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# Grammatical Gender Acquisition in L2 Spanish

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# **Grammatical Gender Acquisition in L2 Spanish**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
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by

**Alanna Quinn**

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Grammatical Gender Acquisition in L2 Spanish

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## Introduction

Prior to an analysis of grammatical gender learning, it is necessary to define the central tenets of language acquisition. The following sections will explain the hypotheses and processes which contribute to the current understanding of this field. This review of first and second language acquisition does not seek to provide a comprehensive explanation of these processes; indeed, the information outlined scarcely begins to address language acquisition's complexity and depth. However, this preliminary understanding will serve as the foundation for a narrower analysis of overarching linguistic ideas as they connect to the concept of grammatical gender acquisition in L2 Spanish by L1 English speakers.

### First Language Acquisition

**Universal grammar and comprehensible input.** The field of first language (L1) acquisition studies the emergence of language during the first years of a child's life. One early theory with regard to L1 emergence is that of Universal Grammar (UG), proposed and popularized by Chomsky beginning in the 1950s. As language is an inherent component of the human experience that emerges regardless of external factors in individual lives, Chomsky determined that an innate mechanism which permits the full acquisition of any given language must be present in the genetic makeup of all human beings (Chomsky, 1965; 1981; 1995). This mechanism, dubbed UG, essentially consists of a set of general principles that apply to all languages and which allow for the activation of specific parameters unique to the language to which one is exposed (Chomsky, 1995). That is, UG is the entire system of potentially applicable language parameters, while, on a more individualized level, "the grammar of a language can be regarded as a particular set of values for these parameters" (Chomsky, 1982).

Intrinsically connected to the UG hypothesis is the necessity of input for L1 acquisition. Input is defined as the language samples to which individuals have access during the process of acquiring a language (VanPatten & Williams, 2007), such as overheard conversations, voices on the television, and modified speech. Individuals process the input that they hear when they make a connection, either accurate or not, between the form of a language sample and its meaning (VanPatten, 2004). The UG theory holds that exposure to a language in the form of processed input allows for the activation of the innate mechanism for L1 acquisition (White, 2007).

Therefore, processed input is the factor which activates the UG, a mechanism that is proposed as an innate set of language principles and parameters. When individuals receive L1-specific input, the UG parameters applicable to that language are activated (White, 2007). It is thus sufficient to state that UG is a mechanism which guides the acquisition of L1 by assisting individuals “in the process of attending to, selecting, and processing input” (Montrul, 2004, p. 3), which signifies the mutual dependency of these two facets of the UG theory.

This mutual dependency is evident through the fact that language exposure alone could not be responsible for L1 acquisition, as individuals are not limited to mere repetition of the phrases to which they are exposed. Indeed, Chomsky (1986) asserts that to know a language signifies having “mastered a set of rules and principles that determine an infinite, discrete set of sentences” (p. 303). If individuals only acquired language through exposure, such an infinite possibility of sentences would not be possible, as they would be limited to the production of phrases which they had previously processed. Instead, individuals, even early in the stages of L1 acquisition, demonstrate linguistic knowledge and performance which extend beyond the scope of the language stimuli to which they are exposed (White, 2007). This claim is dubbed the pover-

ty of the stimulus by Chomsky (1986). Individuals know the grammaticality and ungrammaticality of structures in their L1, as well as the contexts in which they should occur, without explicit instruction to many of these points (White, 2007), which supports the UG theory and the role of input within it.

Likewise, it is equally unfeasible for individuals to acquire language through UG alone, as input is necessary to activate this mechanism. The well-documented case of one individual, Genie, emphasized the importance of input in language acquisition. Having grown up in complete social isolation, confined to a silent room for her entire childhood, Genie, upon her rescue, served as the subject of linguistic and psychological study (Fromkin et al., 1974). It was discovered that, given the lack of input she received, Genie did not follow the prescribed pattern of innate, UG-permitted language acquisition, and was thus completely without language (Fromkin et al., 1974). Genie's case led to increased focus on the role of input in the language acquisition process, and has contributed to the understanding of the connection between UG and input in L1 acquisition.

**The Critical Period Hypothesis.** An additional hypothesis of significance within the field of L1 acquisition is the Critical Period Hypothesis, proposed by Eric Lenneberg in 1967. This theory suggests that L1 acquisition is intrinsically linked to biological age. Specifically, it states that individuals can acquire language with native-like proficiency only within a certain time period, from early infancy until the beginning of puberty (Lenneberg, 1967). While the exact influence of age in language acquisition is subject to debate, it is true that, given normal developmental progression, children universally acquire their L1 (or L1s, in the case of simultaneous bilingualism) with complete fluency by 3 to 4 years old (Montrul, 2004). The outcome for

individuals who do not begin the process of language acquisition until later in their lives, however, is far more variable. While there are a variety of factors which may be responsible for this acquisition discrepancy, the Critical Period Hypothesis is a commonly utilized explanation for the relative ease of language acquisition in early years compared to later in life.

### **Second Language Acquisition**

L2 acquisition is a complex process with manifestations that are notably different from those of L1 acquisition. A distinction between the terms “acquisition” and “learning” may aid in a more thorough understanding of the nature of the L2 process. Acquisition is a natural, subconscious process that occurs without explicit thought or instruction, and “emerges spontaneously when learners engage in normal interaction in the L2” (VanPatten & Williams, 2007, p. 26). L2 acquisition is the desired goal of L2 instruction, as it signifies an ability to engage with the language in naturalistic, spontaneous oral production and places a focus on communication and understanding rather than on rote application of grammatical rules. L2 learning, however, occurs when “the L2 is the object, but not necessarily the medium, of instruction” (VanPatten & Williams, 2007, p. 26). In other words, L2 learning is a rules-centric approach which focuses on explicit instruction of the underlying principles of the language, rather than of its actual usage.

Whereas L1 speakers always acquire language implicitly, L2 learners are typically active participants in a learning process, during which they develop a metalinguistic awareness about the language. As such, the language which emerges for L2 speakers is different than that of native speakers; L2 speakers are aware of the “systematic and rule-governed” nature of the language, whereas native speakers do not necessarily have to be (White, 2007, p. 39). L2 learners often use cognitive problem-solving and rule application abilities in order to determine the con-

texts in which certain grammatical structures should appear, whereas this knowledge is intrinsic to L1 speakers and such problem-solving is thus not necessary for comprehension (Montrul, 2004).

An additional result of the unique nature of L2 acquisition is the highly variable extent to which the language is acquired; while L1 acquisition universally produces complete linguistic aptitude, this is not always true for L2 learning. In fact, it is instead considered “a given that most learners do not achieve native-like ability in a second language” (VanPatten & Williams, 2007, p. 11). While children who learn a language within the years of the Critical Period commit relatively few errors and progress through systemic acquisition stages which eventually result in fluency, most adult L2 learners commit errors that “are very frequent and may last a long time” (Montrul, 2004, p. 2). The L2 proficiency level that they do reach depends on a number of factors, a few of which will be examined in the following sub-sections.

While the extent to which L2 learners become proficient in their L2 is variable, one SLA proposal suggests that the language that these learners develop is, in its own right, a valid linguistic system. This is the interlanguage theory, labeled as such by Selinker (1972), and which defines interlanguage as the L2 dialect of an individual learner, or idiolect, which incorporates elements of L1 influence as well as L2 learning mechanisms. That is, the form of the L2 which learners acquire is not a faulty version of the language, but rather a system of development which follows unique stages and can fossilize, or cease developing, depending on the speaker’s interactions with the L2 (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001). For this reason, L2 learners may use the language in a different manner than do native speakers, and may demonstrate unique characteristics in their L2 production. This inherent difference between the language systems of native and L2



speakers supports the argument of the comparative fallacy, which notes the irrelevance of judging L2 speakers' production based on the production of native speakers, as the two systems will likely not align in their determinations of which structures are grammatical or ungrammatical (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001). Therefore, L2 progress should be judged separately and according to its own stages of development.

