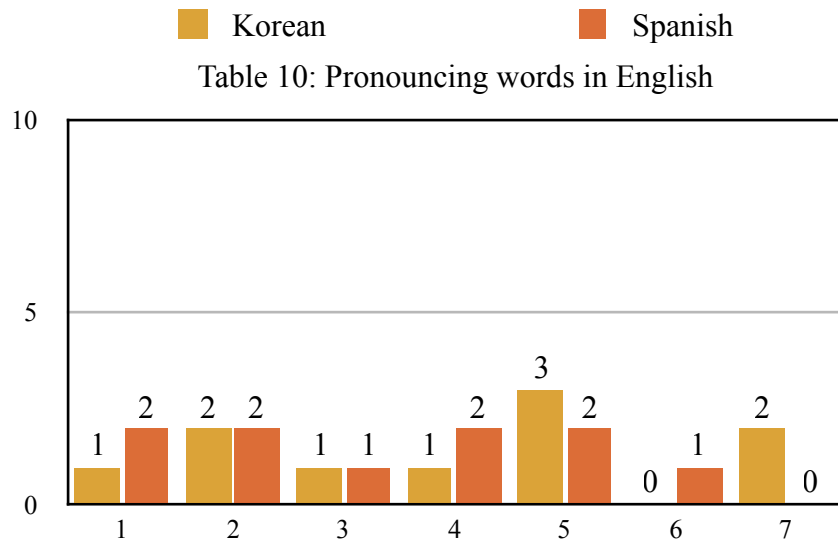
In Table 8 the results related to English verb forms can be seen. 40% of the Korean learners placed their answers on 4. Another 20% of them marked numbers 2 and 3, and the remaining 40% chose 5 and 6. A difficulty level of 5 was given to this factor by 30% of the Spanish participants. A total of 40% of them marked numbers 2 and 4, and the 30% left selected 1, 3 and 6.

Table 9 shows the results regarding vocabulary and learning new words in English. 40% of the Korean learners gave this factor a difficulty level of 5. Another 30% of them placed their answers on number 3, followed by 20% of them who gave it a 4 and a remaining 10% who gave it a 6. Numbers 1 and 2 were marked by 40% of the Spanish learners, followed by 20% of them who placed its difficulty on 3, another 30% of them who chose 4 and the 10% left who placed it on 5.

■ Korean ■ Spanish

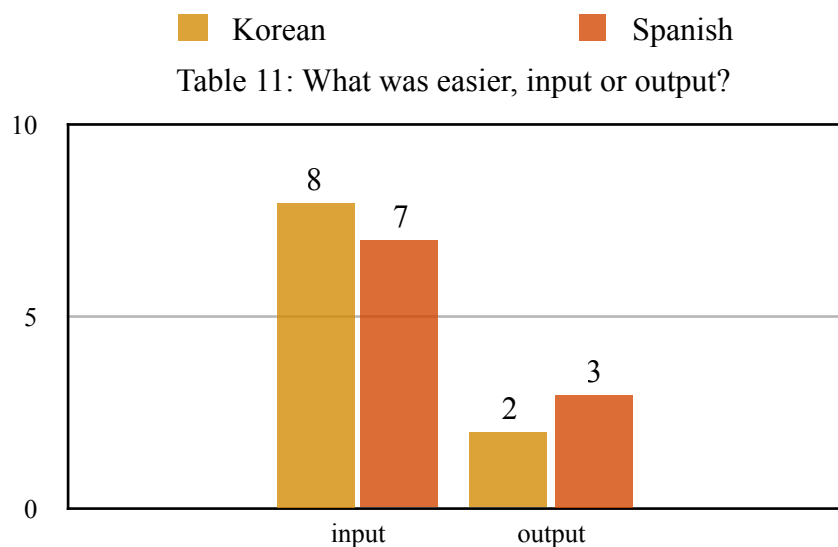
Table 9: Learning vocabulary and English words





The results on Table 10 are related to the pronunciation of English words. 30% of the Korean participants gave this a difficulty level of 5, followed by 20% of them who gave it a 7. The other 50% placed their answers on the numbers between 1 and 4. As for the Spanish participants, 50% of them selected the numbers below 4, and the other 50% marked 4, 5 and 6.

