Language Acquisition and the Errors We Make

- A comparison between beginners and intermediate learners
Abstract
The aim of the study was to find out whether or not there is a difference in the type and number of errors made by L2 intermediate learners and beginners of English. Texts were gathered from two age groups, 9-10 year olds and 16-18 year olds, 16 texts from the younger beginner level learners and 9 from the older intermediate learners. From the errors made in the texts five categories were formed (six for the beginners): Grammatical errors, word missing errors, morpheme errors, word order errors and spelling errors that is unique to the beginners. It was found that intermediate learners make fewer errors overall but that they make the same types of errors as the beginners when they do make an error.

Keywords
Error analysis, comparison, intermediate learners, beginners, L2 English.
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Appendix A
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There are a number of contradictory beliefs about how second language learner errors vary with age. First, most people would probably expect second language students to make fewer and fewer mistakes as they learn the language. Even if this is true at large, recent studies have shown that errors are still frequent even at the advanced level (e.g. Dagneaux et al. 1998:163-174). Secondly, we may expect learners to make different types of errors as they progress; we will, for example, probably not expect subject-verb agreement errors to be as common among intermediate learners as with beginners. However, in a longitudinal study by Chamot (in Ellis 1994:55), it was show that there is a great deal of fluctuation in the types of error made by learners over time, and that the learners showed little progress with regard to some errors. Third, we may expect a beginner to be more affected by his/her mother tongue in the errors made than an intermediate learner, who has access to a greater vocabulary in the new language, as suggested by e.g. Taylor (1975 in Ellis 1994:62). Others argue that it is important to take into account that some errors can only be made at a higher level (e.g. Kellerman 1983 in Ellis 1994:330-332). For example, a beginner would most likely not make a relative pronoun error such as “This is a car which Motorola built”. Instead, a beginner student would have split the sentence into two separate sentences and written “This is a car. Motorola built this car”. This is but one example of errors that advanced learners could make that a beginner student most likely would not make. It is equally interesting to compare learners at lower proficiency levels with regard to error frequency: e.g. to study weather or not intermediate learners make fewer mistakes than beginner students and if they make the same errors.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to find out whether or not there is a difference in the type and number of errors made by intermediate learners and beginners that has Swedish as their L1 and English as their L2 language. I will devided the errors into descriptive categories, for example, morphological errors and word order errors.
1.3 Material and Method

The material consists of written materials by students of different age groups. The students’ ages are 9-10 for the beginners and 16-18 for the intermediate learners.

The type of writing differs between the age groups; the younger students wrote letters of approximately 80 words while the older students wrote essays of approximately 350 words each. The number of essays gathered is 16 for the younger students and nine for the older students. The essays from the older students were gathered by having them send them to me by email while the younger students’ letters were gathered by going to a nearby school and asking their teacher for permission to copy some letters that they had written. After gathering the texts, I corrected them on my own. I was allowed access to the papers if all personal information was removed in the essay and thus all examples used in this essay are anonymous.\(^1\)

The method that will be used in this essay is error analysis.

2. Error analysis

In error analysis there are several ways of looking at errors or mistakes that students make, for example one could create taxonomies for classification of errors or define certain errors on more levels. No matter how one chooses to approach the subject one will encounter similar difficulties, mainly in how to classify different errors or mistakes. The outline of this chapter is as follows: In section 2.1., there will be a discussion of the differences between errors and mistakes. In section 2.2., there will be a discussion of problems in identifying errors. In the last section 2.3., there will be a discussion of transfer errors.

2.1 Errors versus Mistakes

To define a difference between the terms error and mistake is difficult. According to Corder (1967 in Ellis 1994:51) “[a]n error (in this technical sense) takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge. It represents a lack of competence” (1994:51). He also

\(^1\) Ideally, I should have asked the parents’ consent to use the essays. However, I was unaware of such procedure at the time. Given the circumstances, I feel that my study is ethically appropriate since student’s identities have been removed and that there is no discussion of the content in the essays.
states that “[a] mistake occurs when learners fail to perform their competence; That is, it is the result of processing problems that prevent learners from accessing their knowledge of a target language rule and cause them to fall back on an alternative, non-standard rule that they find easier to access. Mistakes, then, are performance phenomena [...]” (1994:51). With regard to the two quotes above we can define an error as a ‘lack of competence’ and a mistake as a ‘performance phenomena’. This means that errors are something that we cannot correct; it is something that we will have to learn in order to correct and understand, while mistakes can be corrected as the knowledge is already learnt.