**Learning environment and input.** Just as in L1 acquisition, input plays a significant role in the process of acquiring an L2. In the 1970s and 80s, Stephen Krashen made significant contributions to the field of SLA and the current understanding of the role of input in L2 acquisition, most notably with his Monitor Theory and Input Hypothesis.

The Input Hypothesis suggests that “humans acquire language in only one way— by understanding messages” (Krashen, 1985, p. 2). That is, in order to gain a language, individuals must be exposed to and understand what Krashen considers “comprehensible input.” This specific type of language sample contains linguistic information that is slightly more difficult than that which the learner has previously processed (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). Krashen (1985) identifies this with the equation  $i+1$ , in which  $i$  serves as the knowledge that the individual already possesses and  $+1$  as the language that is slightly beyond their ability. This model ensures that language is not too difficult for individuals, as overly challenging content will render comprehension impossible, but that it is sufficiently stimulating to advance one's L2 acquisition progress (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). Krashen (1985) assesses input as “the essential environmental ingredient” (p. 3) for L2 acquisition, and thus the quantity and quality of the language samples to which a learner has access plays a significant role in the extent of their L2 attainment.

The learning environment in which learners acquire their L2 also contributes significantly to the input that they receive and the manner in which they develop the language. Just as is the case for L1 learners, “acquisition will not happen for learners of a second language unless they are exposed to input” (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 9), and thus L2 learning must take place in an environment where input is consistently available. Krashen (1981) suggests that language acquisition is preferable to language learning in cases of L2 development, as it permits a meaning-based view of the language. However, for the majority of L2 learners, the L2 acquisition environment is a formal classroom setting and the input is primarily artificial and deliberately structured by a teacher. This formal learning environment is comprised of tasks that are “directly aimed at increasing conscious linguistic knowledge of the target language” (Krashen, 1981, p. 47). In other words, the input strives to explicitly teach about the language, and exposes students to language learning as opposed to language acquisition.

An environment which encourages language acquisition would be more naturalistic and would provide opportunities to engage with the language in a realistic manner; however, most L2 learners who are learning the language in any country where the language is not the majority language will have limited exposure to the L2 in a naturalistic context. Most adult learners who are acquiring the L2 in the classroom receive a mere 3 to 5 hours of instructional time each week, which is an input-poor environment compared to that of L1 acquirers, who are constantly surrounded by input, even if they are initially unable to process much of it (Krashen, 1982).

**Age of acquisition.** The age at which individuals begin to learn their L2 can play a role in how they acquire the language and the ultimate proficiency level that they achieve, which follows the aforementioned Critical Period Hypothesis. It is commonly accepted that younger

learners, particularly those who have not yet reached puberty, are at a distinct advantage for L2 acquisition compared to adult learners (Lenneberg, 1967).

There are areas, however, in which research seems to suggest an advantage for adult learners. Most notably, Krashen (1982) suggests that “adults proceed through the early stages of L2 development faster than children do” (p. 40). That is, while children ultimately reach higher proficiency levels than adults, ease of learning in the initial stages of acquisition appears to be slightly skewed in favor of older learners. A likely reason for this phenomenon is that adult learners receive more comprehensible input than do children (Krashen, 1982). This is believed to be the case because, as explained by Bardovi-Harlig (2007), adult L2 acquirers “have access to the full range of semantic concepts from their previous linguistic and cognitive experience” (p. 58). As adults have already mastered language structure and usage patterns in one language, they can potentially apply this knowledge to their emerging understanding of the L2. This is a capacity that very young learners do not have, as they have not yet acquired metalinguistic awareness. This possible advantage for adult L2 learners may explain their initial success as noted by Krashen (1982).

However, the connection that adult learners form between their L1 and L2 can also lead to negative transfer, which will be explored further in the sub-section on cross-linguistic influence, and essentially consists of knowledge from the L1 that interferes with learning the L2 (Odlin, 2003). In other words, during the L2 acquisition process, adult learners may make connections between their L1 and L2 which are not applicable, such as assuming that sentence structures that are common in the L1 will necessarily be the default in the L2 as well. It can be difficult for adult learners, who have grown accustomed to the semantic conventions of their first

language, to learn the conventions of another language. Some analyses even suggest that the Critical Period marks the cutoff point after which “it becomes impossible to achieve native-like proficiency in another language” (Odlin, 2003, p. 463). This would suggest that age is among the most significant factors in L2 acquisition, as the opportunity for full acquisition is restricted after a certain age. Still, while this is an area which is subject to on-going debate, a general conclusion is that children are typically more successful with L2 acquisition than are adults and that the acquisition processes look considerably different for these two groups of language learners.

**Feedback.** L2 acquisition is also characterized by the distinct feedback that learners receive during this process. When nonnative speakers commit an error during an interaction with a more fluent speaker, they often receive feedback, or corrections, that provide the accepted linguistic forms. Also referred to as negative evidence, this feedback provides the speaker with information “concerning the incorrectness of their own utterances” (Gass & Mackey, 2007, p. 178). An awareness of the accuracy of their production allows learners to adopt more commonly-accepted forms in the L2.

There are two primary types of feedback: explicit and implicit. In instances of explicit feedback, the L2 learner is made directly aware of the error which they committed, and the accepted form which should be used in its place. A potential example is if a student says *Yo haco mi tarea* to mean “I do my homework,” and a fluent speaker responded, “No, the accepted form of *hacer* in the first person singular is *hago*.” Metalinguistic explanations of unacceptable productions are considered explicit feedback; when students are informed of the L2 rules which deem their productions ungrammatical, they are being made explicitly aware of the acceptable usage of the language (Gass & Mackey, 2007).

In instances of implicit feedback, L2 learners receive information about their errors in a subtle, indirect manner. An example of such feedback is a recast. In recast situations, when a learner produces an unacceptable statement, the more fluent speaker repeats the statement using the acceptable form. For instance, to utilize the previous example, *Yo haco mi tarea*, an example of an implicit recast response would be *Yo hago mi tarea también*, 'I do my homework too'. Thus, there is no direct instruction regarding the error, but instead an example of the accepted usage of the grammatical form is immediately provided. Feedback occurs throughout the L2 acquisition process and is a necessary component for advancement, but it does not always lead to complete acquisition of the acceptable forms (Montrul, 2004).

**The Affective Filter.** Emotional and social barriers contribute to an additional component of L2 acquisition which can make the process more challenging for learners. The Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that within L2 acquisition, there is a tendency for learners to build up an emotional resistance to learning as a result of communicative anxiety, low self-confidence, and decreased motivation levels (Krashen, 1982). It thus follows that in a stressful learning environment, affective filters are high for many students, and learning is stifled. It is therefore the goal of L2 instructors to create environments which produce "learners who are comfortable and have a positive attitude toward language learning [and] have their filters set low" (VanPatten & Williams, 2007, p. 28), as this is the scenario in which maximum L2 acquisition will occur.