Table 11 shows the results of the question related to input and output. The participants were asked to choose which one of the two options was easier for them when learning English, input or output. 80% of the Korean learners and 70% of the Spanish ones chose input as being easier. The remaining 20% of the Korean learners and 30% of the Spanish ones chose output instead.



In the following tables some answers of the open question have been collected. Learners were asked to talk about those factors to which they gave a difficulty level of 5 or above 5.

KOREAN PARTICIPANTS' ANSWERS
<p>“Word order was extremely hard for me to produce the message (Speaking) because it is totally different from the structure of my language. Plural forms and subject-verb agreement are not familiar with my mother tongue language. It is probably still an issue. Articles and preposition is still an issue for me to understand. I just ignore its rule. I am just following my instinct to complete the sentence (which causes many errors and limit myself to write things in English. Or many of the confusing facts that are different from my mother tongue language are depending on the memory that I have earned from the passive education at school”</p>
<p>“There is no similar concept of the grammar in Korean like Subject-verb agreement in English. So it was little bit difficult to understand at first”</p>
<p>“We do not have articles in Korean”</p>
<p>“Use of articles and subject-verb agreement, because we do not have them in Korean language, and they are very ambiguous in some sentences”</p>
<p>“The most reason why I feel difficult when using articles and numbers like singular and plural is because in my mother tongue those things are not that important. We do not mark them every single time, but they must be marked in English. So Koreans are not familiar with using them. Korean and English are totally different in characters, structure, and pronunciation. Because of that, Koreans need more time to get used to new words or irregular forms and even subject verb agreement. The rules can be simple, but using them correctly, properly, and fluently is a different issue. When it comes to pronunciation, Korean and English have different ways to pronounce. Korean does not have strong accents or intonation. Its rhythm is almost even”</p>

SPANISH PARTICIPANTS' ANSWERS
<p>“In English, words are not pronounced in the same way that they are written, there are many irregular verbs and they have to be learnt, the use of articles is very different in Spanish since, depending on which one is used, the message can change”</p>
<p>“Phrasal verbs were the hardest for me”</p>
<p>“Verb forms are hard, I struggle with them even in Spanish. Pronunciation is hard because there are letters that are pronounced sometimes and other times they are not, and that is confusing”</p>

“Difference with my mother tongue”
“Because of a lack of memorisation, it was hard for me to learn certain words without knowing the context in which I could use them”

3.3. Discussion

In this section the results previously displayed in the tables will be interpreted and analysed.

In relation to word order in English, both groups of participants showed similar results. Since Korean is an SOV language, it was expected that word order in English would be of high difficulty for Korean learners. In the open question, one of the Korean participants stated that, “Word order was extremely hard for me to produce because it is totally different from the structure of my language”. Also, according to the findings of Kim & Kim’s study it is common for Korean learners to have problems with the pattern of sentences in English due to the difference with their L1 (2013). However, in this case answers were evenly distributed among the difficulty scale. The reason why the results of this study were irregular could be related to the fact that most learners had an intermediate or advanced level of English and, perhaps, this factor has already been internalised. As for the Spanish participants, word order in English did not seem to be a problem. It was hypothesised that the Spanish learners would not have many problems with word order in English because both languages, Spanish and English, share the same sentence pattern (SVO).

Regarding the lack of honourifics in English, the results for both groups of participants were quite balanced. For the majority of the Korean learners this did not seem to be a problem. Because Korean is a language that uses honourifics to address elders or people of higher status, it was expected that the participants would give this factor a high difficulty level since in English these honourifics are lost. However, the findings showed otherwise. Similarly to the results of the Korean learners, the Spanish learners did not give this aspect a high difficulty level. So, it could be concluded that this was not a difficult factor for them.

The results related to plural forms in English show some irregularities. Whereas Spanish and English have a similar way of forming the plural, in Korean there is usually no distinction between singular and plural form. Some of the Korean participants who placed the difficulty level of this factor above 5 stated in the open question that, “Plural forms [...] are not familiar with my mother tongue language” and “The most reason why I feel difficult when using [...] numbers like singular and plural is because in my mother tongue those things are not that important. We do not mark them every single time, but they must be marked in English. So Koreans are not familiar with using them”. Despite language differences, less than half of the Korean learners gave plural forms a difficulty level of 5 and 6. Again, this could be related to the proficiency level that learners had. Some findings of Ramón’s study showed that sometimes Spanish speakers can have problems with plural forms in English and they simply add “-s” to all words (2009). However, this did not seem to be the case for most of the participants of this study. In fact, Ramón’s findings in relation to errors in plural forms were related especially to the beginner stages, and there were not Spanish participants with a beginner level in this study. So, the results show that, in general, the majority of these learners did not find English plural forms very difficult.