There are several opinions on this matter and how to deal with the results. Corder (1967 in Ellis 1994:51) argues that mistakes as defined above should not be included in an error analysis. One should instead focus on the errors that students make. Nonetheless, Ellis (1994:51) argues that this idea is questionable, apart from the problem of telling apart what is an error and what is a mistake; it also assumes that a learner will always make the same errors in the same places. Instead, the learner might sometimes make an error and sometimes a mistake (1994:51). It could be a problem that the learner has but partial knowledge of the specific form: “It is possible that the learner’s knowledge of the target form is only partial; the learner might not have learnt all the contexts in which the form in question can be used” (Ellis 1994:51). Thus a learner might make an error when trying to use what the learner is assuming is the correct form when in that context, it is the wrong form. Ellis gives an example of how a learner might make errors due to partial knowledge with these two sentences:

- My sister is older than me.
- My three sister are older than me.

In the first example, the usage is correct but in the second it shows how partial learning misleads the student and causes an error.

### 2.2 Problems with identifying errors

Corder (1971a;1974 in Ellis 1994:52) proposes an elaborate way of getting to the problems that analysts face when trying to recognize errors (1994:52). Ellis states that the proposed procedure “[...] acknowledges the importance of ‘interpretation’ and distinguishes three types: normal, authoritative, and plausible” (1994:52). The different types presented refer to different interpretations of errors made by the analysts. A normal interpretation will be used in this essay and refers to when the analyst is able to use the target language to assign a meaning to the utterance made.
Even if this procedure gives the analysts the possibility to address errors it also has its weaknesses. This structure relies on access to the specific learner, which sometimes is not possible. However, according to a study made by Van Els et al (1984 in Ellis 1994:54), when the learner is asked to give an account of what they wrote the answer might not be reliable (1994:54). Ellis also says that “such a procedure assumes that learners possess the necessary metalingual knowledge to talk about their own performance – an assumption that may not be justified in the case of children and some adult learners” (1994:54). This shows that there is a problem not only with the definition of errors, but also when asking a learner to give an account of what they wrote; not only might the result in itself be unreliable but the learner might lack the knowledge needed to explain it as well.

2.3 Explanations: Transfer errors
A transfer error occurs when the person is writing in the target L2 language using their L1 grammar. For example, a study made by Richards (1971b in Ellis 1994:58) states that “[i]nterference errors occur as a result of ‘the use of elements from one language while speaking another.’ An example might be when a German learner of L2 English says ‘I go not’ because the equivalent sentence in German is ‘Ich gehe nicht’” (1994:58). The definition of what a transfer error is then clear: it is an error that occurs when L1 grammar is used in L2 writing and speech. Transfer errors can then be further subdivided as Lott (1983 in Ellis 1994:59) shows by distinguishing three categories:

1. ‘Overextension of analogy’ occurs when the learner misuses an item because it shares features with an item in the L1 (for example, Italian learners use ‘process’ to mean ‘trial’ because Italian ‘processo’ has this meaning).

2. ‘Transfer of structure’ arises when the learner utilizes some L1 feature (phonological, lexical, grammatical, or pragmatic”) rather than that of the target language. This is what is generally understood as ‘transfer’.

3. ‘Interlingual/intralingual errors’ arise when a particular distinction does not exist in the L1 (for example, the use of ‘make’ instead of ‘do’ by Italian learners because the ‘Make/do’ distinction is non-existent in Italian).

(Ellis 1994:59)
The above description allows for classification of transfer errors and also means of supplying reasons for why certain errors occur.

Ellis (1994:59-60) also mentions a study made by Dulay and Burt (1974b) where they classified the errors they collected into three categories:

1. Developmental (i.e. those errors that are similar to L1 acquisition)
2. Interference (i.e. those errors that reflect the structure of the L1)
3. Unique (i.e. those errors that are neither developmental nor interference)

(Ellis 1994:60)

It is shown here how different studies define and classify errors. Note that there is never only one theory. There are always different ways of looking at the same problems. In the present study, I will discuss error explanations in terms of transfer and non-transfer.