It is worth noting that while structured classroom environments provide inauthentic communicative opportunities, they also allow for a potentially lowered affective filter, as students can acquire aspects of the L2 slowly and sequentially, as opposed to a naturalistic environment in which communicative pressures are high. As such, in structured classroom environ-

ments it is more likely that individuals will comprehend the input that they receive, because teachers “modifying input makes the language more comprehensible” (Gass & Mackey, 2007, p. 176). This better adheres to the Input Processing Theory (VanPatten, 2007) which asserts that input comprehension is the most critical aspect of L2 acquisition. However, in certain classroom environments, affective filters may be high if students are judged by their ability to produce the L2 in an acceptable manner, and particularly if their grade depends on this. VanPatten & Williams (2007) suggest that the affective filter “can help explain the variable outcome of SLA across L2 learners” (p. 28), which signifies the considerable role that it can play in an individual’s L2 acquisition.

**Motivation.** Learning motivation is an additional factor that plays a significant role in the L2 acquisition process. Doughty and Long (2003) express that external factors, such as “international travel, higher education, and marriage” (p. 5) are among the motivations which lead individuals to acquire an L2. The increasing popularity of L2 programs in U.S. high schools and universities, along with the advantage of bilingualism in a globalized world, are also undoubtedly contributing factors to the decision to begin this learning process. There are different hypotheses which seek to explain how motivation contributes to the L2 acquisition process, and though they vary in their conclusions, they all agree that motivation significantly impacts L2 learning.

Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) suggest that motivation is an ever-changing component of learners’ identities, which fluctuates greatly even throughout one L2 instructional course. They assert that “most learners experience a fluctuation of their enthusiasm/commitment, sometimes on a day-to-day basis” (p. 617). Thus, the concept of learner motivation is not a static characteristic, but rather a continuously shifting facet of learning which depends on several factors. One

such factor is that of stimulus appraisal, proposed by Schumann (1997), which suggests that individuals' motivation for acquiring a particular facet of language depends on the input which they receive about it. They assess the stimuli for certain characteristics, such as its familiarity to them, its perceived necessity with regard to the goal to which they are striving, and their belief in their own ability to adequately address it. These characteristics, according to Schumann (1997), determine individual motivation levels.

In their own theory, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) suggest that the attitudes that L2 learners have towards the L2 community as a whole greatly determine their motivation and success in learning the language. That is, a positive interpretation of the L2 community by learners will incentivize them to learn the language, whereas the perception of the L2 community as “low-status” will not lead to successful acquisition. This is related to Noels' (2001) research, which distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. If learners strive to acquire language in order to become members of a “high status” linguistic community, this is considered an extrinsic motivation. If they seek to acquire a language in order to contribute to their own sense of accomplishment and linguistic ability, they are learning due to intrinsic motivation. MacIntyre et al. (1998) explains the Willingness to Communicate Theory, which asserts that “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (p. 547) will vary between individuals, and this motivation to communicate will determine the rate and success of L2 acquisition. The aforementioned theories comprise only a handful of the ideas behind motivation in SLA, and there is no definitive conclusion about its influence on L2 acquisition.

**Cross-linguistic influence.** Cross-linguistic influence, most notably L1 influence, is a final component which comprises a significant role in the L2 acquisition process. Commonly re-

ferred to as L1 transfer, this concept signifies “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired” (Odlin, 1989, p. 27). For the purpose of the present study, the definition of cross-linguistic influence will be limited to the effect of L1 on L2, though it is worth acknowledging that this influence can extend between any number of acquired languages, in any direction.

L1 influence can be a positive component of the L2 learning process if knowledge from the L1 aides in acquiring the L2, as assessed by Bates and MacWhinney’s (1982) Competition Model, which claims that learners rely on transfer to help them function in L2. However, transfer can also be negative if it actively disrupts or inhibits L2 learning (Odlin, 2003). Cognates can serve as examples of both positive and negative transfer. Cognates are pairs of words in two languages that are derived from the same root and have similar meanings. Thus, if an L2 Spanish learner who spoke L1 English knew that the word *el diccionario* is a cognate, equating the Spanish word with the English ‘the dictionary’ would be simple, and is thus positive transfer. On the other hand, negative transfer is likely in instances of false cognates. These are words which seem to share similar meanings but are actually derived from different roots. For instance, use of the word *embarazada*, or ‘pregnant’ in English, is a common false cognate for ‘embarrassed’. In this way, making connections between the L1 and L2 can be unhelpful for learners.

Much about L1 transfer is highly individualized, and will manifest itself differently from person to person. With regard to positive transfer, for instance, implementation of L1 prior knowledge to acquire L2 concepts “depends on the individual judgments of language learners and bilinguals that there exist certain cross-linguistic similarities” (Odlin, 2003, p. 443). That is, L2 learners of a given L1 do not uniformly identify similarities between their languages, due to



different cognitive abilities and L1 mastery, and as such, it is difficult to predict with certainty which components of the L2 will demonstrate L1 influence.

### **Summary**

The current understanding of L1 and L2 acquisition is characterized by a number of dynamic factors, many of which are still open to debate. The outcome of L2 acquisition is different than that of L1 acquisition, and learners often never achieve fluency in the L2, though their L2 dialect is theorized as being a language system in its own right. Within the domain of L1 acquisition, it is recognized that Chomsky's (1995) UG theory, with its focus on the innate, input-activated human capacity for language, serves as the most impactful analysis of the process. The field of SLA shares a recognition of the importance of input, while also noting the variable influence of learning environment, age of acquisition, communicative feedback, learner motivation, and both negative and positive cross-linguistic influence. The following section will explore one area of SLA research, the acquisition of grammatical gender in L2 Spanish, in greater detail.

## Literature Review

### Spanish Gender

Gender is a multifaceted grammatical feature that is represented differently across languages. In Spanish, gender refers to the binary system which classifies all nouns as either masculine or feminine and are assigned the articles *el* and *la*, respectively (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Spanish gender is further divided into two distinct categories, that of natural gender and of grammatical gender (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). Natural gender refers to the distinction between masculinity and femininity as it refers to nouns with sexual referents, such as people and animals (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). Henceforth, this thesis will refer to nouns with sexual referents as sexual nouns. Natural gender is assigned to sexual nouns on a semantic basis, meaning that gender in these cases refers to the biological sex of the individual (White et al., 2004).

Two examples of natural gender assignment in Spanish are *el hombre*, ‘the man’ and *la mujer*, ‘the woman’. In these instances, the masculine *el hombre* semantically corresponds to the gender that is assigned to individuals of the male sex. Likewise, *la mujer* is feminine to express the gender assigned to individuals who are anatomically female (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). It is worth noting that “nouns for people and animals (animates) generally have both masculine and feminine forms” (Pérez-Pereira, 1991, p. 575). That is, in cases of sexual beings, the gender of the noun is dependent upon the identity of the referent, which changes according to sexual anatomy. For example, the term *el/la maestro/a* ‘the teacher’ does not have an unchanging gender assignment, but rather one that depends upon the sex of the teacher to whom the term refers.

Contrary to natural gender, grammatical gender is a functional category of Spanish, which signifies that it is an element that serves a purely grammatical role (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). In other words, grammatical gender is assigned to nouns with non-sexual referents, and this assignment is devoid of semantic meaning, as such objects have no sex (White et al., 2004, p. 107). Henceforth, this thesis will refer to nouns with non-sexual referents as non-sexual nouns. Although the assignment of gender to non-sexual nouns in Spanish is arbitrary, it is still considered an “inherent lexical feature” of the noun (White et al., 2004, p. 107). This dictates that gender of such nouns is unique and unchanging. Pérez-Pereira (1991) asserts that “inanimates [non-sexual nouns] have only one form, either masculine or feminine” (p. 575), as opposed to nouns referring to sexually animate beings, which can change.