Subject omission in an English sentence did not seem to be a difficult factor for the participants in general. Regarding this question, it was expected that Korean learners should give it a high difficulty level because omitting the subject in Korean is very common, as it is argued in Pae & Sevic’s article (2011). In addition, another finding of Ramón’s study showed that Spanish speakers tend to drop the subject all the time in a sentence because it can be understood just by looking at the inflected verb tense (2009). Although it is very common to omit the subject in the participants’ L1s, Spanish learners did not give this factor a high difficulty level either. Therefore, these results might suggest that, despite language differences, the participants did not find it difficult to get used to forming sentences in English where the subject cannot be omitted.

Regarding the position of adjectives in an English sentence, the results were very similar to the ones in the previous question. Korean and English place the adjective before the noun they modify, but in Spanish it is placed after the noun. Despite this, there were some Korean participants that gave this factor a higher difficulty level, but they could perhaps be beginner learners of the language. Also, although the answers of the Spanish participants were evenly distributed along the difficulty scale, the highest difficulty level for them was a 4, which is not a high one. Perhaps the fact that more than half of the Spanish learners had an advanced level of English is reflected in these results. Overall, the position of the adjective in English, was not a difficult aspect for the participants of this study.

In relation to the use of articles in English, different results from the participants can be seen. On the one hand, most of the Korean learners gave this factor a high difficulty level. In the open question, some of the Korean participants stated that, “Use of articles [...] because we do not have them in Korean language, and they are very ambiguous in some sentences” and “We do not have articles in Korean”. The findings of Ko et. al.’s study showed that Korean speakers tend to make errors in relation to articles because they contain meaning that cannot be traced back to their L1 since there is a lack of it (2009). These statements together with the results imply that for the Korean participants, use of articles in English was quite difficult. On the other hand, Spanish learners gave this factor lower difficulty levels. Even though the results show that, in general, this was not difficult for the Spanish participants, one of them stated in the open question that, “The use of articles is very different in Spanish since, depending on which one is used, the message can change”. It could be concluded that for most of the Korean learners, English articles were very difficult, but for most of the Spanish learners they were not.

As for subject-verb agreement in English, the results were also quite irregular. The majority of the Korean participants gave it a high difficulty level as opposed to the Spanish participants who stated that this was of lower difficulty. One of the Korean learners who marked the difficulty level of subject-verb agreement above 5 stated in the open question that, “There is no similar concept of the grammar in Korean like Subject-

verb agreement in English. So it was little bit difficult to understand at first”. This statement together with the results imply that, perhaps due to unfamiliarity, subject-verb agreement was a difficult aspect to learn about English for the Korean participants. Although there were no beginner learners of English among the Spanish participants, a few of them did give subject-verb agreement a higher difficulty level. But in general, according to the results this was not a difficult aspect to learn for Spanish learners, although it was for the Korean ones.

Quite irregular results were also seen regarding English verb forms. It was expected that the majority of the participants, regardless of their L1, classified this factor with a high level of difficulty due to the many differences between verb forms across languages. The results show that the majority of the learners in general gave this factor a high difficulty level, but there was a minority of them who gave it a lower one. The Korean learners did not talk about verb forms in the open question, but a few Spanish learners stated that, “In English [...] there are many irregular verbs and they have to be learnt”, “Phrasal verbs were the hardest for me” and “Verb forms are hard, I struggle with them even in Spanish”. Additionally, another of Ramón’s study findings show that some Spanish speakers show problems with the use of verb forms in English because some verbs in Spanish have a wider range of meanings than in English (2009). Judging by the participants’ contributions and the results, it could be concluded that, in general, verb forms seemed to be an aspect of high difficulty when learning English for both Korean and Spanish speakers.