3. Results

This chapter will be split into three parts. The first part is an analysis of the results gathered from the younger students, the second part deals with the older students, and the final part will be a comparison of the two. In each section, I will discuss the errors in terms of error frequency, error types and error explanation. For a complete list of all the tables and graphs used in this section, see Appendix A.

3.1 Categorization of errors

There are many different error typologies available (see e.g. Källkvist 1999 for some examples). In the present study I will use four different categories (five for the younger students). The example numbers presented below corresponds to the number they have in the essay where the number corresponds to the order in which the examples appear, thus example number 1 is the first example used and number 23 is the last example used.

The first category is grammatical errors. Grammatical errors could be further subdivided but will here be kept as one category. Example (16) consists of a verb choice error:
(16) “Most of the times we often appear there quite late in the evening[...]”

In this example, the students has chosen the word ‘appear’ instead of the correct verb ‘go’.

The second category is words missing. This category contains all mistakes were the students failed to use a word that was necessary for the sentence. Example (4) shows a word missing error:

(4) “Woodrabbit lives in woods in all Sweden”

In this example, the student is missing the word ‘of’ in-between ‘all’ and ‘Sweden’.

The third category is morpheme errors. This category contains all morpheme errors that the students have made. Example (6) shows several similar errors:

(6) “…nuts, mushroom, egg, bird kids, acorn, seed […] and insects”

This example shows a student making several affix errors, all items listed need a ‘-s’ suffix.

The forth category used is word order. This category contains all errors where the students wrote a correct sentence but switched the position of two words. Example (10) shows an example of a word order error:

(10) “No there not”

This example shows a word order error where the student needed to have changed the words ‘there’ and ‘not’.

The fifth category spelling errors only applies to the younger students. This category contains the spelling errors that the students made. Example (11) contains a spelling error:

(11) “Shi is 10 yers old”

This example shows a student making two spelling errors in both ‘shi’ and ‘yers’.

There are difficulties in creating a taxonomy for some of these categories. The ones where a classification was most difficult were grammatical errors. The grammatical errors were classified as anything that did not fit under any other category and thus this area is wide.

3.2 Analysis of students aged 9-10

This section will provide an in-depth analysis of the results gathered from the younger students and an attempt to see if there are conclusions to be made from these results. The
The problem with the analysis of this part is that each individual essay has a small amount of words and thus the impact of one error can be difficult to estimate as the data for analysis is small. In the cases where a word error was found, an analysis of the entire letter was done in order to define an error as a error and not a mistake. It is however, important to know that the teacher of these younger students stated that their classes are mainly oral and not written. This may contribute to some of the errors made in their letters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Younger students</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4,24</td>
<td>27,71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words missing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3,32</td>
<td>21,69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme errors</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3,60</td>
<td>23,49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0,65</td>
<td>4,22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling errors</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3,51</td>
<td>22,89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of words</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of errors</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of errors</td>
<td>15,31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of errors made by the younger students (numbers are rounded off to two decimals)

The above table shows the total number of all errors found in the short texts provided by the younger students. These results are based on 16 letters and the most important finding here is that the students only make a small number of word order errors.

3.2.1 Grammatical errors

As seen in Table 1 a large percentage of errors are defined as grammatical, and the two errors that occurs the most are errors in apostrophe use and using the wrong personal pronoun. In the letters, the omitted apostrophe is taken as a grammatical error; while the personal pronoun error is much more uncommon and only occurs in a few instances it is still the second most common error made; an example of this is using “she” instead of “her” as in example (2).

In all the letters that the students have been writing, apostrophe errors, account for a majority of the total number of grammatical errors. Why this is, is hard to define, however, one can hypothesise that the errors are due to the fact that the apostrophes are not articulated clearly when speaking and thus the students write the way they speak and miss the
apostrophes. According to their teacher, most classes focus on the spoken word and not the written at this level, which affects their writing in that they write according to the pronunciation when they do not know how to spell the word.