Two examples of non-sexual nouns with arbitrarily assigned grammatical genders are *el libro*, ‘the book’ and *la casa*, ‘the house’. While there is no semantic motivation for this gender assignment, the masculine identity of *el libro* and the feminine of *la casa* are intrinsic, unchanging components of these nouns (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). It is also worth noting that nouns referring to plants, such as *el árbol*, ‘the tree,’ are also considered non-sexual nouns. Although these nouns refer to living things, they do not have a sex, and are thus non-sexual. This thesis will focus specifically on concepts related to grammatical gender, referring to the arbitrarily motivated assignment of gender to non-sexual nouns.

**Spanish gender assignment patterns.** There are clearly observable patterns within the domain of Spanish grammatical gender assignment. About 99.4% of nouns which end in *-o* are masculine, and about 96.3% of those which end in *-a* are feminine (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Such nouns are dubbed “canonical” and, in total, comprise about 68% of all Spanish nouns

(Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). This statistic suggests that a significant portion of nouns are non-canonical, such as, among many examples, nouns that end in *-a* but are masculine (i.e. *el mapa*, ‘the map’), end in *-o* but are feminine (i.e. *la mano*, ‘the hand’), or end in *-e*, which can be either masculine or feminine (i.e. *la costumbre*, ‘the custom,’ and *el pie*, ‘the foot’). Thus, simply knowing the structure of canonical nouns would seem to be insufficient for Spanish speakers and learners to fully master this grammatical concept.

While Spanish nouns possess an inherent gender identity, the adjectives and determiners that are assigned to nouns are not intrinsically connected to one gender (White et al., 2004). That is, adjectives and determiners assume the grammatical gender of the noun which they modify. For instance, in the cases of *el libro*, ‘the book’ and *la casa*, ‘the house,’ each can be modified by the adjective *pequeño/a*, ‘small,’ as in *el libro pequeño*, ‘the small book’ and *la casa pequeña*, ‘the small house.’ Thus, the adjective *pequeño/a* does not, independently, have an unchanging gender, but rather assumes the masculine and feminine as directed by the head noun (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). The agreement between a noun, its determiner, and its adjectives is known as gender agreement (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012).

**L1 acquisition of Spanish gender.** Prior to an analysis of the difficulty of grammatical gender acquisition by L2 Spanish learners, it may be beneficial to provide an overview of the L1 acquisition process for this grammatical concept. White (2003) suggests that for L1 speakers, this functional category “forms part of the UG inventory” (p. 10). In other words, when speakers are routinely exposed to grammatical gender input early in their life, the parameter for grammatical gender is activated. This parameter typically includes a gender for masculine and feminine, as in Spanish, but different languages can have many more genders (Corbett, 2013). While it is clear

that grammatical gender mastery inevitably emerges for L1 speakers, there is not a unanimous consensus on how these L1 speakers determine the gender of a noun and its modifiers (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). The most salient theory, according to Pérez-Pereira (1991), points towards an L1 reliance on intralinguistic cues.

The intralinguistic-focused theory of acquisition of grammatical gender on the part of native speakers suggests that in order to accurately identify and assign gender, children rely on data from the linguistic context in which the noun appears (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). It suggests that children are able to process linguistic cues and attribute gender to certain contextual patterns. Pérez-Pereira (1991) notes that this theory suggest that “morphophonological and syntactic data are the most relevant” (p. 572). That is, children might subconsciously identify that specific noun endings consistently appear with certain pronouns, which leads to a general awareness of the concept of grammatical gender. Pérez-Pereira’s (1991) study found that as children grow older, they particularly focus on syntactic cues, as they “learn that syntax can override phonology (e.g. *el programa*, ‘the program’)” (p. 584).

This theory is in contrast with a less popular hypothesis of a dependence on extralinguistic cues, which holds that children will identify the gender of a noun “on the basis of information given by sexual dimorphism and semantic features related to this” (Pérez-Pereira, 1991, p. 572). This theory suggests that natural gender and sex traits are the most significant cues that children have in identifying the gender of nouns (Mulford, 1985). Pérez-Pereira (1991) counters this theory on the basis of his study, which found that “the feature of animacy/inanimacy does not seem to produce any substantial difference in Spanish children’s handling of nouns” (p. 584). By this, he means that when Spanish L1 children were tasked with identifying the gender of nouns, they

were equally accurate with assignment of sexual and non-sexual nouns. Therefore, intralinguistic cues seem to be more influential for L1 speakers.

In an effort to more fully understand how grammatical gender is acquired in the L1, Hernández Pina (1984) performed a longitudinal study on an L1 Spanish speaker to analyze his acquisition of gender. She found that when he first began producing words, he would replicate the sounds that he heard, including those of gender articles attached to nouns. She asserts that when he first began producing words, “*en él no había aún una idea consciente de la existencia del género masculino/femenino* [in him there was not yet a conscious idea of the existence of masculine/feminine gender]” (p. 235). When the subject began producing complete words, Hernández Pina notes that he accurately assigned gender to nouns when he learned the article and the noun “*como bloques individuales* [as chunks]” (p. 235). For instance, the child might produce *la puerta*, ‘the door’ correctly, because he received this input and processed the noun and its article together, assuming they were an inseparable chunk.

Over time, however, the child began to recognize that “*el género no es rasgo individual sino generalizable, y que debía aplicarlo a las palabras* [gender is not an individual feature but can be generalized, and that it should be applied to words]” (p. 235). That is, L1 Spanish children begin to recognize that gender is a general feature of all nouns, rather than an isolated occurrence. After this, Hernández Pina notes that the child seems to progress through distinct stages of production. He begins by over-applying the masculine to even feminine nouns, as in the unacceptable gender assignment of *un llave\**, ‘a key’ (p. 236). Subsequently, he opts to apply the feminine to the majority of nouns, even when considered unacceptable, as in *una pájaro\**, ‘a bird’ (p. 236). However, by 27 months of age, the L1 child seems to demonstrate a deepened pro-

iciency with gender assignment and agreement, initially by assigning feminine forms to nouns ending in *-a*. By the time the speaker is 3 years old, Hernandez Pina notes “*concordancia plena entre el artículo y el nombre* [full agreement between an article and its noun],” (p. 236). That is, grammatical gender assignment is fully acquired by this age. The relative subconscious ease of this process stands in contrast to the acquisition process by L2 Spanish speakers.

### **English Gender**

English possesses a relatively sparse gender system, particularly compared with the complexity of the Spanish system, with Comrie (1999) noting that in English, “gender plays a rather small part in the grammar” (p. 458). Still, natural gender, or the assignment of gender on the basis of sex, does exist in English, and is generally seen in pronouns such as “he” and “she” and occasionally in gender distinct titles such as “waitress”/“waiter” or “actress”/“actor” (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). However, many nouns referring to animate beings are gender neutral, such as the term “teacher” to refer to individuals of either sex (Comrie, 1999). Therefore, gender in Spanish is assigned by semantic principles on the basis of the sex of individuals, but often adopts neutral forms as well.

Meanwhile, non-sexual nouns in English are entirely unmarked (White et al., 2004). That is, there is no system of grammatical gender for non-sexual nouns as there is in Spanish. The nouns “the book” and “the house,” for instance, do not belong to grammatical categories like their respective masculine and feminine Spanish counterparts *el libro* and *la casa* (White et al., 2004). According to Comrie (1999), the English grammatical representation therefore does not assign gender arbitrarily, except in very few instances of “idiolectal or dialectal variation” (p. 459). Such an outlying case can be seen in the occasional assignment of feminine gender to ships

and cars, which are occasionally called “she.” This example represents an exception to what is otherwise a general rule of an absence of grammatical gender in English, a fact which may contribute to the difficulty Spanish L2 learners have with this concept in the target language.