The results regarding vocabulary and learning new words in English were not very concluding. The findings of Jeon’s study show that Korean learners of English tend to use techniques such as memorisation and repetition when learning vocabulary (2007). Due to the format of the questionnaire and the fact that none of the Korean participants talked about vocabulary in the open question, it is not possible to know the reason why they placed vocabulary’s difficulty level where they placed it. However, it can be hypothesised based on the results that half of them found it more difficult than the other half. One of the Spanish participants commented that, “It was hard for me to learn certain words

without knowing the context in which I could use them”. The findings of Sagarra & Alba’s study showed that most Spanish speakers acquire vocabulary by using the keyword method (2006). However, just like in the case of the Korean learners, there is no clear conclusion as to why these participants found learning vocabulary easier or harder. Despite this, the majority of learners from both groups gave this factor a medium difficulty level.

In the case of the pronunciation of English words, the results were quite balanced. All learners seemed to have different opinions about this factor. Based on the results, it seems that Korean learners found it slightly harder than the Spanish ones, although it is hard to draw a conclusion since different difficulty levels were attributed by the different participants. In the open question, some learners helped to clarify why pronouncing words in English was a challenge for some of them. One of the Korean learners stated that, “When it comes to pronunciation, Korean and English have different ways to pronounce. Korean does not have strong accents or intonation. Its rhythm is almost even”. As opposed to English, Korean does not distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables. The findings of Wang et. al.’s study show that Korean phonology seems to be useful for English learners because both languages are alphabetic (2003). However, the results of this study show otherwise, since half of the Korean participants classified it as a rather difficult aspect. On the other hand, some Spanish learners also commented in the open question that, “In English words are not pronounced in the same way that they are written” and “Pronunciation is hard because there are letters that are pronounced sometimes and other times they are not, and that is confusing”. Based on the statements of the Spanish participants, it could be said that one of the main difficulties for them is that, unlike in Spanish, in English some words are pronounced differently from how they are written.

Lastly, there was a clear division in the results related to input and output. In this question learners were asked to rate which one of the two options was easier instead of ranking the difficulty level in a scale. Input was chosen as the easiest aspect by the majority of the participants, and only a few learners chose output as being easier. This

means that the majority of the participants found it easier to understand the message instead of producing it regardless of their level of English.

These results answered the research questions of the study. The first research question was related to whether Korean participants found it harder to learn English, in comparison to the Spanish participants, since their L1 is different from English. Taking the results into consideration, it can be said that this question is right. In general, the Korean learners marked difficulty levels between 5 and 7 more often than the Spanish ones, who had a tendency to mark lower difficulty levels. The highest percentage of Spanish learners placing the difficulty level of a question between 5 and 7 was of 40%. Therefore, Spanish participants seemed to find English easier to learn than Korean participants. However, a couple of factors need to be taken into account. First of all, there were differences regarding the level of English of the different learners. Among the Korean participants there were some who had a beginner level, whereas none of the Spanish learners was a beginner. Also, more than half of the Spanish participants, 80% of them, had an advanced level of English as opposed to the Korean ones who were mainly intermediate level learners. Secondly, there were also differences between the hours of exposure to the language and the use of it on a daily basis. More than half of the Korean participants, 70% of them, were only exposed to English a maximum of 1 hour a day, whereas 70% of the Spanish participants were exposed to it more than 5 hours. In addition to this, 70% of the Korean learners used English to communicate sometimes, whereas 70% of the Spanish ones used it more often. Therefore, all these differences between levels and hours of exposure could have influenced the results of the study.

The second research question was related to the linguistic feature of English that both groups of learners found more challenging when learning the language. Although verb forms had an elevated percentage in the difficulty scale for both groups of participants, English pronunciation was ranked between 5 and 7 by 50% of the Korean learners and 30% of the Spanish ones, making it the most challenging aspect for both groups of participants in this study. Although pronunciation was found to be the most difficult factor over all, two other different aspects were found to be the most challenging for each

one of the two groups. Regarding the Korean participants, the most challenging aspect of English was the use of articles. A total of 90% of the Korean learners placed its difficulty level between 5 and 7. As for the Spanish learners, the most challenging aspect was dealing with English verb forms. A total of 40% of the Spanish participants placed its difficulty level between 5 and 7. In relation to the overall results of the study, it needs to be clarified that, although they answered the research questions, there was a limited number of participants. Perhaps, these results should not be generalised as these are just the results of this specific study.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the difference between Spanish and Korean learners of English focusing on some linguistic factors that could be difficult for them when acquiring the language. All the participants rated the difficulty level, in a scale from 1 to 7, of some English aspects related to vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonetics. Apart from the *Likert scale* questions, there was an open question at the end where participants could talk about those aspects that they found more challenging. This section was very helpful because it provided any kind of additional information that the learners wanted to add and, in some cases, the participants' responses were very insightful.