When looking at occurrences of using the wrong word, the errors are shown to be errors in personal pronoun usage. For example, one of the students writes primarily short sentences and uses pronouns at the beginning of every sentence and out of eight sentences the student makes two errors as seen below:

(1) “His name is Tomy. His is two 2 yers old”
(2) “Shi name is Filisia” when talking about her rabbit.
(3) “I dont know”

These three are good examples of what type of errors they make at this level of learning. The students make errors in their usage of apostrophes as in (3) as well as in their usage of personal pronouns as in (1) and (2).

In the examples above, the first sentence shows a correct use of a personal pronoun but the second sentence uses the wrong one. After analysing the whole letter one can assume that the student is unable to use the third person objective form, and that the student is using the possessive form instead of the correct third person objective form in both the errors that are shown in example (1) and (2).

3.2.2 Words missing
This topic deals with every missed word in the letters written and this includes lexical words as well as function words like articles. This is the third most common error that the students make. Out of these errors, the most common one is article omissions and they occur almost exclusively with the article ‘the’. There are examples of this error in almost every letter. The least common is failing to put in a word, usually ‘that’.

From this information one could assume that the students at this level have yet to master the usage of articles and that they sometimes omit words. This is either because of the fact that the students do not know it is needed or because of a temporary mistake in performance. As stated previously, their teacher said that they usually talk in class and that not much is written at this level which may contribute to such errors in writing. One could assume that when talking and writing they are missing the articles due to the fact that in Swedish the
article ‘the’ corresponds to a morpheme at the end of a word and not by adding an article before the word. This accounts for most of the errors that the students make and the few errors that concern a missing word cannot be explained by transfer of Swedish grammar since in the cases of word missing errors a similar word is almost always needed in Swedish to make the sentence correct.

Some examples of word missing errors that the students made:

(4) “Woodrabit lives in woods in all Sweden”
(5) “Fieldrabit are brown all year”

As mentioned the first sentence, a direct translation of that sentence into Swedish would say “Skogskanin lever i skogar i hela Svergie” and thus it could be argued that it is a Swedish transfer mistake instead of a missing word error. Instead, of arguing that this is a mistake, it is assumed that it is a missing word error since the missing word is ‘of’ that is to be inserted between ‘all’ and ‘Sweden’.

The second example sentence is missing the word ‘around’ at the end of the sentence or switching the word ‘all’ into ‘the whole’ to make it correct. It is thus a word missing error and word order error sentence.

3.2.3 Morpheme errors
These errors occur when a student fails to add the correct affix or uses the wrong form of a verb. These younger students, who are writing very short texts, do not use the wrong form of a verb. Instead, all their morpheme errors are based on not using the correct affix. What they have the most problem with is the affix –s when it comes to the plural form of nouns. Some students are better than others in this aspect and some students use the correct form in one instance but fails in doing so in the next one. Consider, for example:

(6) “…nuts, mushroom, egg, bird kids, acorn, seed […] and insects”*
(7) “There are two kind of rabbits that are Fieldrabit and Woodrabit”
*The […] represents a long list of what rabbits eats all in singular form.
In both these examples, the students show that they are able to use the plural form in some cases but not in others. Looking at the first example, we see that the correct morpheme is used on ‘nuts’ and on ‘insects’ as well as ‘kids’ but not in any of the other nouns on the list. This shows that the student has yet to grasp how to change a noun from its singular form into its plural form. All the nouns on the list in the first example are changed into their respective plural form by adding an ‘s’ to the end of the noun so the student should have no problem adding an ‘s’ to the end of the noun. In short, the student in this case has not yet acquired the complete knowledge needed to understand how to use the affix –s.

In the second example, it is clear that the student is referring to many rabbits of both species; here the affix –s should be attached to ‘kind’ as well as the two kinds of rabbits. However, the student uses the correct form when talking about all rabbits when they write ‘rabbits’ but fail to do so when they are talking about a specific kind of rabbit. This has been defined as a morpheme error, but if you change the latter half of the sentence a bit, one could see it as a word missing error. However, this poses the problem that a larger portion of the sentence would have to be changed. Thus, it is defined as a morpheme error as there is less of a change to the sentence structure.