**Grammatical gender acquisition in L2 Spanish.** As grammatical gender does not exist in English, native speakers of this language who are learning Spanish are faced with the task of acquiring a new grammatical concept, and errors are common. Grammatical gender is identified by Alamry & Sabourin (2017) as among “one of the most difficult structures that non-native learners need to acquire” (p. 1). For Spanish native speakers, knowledge of grammatical gender assignment is part of their linguistic competence (Corbett, 1991). In other words, under regular developmental conditions, L1 speakers will fully and successfully acquire grammatical gender, as they have complete access to the parameters specifying this within UG. However, successful acquisition of grammatical gender is not always an outcome for L2 Spanish learners whose L1 is English (Montrul, 2008). A study comparing acquisition of gender between speakers of various L1 groups found that English children were heavily influenced by the presence or absence of sex in the noun (Mills, 1986). This finding suggests that in instances of gender assignment to non-sexual nouns, English speakers will likely struggle with accuracy, as sex clues are not available.

Gamboa Rengifo (2012) explains the two most common potential errors when learning grammatical gender. The first is that of lexical assignment, when both the noun and its modifiers, such as its adjectives, are not accurate (i.e. *un pequeño casa\**, instead of *una pequeña casa*, ‘a small hand’). The second is that of syntactic assignment, which is evident when the speaker inaccurately represents gender agreement between the noun and either the article or the adjectives (i.e. *una pequeño casa* or *un pequeña casa*), but when there is at least one case of accurate



agreement to the noun. There are a variety of hypotheses and studies which seek to explain the difficulty that L2 learners face when acquiring this grammatical element, and this literature review will present a few of them.

### **Failed Functional Features Hypothesis**

One of the hypotheses that is utilized to explain the manner in which L2 learners acquire grammatical gender is the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH). This hypothesis suggests that L2 learners cannot fully acquire gender if their L1 does not possess this feature, due to an inability to access new parameters in the UG in adulthood. This argument therefore holds that new grammatical representations cannot be formed after the critical period of acquisition (Hawkins & Chan, 1997). For this reason, the FFFH purports that “adult learners won’t advance beyond the stage of probabilistic selection of determiner forms on the basis of noun phonology” (Montrul et al., 2008, p. 512 ). That is, adult L2 learners will never have a native-like knowledge of grammatical gender, but will rather be limited to assigning gender based upon educated assumptions; accuracy, therefore, is essentially a matter of chance.

The FFFH was first proposed by Hawkins and Chan (1997), who endeavored to study if “certain subparts of UG are inaccessible or less accessible to second language learners” (Hawkins & Chan, 1997, p. 189). While their research focused specifically on L1 Chinese speakers who were studying English, the results of their study serve as the foundation for the representational deficit view of L2 Spanish acquisition by L1 English speakers, as their conclusions are widely applicable to different L2 acquisition scenarios. The researchers suggested that in linguistic situations in which there are parameter setting differences between an L1 and a target language, there will be “considerable restrictions on the extent to which an L2 learner can

build a mental grammar like that of a native speaker” (Hawkins & Chan, 1997, p. 189). Parameter setting refers to the notion that individual languages have options, or parameters, unique to a certain language which are activated when a child is first exposed to their L1 (Chomsky, 1982). The parameters that are not applicable to the L1 do not become activated. Thus, when the individual learns an L2, they would ostensibly have to activate the previously inactive parameters (in this case, the parameter for grammatical gender). Hawkins and Chan’s opinion is that such retroactive parameter resetting is not possible post-childhood.

Hawkins and Chan performed a study on L1 Chinese and French individuals in the process of learning L2 English which required them to ascertain the acceptability of certain English sentences. The researchers selected Chinese and French subjects because the English grammatical component under study was not present in Chinese but was similarly expressed in French. The results demonstrated that the Chinese L1 speakers performed significantly less accurately on the test than did French subjects of the same English proficiency level, which Hawkins and Chan concluded signified an inability on the part of the L1 Chinese group to reset their parametric differences. They suggested that “it is the L1 which gives rise to such differences; French has [the grammatical concept], Chinese does not, and this difference is transferred into the L2 grammar” (Hawkins & Chan, 1997, p. 206). This conclusion then led to the formation of the FFFH, which suggests that L1 influence will lead to a difficulty, and perhaps even a complete inability, with acquiring L2 grammar in instances of parametric differences.

While this hypothesis extends to a broader view of grammatical acquisition in the L2, it is often referenced in literature on grammatical gender acquisition by L1 English speakers acquiring L2 Spanish in an attempt to explain the differences in their grammatical representations as

compared to those of native speakers. Hawkins and Chan (1997) express that due to the inaccessibility of certain “fixed function features” (p. 216), it is inevitable that L2 speakers will possess a grammar that is noticeably distinct from that of native speakers. Thus, according to the FFFH, adult L2 Spanish learners will never fully acquire grammatical gender if such a parameter is not activated in their L1; this hypothesis places the most influence on negative L1 influence of all those proposed.

Additional support for the FFFH specifically within the domain of grammatical gender acquisition by English-speaking adult L2 Spanish learners comes from Franceschina (2001) and her study of an individual named Martin. Martin is a non-native Spanish speaker whose L1 is English, but who has lived and worked in a Spanish-speaking country for many years and who is considered a near-native speaker. Franceschina conducted a study in order to assess if, given his position at the end state of L2 acquisition, Martin had fully acquired grammatical gender to the same extent as a native speaker. She assessed multiple hours of naturalistic oral production by Martin, and determined that, despite his fluency, he continued to struggle with certain aspects of gender agreement. Martin demonstrated complete accuracy on the lexical component of assigning the correct gender to each individual noun; that is, he was entirely accurate when assigning articles to nouns. However, he was not entirely successful with certain agreement tasks, as in assigning gender to the adjectives and modifiers which accompanied said nouns. In fact, accuracy within these categories ranged from a 85 to 92% success rate. Returning to Gamboa Rengifo’s (2012) distinction between gender assignment errors, it is evident that Martin struggled more with the syntactic component of gender agreement between nouns and modifiers. Franceschina confirms this in her assessment that Martin may have successfully acquired the lexical compo-

ment of noun forms, but not the full functional specification of gender within the phrase. She cites Aronoff's (1994) assessment that "gender is reliably detected not on the word that inherently carries the gender feature but rather on the lexemes that receive the feature by way of syntax" (Franceschina, 2001, p. 242). That is, Martin is able to acquire lexical knowledge about a word's gender identity, but is unable to accurately assign the gender of the words associated with that noun, like adjectives and pronouns, because he lacks a complete acquisition of "the full functional specification of the Spanish DP" (Franceschina, 2001, p. 242).

Based upon Martin's results, Franceschina (2001) determined that there is a permanent deficit with regard to English native speakers' ability to acquire L2 grammatical gender. She noted that Martin appeared to use the masculine as a default gender, even in instances where it is incorrect, which is a result found in many subsequent studies (see: McCarthy, 2007; Montrul, 2008; and Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002). However, Franceschina (2001) is unique in her interpretation of this phenomenon, as she asserts that a "natural explanation would be that Martin is not relying on native-like morphosyntactic representations of the Spanish gender system" (p. 243). In other words, the masculine default is the result of a syntactic deficit on the part of L2 speakers, as they are attempting, but are ultimately unable due to the inaccessibility of UG, to create a grammatical representation that mirrors that of L1 speakers.