At the beginning of the study, two research questions were suggested. The first one was a hypothesis about Korean participants having more problems when learning English in comparison to Spanish participants because their L1 is more distant to English. The second one was related to finding out which linguistic factor of English was harder for both groups of learners. One of the findings of the study showed that the Korean participants did seem to have more problems than the Spanish participants with most of the aspects that were asked. However, it might be important to emphasise that Korean and English are more distant and this can contribute to the difficulty of learning certain elements. Also, in comparison to the Korean participants, the Spanish participants of this study had intermediate and advance levels of the language and none of them was a beginner, which can also contribute to the fact that they found the majority of linguistic

aspects quite easy. Another finding of the study showed that the most challenging aspect for both groups of participants was related to English pronunciation. Furthermore, for the Korean participants in particular, English articles were the most difficult factor according to the results. As for the Spanish participants, English verb forms were the ones given the highest difficulty level. Overall, it needs to be emphasised that the participants of this study were limited to a total of twenty and that the results should not be generalised.

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Appendix 1

Background information

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Mother tongue/s: _____

Level of English:

beginner	intermediate	advanced
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How old were you when you started learning English? _____

How often do you use English to communicate?

never	very little	sometimes	often	a lot
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On average, how many hours are you exposed to English per day:

0-1 hours	1-2 hours	2-3 hours	3-4 hours	4-5 hours	5 hours +
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Do you know any other language apart from English? Which one/s? _____

Language learning

How difficult did you find the following aspects when learning English? Please rank from 1 (very easy) to 7 (very difficult):

Word order in an English sentence

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Lack of honourifics in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Plural forms /forming the plural of words

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Subject omission in an English sentence

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Position of the adjective in an English sentence

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Use of articles in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Subject-verb agreement in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Verb forms in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Vocabulary and learning new words in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Pronouncing words in English

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What was easier for you, understanding the message in English (input) or producing a message (output)?

- a) Input
- b) Output

Those that you found very difficult (5 or above), do you know why they were so difficult for you?

Appendix 2

Background information

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Mother tongue/s: _____

Level of English:

beginner	intermediate	advanced
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How old were you when you started learning English? _____

How often do you use English to communicate?

never	very little	sometimes	often	a lot
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On average, how many hours are you exposed to English per day:

0-1 hours	1-2 hours	2-3 hours	3-4 hours	4-5 hours	5 hours +
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Do you know any other language apart from English? Which one/s? _____

Language learning

How difficult did you find the following aspects when learning English? Please rank from 1 (very easy) to 7 (very difficult):

Word order in an English sentence (this question was asked because English and Spanish follow an SVO pattern (“I go to school”), but Korean follows an SOV pattern (“I to school go”))

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Lack of honorifics in English (this question was asked because English and Spanish do not have levels of formality in the same way that Korean does. In Korean, verb forms change according to the person who is being addressed)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Plural forms /forming the plural of words (this question was asked because both English and Spanish change their forms when forming the plural with “-s” or “-es”, but Korean uses the same form for singular and plural)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Subject omission in an English sentence (this question was asked because in English the subject cannot be omitted, but in Spanish and Korean it is possible to omit it)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Position of the adjective in an English sentence (this question was asked because in English and in Korean the adjective is placed before the noun, but in Spanish it is placed after the noun)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Use of articles in English (this question was asked because in English and Spanish there are articles, but they do not exist in Korean)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Subject-verb agreement in English (this question was asked because in English and Spanish the subject agrees with the verb of the sentence (“he likes” or “we like”) but Korean does not have subject-verb agreement)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Verb forms in English: irregular verbs, auxiliaries, past forms, etc (this question was asked because each language has different ways of conjugating verbs and this could be something learners struggle with)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Vocabulary and learning new words in English (this question was asked in order to know if learners find it hard to learn new words in English or to remember them since they are different from those of their L1s)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Pronouncing words in English (this question was asked because English and Spanish follow a stress pattern, but Korean does not. Pronunciation could also be something that can make learners struggle)

Very easy						Very difficult
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

What was easier for you, understanding the message in English (input) or producing a message (output)? (this question was asked in order to see which one was harder for learners, either producing or understanding)

- a) Input
- b) Output

Those that you found very difficult (5 or above), do you know why they were so difficult for you? (open question)