Both of these examples show what is typical for all the letters written by students of this age; they are have problems when it comes to usage of the affix –s. This accounts for almost all the morpheme errors that the students have made.

3.2.4 Word order errors

Word order error is defined as such when the sentence is well structured if two words next to each other switch places. The difficulty of distinction between an error and a mistake in this category is because Swedish and English sometimes show a close similarity in their grammatical structure. Sometimes a direct translation works and sometimes it does not; from this comes also the fact that switching places of two words can make an important difference. This makes it difficult to define it as an error or mistake.

Below are some examples showing word order errors:

(8) “So the animals not kan take them”
(9) “ah there is it”
(10) “No there not”
The first example is the best example of an error caused by using Swedish words and grammar in English. Here the student has used Swedish grammar and also used the Swedish word ‘kan’ instead of the English word ‘can’. This sentence’s direct translation is “[s]å djuren inte kan ta dom” which is a well structured Swedish sentence but one can see how closely that relates to the original written sentence; thus this sentence shows the difficulty in knowing whether it is a mistake or error that the student has made.

The second sentence however, is not as clear as the first example. This sentence says “ah där är den” in Swedish, a well structured sentence and thus it can be thought of as a transfer of Swedish grammar. However, this sentence also shows that there are only two words that need to change places to make it structurally correct. These two points makes it difficult to explain it as either a mistake or an error.

The last example shows a clear word order error. This sentence make sense if the words ‘there’ and ‘not’ change places, and thus it is a word order error.

The three examples above are all a good pointer to the difficulties of defining an error. As said in the introduction to this part of the analysis the amount of text provided is limited and thus it is hard to define an error. However, if it only requires a change of places of two words that are written next to each other the error is defined as word order error.

3.2.5 Spelling errors

This topic is unique for the younger students as all the older students have written their papers using word processors. Thus they make a very limited number of spelling mistakes. The data from the younger students are all handwritten and then copied which makes this analysis possible. For it to be defined as a spelling error and not a spelling mistake, the student has to show that they have trouble spelling this particular word; this was easily definable as most students wrote sentences by reusing most of the words from the previous sentences.

Out of the 16 letters, 10 contained spelling errors to various degrees. Most of the errors can be explained as a result from writing the word based on how it is said in the spoken language. Here are a few examples of how it can look:

(11) “Shi is 10 yers old”
(12) “The wolf is now unkommen”
In the first case the student makes repeated spelling errors with both the words ‘she’ and ‘years’ and instead spells them closer to their pronunciations.

In the second example, the student misspells the word ‘uncommon’ and spells it as ‘unkommen’ which also implies a connection to spelling as it is pronounced.

The third example, however, shows a misspelling that is most likely due to the difficulty of spelling the word ‘either’. In a word processor, the spelling that the student used is automatically corrected and thus this type of spelling error would not have occurred if the student had used one when writing this letter. This is an interesting point as it deals with words that have silent letters and thus you cannot spell them based on their pronunciation.

In the above examples, all three show spelling errors that can easily be defined since the students are not using any word processors, and this is a topic that will be discussed in more detail in section 3.6.

### 3.3 Analysis of students aged 16-18

This section will be an in-depth analysis of the results gathered from the older students and an attempt to see if there are conclusions to be made from their results. One of the problems in this section is the number of essays which can be considered low as there are only 9 of them. The significant problem here, however, is the usage of word processors. The usage of a word processor makes the results look better than they would otherwise since it corrects the errors the students make. How major the impact on the result is, is however hard to find out and is not something that will be considered any further in this essay. Instead, one has to assume that everything written is written as the students write it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Older students</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1,93</td>
<td>52,29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Words missing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0,84</td>
<td>22,88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme errors</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0,72</td>
<td>19,61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0,19</td>
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<td>Total amount of words</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of errors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of errors</td>
<td>3,68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Analysis results from the older students (numbers rounded off to two decimals)
The above table shows the total amounts of all errors found in the essays provided by the older students.