### **Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis**

Whereas the FFFH emphasizes insurmountable differences between L1 and L2 grammatical gender representations, the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (FTFA) emphasizes the similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition, and suggests that L2 individuals never lose complete access to UG. According to Montrul (2008), this hypothesis contends that for L2 learners, it is

possible to “overcome the influence from their L1 and achieve native-like proficiency” (p. 51).

Thus, while acknowledging that L1 transfer is inevitable, the FTFA hypothesis suggests that such transfer is not detrimental to L2 acquisition.

Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) were responsible for the first proposal of the FTFA hypothesis. They asserted that L2 acquisition is undeniably distinct from that of L1 acquisition, arguing that in the former process, “all the principles and parameter values as instantiated in the L1 grammar immediately carry over as the initial state of a new grammatical system” (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996, p. 41). In other words, when L2 acquisition begins in adulthood, learners already possess a wide variety of information about their L1, which may be directly in contrast to components of the L2. They subsequently develop a unique language system, called the interlanguage, which is distinct from the language of L1 Spanish speakers, but is still rule-governed and systematic (Selinker, 1972). Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) believe that the “cognitive processes underlying L1 and L2 acquisition” are the same, and they contend that the ability to form a real grammar, i.e. the interlanguage, is evidence that active restructuring of parameters occurs during L2 acquisition, which is in direct contrast to the FFFH account (p. 42). It is important to note that both the FFFH and the FTFA hypotheses acknowledge L1 transfer as a mechanism of L2 learning; however, they differ in their assessment of how restrictive of a role it plays in this process.

White et al. (2004) conducted an investigation which lends its conclusion to the FTFA hypothesis. Their study investigated gender acquisition through tests of oral production and written comprehension on groups of L2 Spanish learners at three proficiency levels— low, intermediate, and advanced. The participants included 48 French native speakers and 68 English native speakers who were enrolled in Spanish courses as adults. Note that French, as a Romance lan-

guage, possesses a system of grammatical gender similar to that of Spanish. The participants had to select pictures which corresponded to a particular sentence, and which tested comprehension of gender and number. The subjects then performed a semi-spontaneous oral production task that required them to describe pictures, and instances of gender production in these language samples were assessed. The results indicated that low proficiency English speakers were the most inaccurate with regard to gender agreement, but that both the English and French advanced Spanish speakers did not differ significantly from the native speakers in either task, and both score above 90% on the two. However, White et al. (2004) did note a tendency towards default usage of the masculine form in feminine nouns. Still, the relative success of the L2 learners, particularly that of the advanced speakers, led the researchers to determine that the results were inconsistent with the FFFH. The FFFH claims that “post-puberty learners are unable to acquire abstract grammatical features that differ from those found in the L1” (White et al., 2004, p. 106), but this is contradicted by White et al.’s (2004) study, as L2 learners did demonstrate progressive acquisition of a grammatical feature that was absent in their L1.

An additional study in support of the FTFA is that of Keating (2009), which collected data from 18 Spanish native speakers and 44 L1 English speakers acquiring L2 Spanish. The researcher grouped the latter demographic into the same proficiency levels that were seen in White et al. (2004): beginning, intermediate, and advanced. The subjects were tasked with an online comprehension assignment which involved gender agreement between a noun and adjective. They read a passage which was comprised of a number of target sentences that included both grammatical and ungrammatical examples of gender, along with a variety of filler sentences. As the subjects read the passage, their eye movements were recorded with an specific tracking de-

vice which was able to detect their sensitivity towards the ungrammatical gender usages. Keating's study found that advanced learners demonstrated sensitivity towards gender agreement violation, while the beginning and intermediate learners did not. The ability of the advanced learners to identify agreement violations led the researcher to the conclusion that gender agreement can be acquired by adult L2 learners, which supports the FTFA hypothesis.

Bruhn de Garavito and White's (2002) study demonstrated some support for the FTFA by studying L1 French speakers in the process of learning L2 Spanish. The researchers found that issues with Spanish gender were also evident in production by French speakers, despite their L1 containing a system of grammatical gender similar to that of Spanish. They thus concluded that difficulty acquiring gender "cannot be attributed to presence or absence of gender in the L1 and that they are not necessarily indicative of a representational deficit" (Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, p. 2). Instead, they argue that the findings are more consistent with FTFA in that the errors of L2 learners seemed to follow systemic patterns, such as the overuse of masculine in cases which require the feminine and the improved accuracy with determiners than with adjectives. If the FFFH were accurate, they explain, then errors would be random, without a clear pattern or progression.

While Bruhn de Garavito and White (2002) did not study L1 English speakers who were learning L2 Spanish in an instructional setting, they compared the results of the French speakers to those of L1 English learners from Hawkins (1998), which confirmed that there was very little difference between the accuracy of the two groups with regard to grammatical gender assignment.

Alarcón (2010), in a manner similar to that of Bruhn de Garavito and White (2002), concluded that there are systematic patterns within the process of grammatical gender acquisition for L2 speakers, a result which supports the FTFA hypothesis. Alarcón collected data from over 100 English-speaking learners of Spanish of three proficiency levels— low-intermediates, high-intermediates, and advanced. The subjects were given two tasks related to grammatical gender. The first consisted of a variety of masculine and feminine Spanish nouns which lacked articles; the subjects had to provide the missing article. Thus, the first task was purely lexical assignment. The second task required subjects to provide the appropriate adjective to a number of contexts; this demands syntactic competence.

The results of Alarcón's study demonstrated a number of clear patterns. The first task was met with more success than was the second. That is, determiner agreement with nouns is more manageable for L2 learners than is agreement between nouns and adjectives. She confirmed that sexual nouns and canonical endings were, as predicted, easier for L2 learners than their opposites— that is, nonsexual verbs and those with non-canonical endings. She also noted that overall, accuracy levels increased with each proficiency level. These patterns, as well as the increased accuracy that was evident in the advanced groups, support the FTFA hypothesis, as it suggests that L2 learners are able to accurately reset grammatical parameters and demonstrate notable patterns in this process.

Gamboa Rengifo (2012) performed an additional study which was found to support the FTFA. He conducted an investigation that included 57 participants; 30 were advanced L2 Spanish learners with L1 English, 17 were intermediate L2 Spanish learners, and the remaining 10 were Spanish native speakers who served as a control group. The two tasks they had to complete



consisted of a written gender recognition and an oral picture description assignment. The written recognition task required subjects to assign the correct articles and adjectives to specific nouns, while the picture description task required them to produce determiners and nouns to describe pictures of items.

On the written task, the intermediate group demonstrated approximately 88% accuracy, while the advanced group displayed 95% accuracy. The oral picture description task saw a 69% accuracy rate on the part of intermediate L2 speakers, compared to 73% by the advanced group. Statistical analysis concluded that overall, performance was most impacted by proficiency level, as differences between group success rates were significant. Results also suggest that, similar to the findings of Alarcón (2010), L2 learners demonstrate higher accuracy with canonical nouns. Meanwhile, the control group was equally successful with both canonical and non-canonical nouns. The L2 groups also demonstrated higher accuracy with assignment of determiners than of adjectives, and, as was the case in Bruhn de Garavito and White's (2002) study, had more difficulty with feminine nouns than with masculine. The general conclusion that was reached from the results of these tasks was that "L2 groups displayed knowledge of gender in spite of maturational constraints" (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012, p. 42). That is, while there are significant differences between the production of the L1 groups, and confirmation that grammatical gender does cause considerable difficulty for L2 learners, the performance of these speakers suggests a representation of grammatical gender that goes beyond "probabilistic selection" (Montrul et al., 2008, p. 512) as proposed by the FFFH. The fact that there were patterns to their errors suggest that the learners were not randomly selecting gender, as the FFFH would claim.