3.3.1 Grammatical errors
When analysing the older students results what stands out is that out of the total amount of errors found in the essays 52 percent were due to grammatical errors. What falls under grammatical errors in this essay are using the wrong word, using unnecessary words in a sentence, failing to use the appropriate article as well as sentences that does not make sense in neither English nor Swedish. It could be argued that using a wrong word is a lexical and not a grammatical error; however, I see it as a lexico-grammatical error and thus it falls into the grammatical category in this essay. Thus grammatical errors are everything that does not fall into any of the other categories.

The most common error made is using the wrong verb in a sentence. For example, using ‘is’ instead of ‘are’. The correct usages of verbs are difficult for these students and are not always corrected by the word processor and that contributes to the results in this essay.

The second most common errors made is sentence structure errors. These errors entail sentences that do not make sense to sentences where the students repeat themselves by adding the same information in another format again.

Other errors made by the students are the over usage of words, article misses and failure to add the correct words. This contributes to making some sentences harder to grasp or even leading to making the whole sentence erroneous. These types of errors are most evident when the students use words such as ‘there’ instead of ‘their’ or missing a copular word.

Some students however have constructed sentences that are hard to follow or even get the meaning from. These sentences are sentences that you cannot grasp the meaning of. These types of errors are few but can be found in some of the students papers.

Some examples of errors of these types:

(14) “Your friends can also be Rock fans and then it’s easier to get into the style and really be your style”
(15) “[…]colourful characters and the actors is just perfect!”
(16) “Most of the times we often appear there quite late in the evening[…]”
In the first example, the meaning of the sentence is not directly evident and it is more of a collection of words than a sentence. This type of sentence is rare, but this student shows more of this type of error albeit less evident. The meaning of this singled out sentence might to some be evident but the meaning is most likely different for different people as it lacks real meaning. In these cases, one could ask the student what it means to try to find out what they meant with the sentence but as mentioned in the background section, that is not always easy and the student might interpret the sentence differently when you ask them then when they wrote it.

In the second example, we see how the student has failed in the usage of the verb ‘is’, here it is suppose to be ‘are’ as the student is referencing to many characters as well as many actors. These types of errors are rare as the word processor warns the writer about them; however, they sometimes slip through.

The last sentence shows several grammatical errors and thus it can be hard to grasp the meaning of this sentence. This student has added the word ‘often’ where it is not needed as the same meaning is pointed to when they use ‘most of the times’. This type of error where you add words that are not needed in sentences are common for these students. However, this sentence also shows another verb error where they use ‘appear’ instead of ‘go’ which is the correct form.

All of the above sentences show some form of grammatical error. They display usage of wrong verbs as well as sentences that does not make sense.

3.3.2 Words missing
As with the younger students this section will deal with errors that are due to the students missing necessary words. And as with the younger students the older students most frequently miss articles. This can also be put down to the same reason as with the younger students, the fact that in Swedish the meaning of the article ‘the’ is shown through affixes. The students also make general word misses as they miss any kind of word that is necessary for the sentence to be considered grammatically correct. To show this a few examples have been picked out:

(17) “[…]sing along with whole family in the car”
(18) “That is almost the only TV show I am looking at[…]”
(19) “[…]power over the others and he wants the rest of the group to do what he wants”

The first example shows the error where the student fails to add an article that is essential to the sentence, in this case the article ‘the’ between the words ‘with’ and ‘whole’. Without this article the sentence does not appear to be right and the student has failed in the usage of the article in question. This student also shows several other word errors but no other article misses. This might lead one to conclude that this is a mistake and not an error but as there are no other sentences that needs the definite article this conclusion is hard to prove and thus it is assumed that this is an error from the student.

The second sentence shows that the student is able to use the articles correctly but instead misses some words. In this case the missing word is ‘that’ which is needed to be placed between the words ‘show’ and ‘I’. This sentence in particular also shows that the student uses the wrong verb when writing ‘looking at’ instead of ‘watches’ as it is evident they are not watching TV right now.

The last example sentence shows an incomplete sentence. Here the student has constructed what might be considered a correct sentence but that needs more words at the end to make it correct. The student needed to add ‘them to do’ at the end to make the sentence complete and correct.

The above mentioned examples are all extracts of what errors the students of this level fails in when dealing with words missing. In general these errors are not noticed by word processors and thus the results for this part is most likely as they should have be even if the essays had been hand written.

3.3.3 Morpheme errors
As with the younger students, the older students also make mistakes when they fail to add affixes or other morphemes to words. This type of error is the third most common error for these students and in this area they are more widespread than the younger ones. The students of this age are writing longer essays and sentences which contribute to the possibility of these errors but this is also evidently an area where the students fail on numerous occasions. The students of this age make several varying morpheme errors: they miss a necessary morpheme, they fail at adding the correct morpheme or they fail at adding any morpheme to the base
word even if it is needed. To show how students of this age make these types of errors some examples have been selected:

(20) “I had never got that feeling before”
(21) “Nowadays you can easy follow a certain artist or a group[...]”

The first sentence is lacking a verb inflectional ending to make it correct. Here the verb ‘to get’ has been bent to ‘got’ which is half correct, this student also needed to add the morpheme ‘-ten’ to the end of the verb to make the sentence correct.

In the second sentence, the student needs to change the adjective ‘easy’ into an adverbial by adding the morpheme ‘-ly’ to the end of the adjective.

Overall, the morpheme ‘-s’ is the most common morpheme error for the students of this age even if that type of error was not singled out in any of the examples. If one ignores the most common morpheme error, the rest of the morpheme errors are spread out and no single error is reoccurring in enough cases to make it one of the most common errors. Thus, morpheme errors are spread across different areas, both past tense morphemes and adverbial morphemes errors occur and no specific morpheme occurs more often than the other.

3.3.4 Word order errors
The full definition of a word order error can be found under 3.2.4. The basic principle is that if it makes sense after changing the places of two words then it is a word order error. The definition seems simple but to define a particular error as an error and not a mistake is difficult.

To show this some examples have been selected:

(22) “It switch faster than you ever can predict”
(23) “how much some people actually are affected by music”

This first example’s direct translation is “Det ändra snabbare än du någonsin kan förutse” which makes sense in Swedish. Thus the student has used Swedish grammar while writing in English. This sentence contains a word order error as well and thus it is listed here. One has to change the places of the words ‘can’ and ‘ever’.
The last sentence shows a word order error. By switching places of the words ‘affected’ and ‘are’ is the only operation needed to make it correct. Thus this is deemed to be a word order error.

The last example is a good example that shows how close Swedish and English grammar sometime is and how difficult it sometimes is to define an error. The first example contains several errors; however, in the second sentence it is hard to define it as either a mistake or an error. This is because it only requires a change of places for two words.

3.4 Comparisons between the two age groups: types of errors

Figure 1 contains the results from the younger students. It is shown that the errors made have a close resemblance between the two age groups. The two graphs used to present this information are based on the “% of error” column in Tables 1 and 2 where Figure 1 represents the results from Table 1 (younger students) and Figure 2 represents the results from Table 2 (older students).

![Pie chart showing percent of errors made by younger students.](image)

Figure 1: Percent of errors made by younger students.
These two graphs will be used as the base for the comparison of errors between the two age groups.

If we were to let the spelling errors be a part of the grammatical errors in the graph for the younger generation the two graphs would look virtually identical. The two graphs would then show that if you make any error you are about as likely to make the same type of errors independent of your age group. One could also argue that what is shown through these graphs is that there is no difference between the age groups when it comes to what type of error is being made. Thus once a text or an essay is written the type of errors and their percentages will be the same.

However, what is not considered in these graphs is the frequency at which the errors occur, that is the chance that you will make an error while writing an essay and how that number has changed. If we look at the table presented for the younger students the “frequency of errors” number is 15.3 which means that if you write 100 words, chances are that you on average make 15.3 errors; the same number for the older students however is 3.7. Thus there has been a change in the amount of errors made but not in the type of errors made. The students of the older generation then have learnt more rules and managed to make fewer errors overall but when they do make an error the chances are they will make the same type of error as the younger generation.
3.5 Comparisons between the two age groups: Frequency of errors

The frequency of errors for the two age groups is 15.31 for the younger students and 3.68 for the older students. The numbers correspond to the number of errors per 100 words that the students made in their writing. However, this number also has a large margin of error since the older students used word processors while the younger students did not. Thus, one would assume that if the older students were not allowed to use word processors the frequency of errors would increase.