Important conclusions from this study include the fact that spontaneous oral production caused more difficulty for L2 learners than did written recognition, and that gender agreement, non-canonical nouns, and the feminine gender cause more difficulties than gender assignment, canonical nouns, and the masculine. Gamboa Rengifo (2012) argues that this information supports a full-accessibility view, as the FFFH “predicted a faulty performance on gender regardless of the domain of agreement” (p. 51). Because specific domains caused more difficulty than others, the results support the FTFA hypothesis. Gamboa Rengifo believes that there is L1 transfer evident in these results, but that there is not complete inaccessibility to new grammatical concepts.

A final study which supports the FTFA is that of Sagarra and Herschensohn (2011). The researchers conducted a study on gender agreement with regard to sexual and non-sexual nouns, focusing their attention on beginning and intermediate Spanish L2 learners in a university setting, using Spanish monolinguals as a control group. The subjects performed two tasks, one of which was a moving-window task, in which sentences appeared word-by-word on a computer screen, and subjects had to answer corresponding comprehension questions. This task served as a distraction, as it did not evaluate gender agreement, but rather was used to “avoid biasing participants’ attention to the structure under investigation” (Sagarra & Herschensohn, 2011, p. 95). The grammaticality judgement task, on the other hand, directly tested subjects’ ability to gauge the validity of gender agreement samples. They were provided with a number of sentences, some of which contained the target grammatical gender and others that were fillers, and were required to identify if the sentence was correct and, if not, which part was incorrect. The response times of subjects during this task was used to determine if gender agreement sensitivity was present.

The results of Sagarra and Herschensohn's study concluded that the intermediate and native speakers did display sensitivity to gender agreement inaccuracies in both sexual and non-sexual nouns. Beginning learners, however, did not demonstrate sensitivity to inaccuracies with either group of nouns. The authors concluded that this signifies that "learners develop greater sensitivity to ungrammaticality with advancing proficiency" (p. 104), which supports FTFA, as it suggests restructuring the grammar is possible.

### **Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis**

While the FFFH and the FTFA are the hypotheses most often discussed and analyzed with regard to gender acquisition in L2 Spanish, there are a few additional hypotheses which have been studied less extensively. Among these is the Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis (MUSH), most thoroughly proposed by McCarthy (2007). Essentially, this hypothesis proposes that the difficulty L2 learners face with grammatical gender is primarily morphological, in that the majority of errors result from the overuse of the masculine in instances requiring the feminine. McCarthy conducted a study on gender agreement within spontaneous oral production by L2 Spanish learners which found 102 gender agreement errors of a total of 867 determiners. She believes MUSH accounts for the fact that of these errors, almost 90 percent "involved the substitution of a masculine determiner for a feminine one— an underspecification error" (p. 96). By underspecification, McCarthy means that the masculine gender is overused as a default in instances requiring the assignment of grammatical gender; thus, the representation of this gender category is not sufficiently specified for L2 learners. This leads to overgeneralization of the masculine seen not only in McCarthy's (2007) study, but also in studies such as Bruhn de Garavito and White (2002), as well as Franceschina (2001).

McCarthy (2007) notes the distinct circumstances in which masculine gender is used as a default, explaining that, in the target language, it is possible to use “a masculine determiner with a feminine noun,” as in *el mesa\**, ‘the table,’ “a masculine clitic to refer to a feminine NP,” as in *hacerlo\**, ‘to do it,’ when *lo*, ‘it’ signifies *la tarea*, ‘the homework’ or “a masculine adjective with a feminine noun,” as in *\*la mesa alto*, ‘the tall table’ (p. 94). These three errors comprise the majority of instances of masculine default. The researcher also notes that the majority of overgeneralization errors with the feminine gender occurred in instances of non-canonical nouns that end in *-a* but are masculine, such as *el mapa*, ‘the map’ and *el sistema*, ‘the system’. She attributes this tendency to “an overgeneralization of an ‘*-a* nouns are feminine’ strategy” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 98). She notes that because the subjects assume that the inherent lexical property of these nouns is feminine, since they have not yet learned the exceptions, such errors are not technically identified as agreement errors.

### **Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis**

A final hypothesis that is referenced throughout the literature on grammatical gender acquisition is the Missing Surface Inflection hypothesis (MSIH), as proposed by Prévost and White (2000). While Prévost and White’s study focused on the use of morphology by L2 Turkish learners with L1 English, the findings are often referenced with regard to L2 Spanish learners with L1 English and their grammatical gender acquisition. In essence, MSIH suggests that the confusion that L2 learners face when acquiring new grammatical concepts is not related to parameter-resetting, as is often proposed by the FFFH, but rather a “difficulty with the overt realization of morphology” (Prévost & White, 2000, p. 148). That is, L2 learners struggle to use abstract grammatical features in the language that they produce, particularly when faced with communication

pressure, as is the case in spontaneous oral production tasks. It is for this reason that Prévost and White suggest L2 learners will perform significantly better on grammatical assessments when they do not face time constraints or immediate communication pressure, as they will have the ability to recall abstract morphological features and apply them to their grammatical production. In the case of grammatical gender for L2 Spanish learners with L1 English, this would suggest that naturalistic production tasks will lead to less accurate gender agreement performance than will written tasks, a hypothesis which has been upheld in certain studies, including Alarcón (2011).

Alarcón (2011) compared the accuracy of gender agreement recognition and production by Spanish heritage speakers and L2 learners. She provided the subjects with a written test in which they identified accurate gender agreement, and an oral task in which they described a variety of pictures. The results demonstrated a significant discrepancy between accurate production on the part of heritage speakers and L2 learners in the oral production task, signifying that heritage speakers did have an advantage in oral production, whereas L2 learners faced maturational restraints, which may be due to having acquired the L2 in adulthood. However, no significant advantage was found for heritage speakers with regard to the written task; advanced L2 learners and heritage speakers performed statistically similar on this task, and both demonstrated knowledge of the grammatical gender. Thus, the MSIH is upheld because while maturational constraints did lead to difficulty in realization of overt morphology in oral production, such difficulty was not evident when sufficient time was provided and communication pressures were minimized in the written task.

Montrul, Foote, and Perpiñán (2008) also conducted a similar study to compare the gender agreement knowledge of L2 Spanish learners and Spanish heritage speakers, and their results also yielded support for the MSIH. About 70 heritage speakers and 70 L2 learners were provided with tests similar to those of Alarcón (2011), and were thus tested on both oral production and written recognition skills regarding grammatical gender. Just as was found in Alarcón's study, and just as is proposed by the MSIH, L2 learners demonstrated decreased accuracy with gender agreement on the oral production task, signifying a lack of automatic processing. However, this study differed from others in that Montrul et al. found that the heritage speakers demonstrated less accuracy than the L2 learners on the written comprehension task. The researchers attribute this finding to a difference between the metalinguistic knowledge between the two groups, as L2 learners would have acquired more of this through schooling than would heritage speakers, who were not schooled in the language, but rather rely on implicit abilities as any native speaker. Montrul et al. asserts that "metalinguistic knowledge of gender assignment and agreement can be used to compensate for gaps in implicit competence" (p. 541), which might explain why it appears as though L2 learners had an advantage with the comprehension tasks. The study concluded by asserting that both groups of speakers demonstrated some kind of knowledge about gender agreement, but "such knowledge might be stored, represented, and deployed differently" (Montrul et al., 2008, p. 542). They determine the MSIH to be most aligned with the findings of this study, given the fact that L2 learners made the most errors in oral production.