Unlike the types of errors discussed earlier, the frequency of errors differs between the age groups. The older students have in comparison to the younger students managed to reduce their risk of making an error from 15.31 percent to 3.68 percent. This means that the older students have learnt how to use grammar better as they get older and learn more. However, they still make errors; also the number of errors made would be higher if not word processors were used in their writing.

One can see that the use of word processors means that it is difficult to make any viable comparison between the two age groups as they are writing under substantially different means. If the numbers presented would be taken as a matter of fact and that those numbers would not change even if the essay that the older students wrote would have been written by hand; then one would say that the older students have improved their English and that they now make close to four times fewer errors than the younger students. This is a result of approximately eight years’ of studying in school.

3.6 Comparisons between the two age groups: Explanations

When explaining the differences between the two age groups the two main problems are the following: the older students used word processors and the number of essays gathered is not enough to arrive at conclusive explanations. However, these will be disregarded when explaining the problems. This means that it will be assumed that the older students would write with the same proficiency with or without the word processors’ help and that the essays gathered serve as templates for all students. This way a conclusive explanation can be made.

When looking at the types of errors made it is clear that they have not changed over time. The explanation for this could be that the students’ way of writing has not changed; they are still writing in the same mind set. What this means is that the way the students builds their
essays does not change and thus they are inclined to make errors of the same category when they do make errors. The older students form longer sentences and that sometimes lets them down; while the younger students form very short sentences and are thus less inclined to make errors of connection of sentences and relative pronoun errors. This however, is not the complete explanation as it leaves the question of whether a student would not then make the same number of mistakes as well since they have not changed their way of writing. To explain this, we can assume that the student has through school - where they write essays and get them commented upon – learnt the correct way of using plurals and how to use articles. Their grammatical errors are now sentence structure based more than the wrong word in the wrong place. To conclude, this one could say that they still make the same type of mistakes because they are still thinking in the same way.

When comparing the frequency numbers, one sees that there has been a drastic decrease in the number of errors made. The one most likely explanation is that they have been going to school and that they have been taught how to use their grammar in different situations. Thus they have learnt how to avoid making mistakes in most cases, but as all people they still make mistakes.

4. Conclusion
To conclude this research, the results show that there is significant improvement by age in the number of errors. Thus the commonly held belief that you make fewer and fewer errors as you get older holds true. However, there has been no change in the types of errors that the students make. Thus, the students have not overcome all mistakes: instead they still make e.g. morpheme errors. The explanation for the errors is also the same. There are also a great number of transfer errors. This essay has also shown some differences with regard to the complexity of the texts the students have written. The older generation writes more complex sentences and tend to write longer sentence while the younger generation writes primarily short sentences that are less complex. This essay then has shown that the students of the older generation make fewer mistakes overall but that they make the same types of errors as the younger generation when they do make an error.
References

**Primary sources:**


**Secondary sources**


Corder, S.P. 1974 ‘Error Analysis’ in Allen and Corder (eds.) 1974


Richards, J. 1971b ‘A non-contrastive Approach to Error Analysis’. *English Language Teaching Journal* 25 204-19

Appendix A

Here an explanation of the terms in the tables and graphs is presented as well as all of the tables and graphs in the essay.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Younger students</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>27.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words missing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>21.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme errors</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>23.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling errors</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>22.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of words</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of errors</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of errors</td>
<td>15.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Older students</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>52.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words missing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>22.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme errors</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>19.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of words</td>
<td>4153</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of errors</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of errors</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The columns for % and the “frequency of errors” will be explained here as the terms are self-explanatory and so is the number of errors column as well.

- % of total – This term refers to how many percent of the total amount of words that any given error has. Thus this represents the chance that the word is an error.

- % of errors – This term refers to the percentage of the total errors made that any given error is responsible for. For example, in the older student table grammatical errors stand for 52.29% of the total amount of errors.

- Frequency of errors – This term is used for finding out how many errors are made per 100 words written. Thus in the case of the younger students, they are likely to make 15.31 errors per 100 words they write.
The numbers on the graphs above correspond to the “% of errors” column in the tables presented above.