### **Summary**

The field of SLA hosts a variety of hypotheses regarding the acquisition of Spanish grammatical gender by L2 learners, and as of yet there is not a universally accepted conclusion.

Still, it is accepted that gender is represented differently across languages, as Spanish possesses a system of both natural and grammatical gender, whereas English only employs the former. As such, the parameters for marking grammatical gender are not activated in English native speakers, and they face significant difficulty when acquiring this concept in the L2. The hypotheses which seek to explain this difficulty vary considerably in their analysis of the extent to which learners are restricted in their acquisition. The FFFH proposes a complete inability to acquire native-like proficiency in new parameters, while the FTFA asserts that learners are able to activate new parameters and develop fluency at any time in their development. Less commonly proposed but still considerable are MUSH and MSIH, which advocate that the difficulties faced by learners are primarily morphological.

Despite the wide variety of claims made in these hypotheses, most studies have found that L2 Spanish learners who speak L1 English struggle most extensively with assigning gender to non-sexual, non-canonical, and feminine nouns, and that productive tasks requiring gender agreement between nouns and adjectives or modifiers is more difficult than simply assigning gender to a noun. In the following section, I will analyze four separate introductory Spanish textbooks to examine their presentation of grammatical gender.

### **Textbook Analysis**

In introductory Spanish courses at the high school and university level, the textbooks that are used for instruction play a significant role in L2 learning. Richards (2015) explains that in language programs, textbooks “serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom” (p. 1). Typically, instructors base their lessons off of the guidelines and layout of the textbook, meaning that the topics to which students are exposed, and the manner in which these topics are taught, can be largely dependent on the textbook utilized (Crawford, 2002). Especially for students whose only exposure to the L2 comes from classroom experience, the textbook is of great importance in their learning process.

The present section will analyze four textbooks, two used at the high school level and two at the university level, specifically with regard to their explicit instruction of grammatical gender. These textbooks are used in classrooms with learners who are well beyond the critical period as defined by Lenneberg (1967), in their late teens or early twenties, and who have had either no or very little exposure to the L2 previously. Therefore, each topic is presented under the assumption that there is no little to no background knowledge in Spanish upon which to build. In all initial chapters, instructions and explanations are entirely in English, and many connections to English similarities in vocabulary and grammar are made. This subsequent analysis will inform the next section of the thesis, in which pedagogical recommendations are made for teachers of L2 Spanish.

#### **Gender Presentation in *Spanish Now***

*Spanish Now* is a textbook used by introductory Spanish classes in all high school grade levels. The authors, in the book’s introduction, state an emphasis on developing oral proficiency



skills and on providing students with “exercises, drills, puzzles, and activities” to assess acquisition of lexical items and grammatical concepts (Wald, Pomerantz, Kendris & Quiñones, 2015, p. ix). The book contains six units which focus on different aspects of Spanish language and culture, and grammatical gender assignment and agreement is covered in lesson one and lesson thirteen.

Lesson one presents grammatical gender on the first page with an asterisk-marked note in the margins which reads, “adjectives that end in *-o* describe masculine nouns...and adjectives that end in *-o* change from *-o* to *-a* when describing feminine nouns” (3). This note is meant to accompany the vocabulary list for the chapter, as there are adjectives provided which change gender depending on the noun they modify, such as *favorito/a*, ‘favorite’ (3). The distinction between masculine and feminine nouns is not yet explained.

Such an explanation arrives later in the chapter and the distinction between grammatical gender is made explicit. The authors state that “in Spanish, things as well as persons are of either masculine or feminine gender” (6). The section then provides two boxes, one of which is titled “masculine” and the second “feminine” (6). Each box contains two examples of masculine and feminine nouns, respectively, which are used in complete sentences. For instance, an example in the masculine box is *el chico es grande*, ‘the boy is big,’ while the feminine box includes, *la chica es grande*, ‘the girl is big’ (6). These examples demonstrate the assignment of gender to sexual nouns, but two examples of gender as it relates to non-sexual nouns are also given. The masculine example is *el cuaderno es grande*, ‘the notebook is large,’ while the feminine example is *la pluma es grande*, ‘the pen is large’ (6).

Multiple rules are provided regarding gender, the first of which begins with the description that “*el* means ‘the’ before a masculine noun and is the masculine definite article” and provides an identical definition for *la* with regard to feminine nouns and definite articles (6). This connects to the preparatory lesson section, which briefly states that “*el, la* = ‘the’” (xvii). Additional rules offer an overview of the gender associated with specific noun endings, noting that “masculine nouns often end in *-o*” (6), which follows the typical explanation of masculine gender assignment in Spanish. An additional rule mentions that “the typical feminine endings [are]: *-a, -dad, -ción, -sión*” (6). Below the description of typical feminine endings, there is a statement that reads, “Learn: *la ciudad* (‘the city’), *la canción* (‘the song’), *la lección* (‘the lesson’), *la nación* (‘the nation’), *la televisión* (‘the television’)” (6). All of the aforementioned nouns contain the *-dad, -ción, -sión* endings which were addressed in the rule section.

The chapter goes on to explain that the definite articles *el* and *la* “indicate the gender of nouns that do not have the typical masculine ending (*-o*) or the typical feminine endings (*-a, -dad, -ción, -sión*)” (6). That is, even nouns which end in consonants such as *-z* or *-l* contain feminine or masculine gender. This section provides two examples of such non-canonical nouns for each gender; for the masculine, *el lápiz*, ‘the pencil’ and *el papel*, ‘the paper,’ and for the feminine, *la flor* ‘the flower,’ and *la clase*, ‘the class’ (6).

A recommendation for students in this chapter asserts that “nouns should be memorized with their articles” (7). The textbook then provides a list of 15 non-canonical masculine nouns, urging students to memorize them. The terms that are provided are words that students will likely find a use for in discussions within the classroom, such as *el mapa*, ‘the map,’ *el reloj*, ‘the clock,’ and *el programa*, ‘the program’ (7). Within this list of masculine nouns, only two words

are provided which end in *-e*: *el hombre*, ‘the man,’ and *el padre*, ‘the father’ (7). Both of these terms refer to sexual nouns, and thus the gender assigned to them is associated with the sex of the referent. The chapter provides no examples of non-sexual masculine nouns which end in *-e*. An additional list on the same page urges students to “learn these feminine nouns,” and contains multiple feminine nouns with *-e* endings, such as *la calle*, ‘the street,’ and *la frase*, ‘the phrase’ (7).

Finally, the last set of rules explains that “a small number of masculine nouns end in *-a* or *-ma* and must be memorized with their articles” (7). They provide for a second time the examples *el día*, ‘the day,’ and *el mapa*, ‘the map,’ which were previously seen in the list of 15 masculine nouns which do not possess the typical ending *-o*. Although it does not relate to the aforementioned statement, this rule also states that *la mano*, ‘the hand’ and *la radio*, ‘the radio,’ are feminine. The section concludes by mentioning that there are “a few nouns which can be considered either masculine or feminine” (7). The noun *el/la internet*, ‘the internet,’ is mentioned (7).

Grammatical gender assignment exercises are then provided for students to work on (8). The first activity provides words that are missing definite articles, such as *escuela*, ‘school,’ *libro*, ‘book’ and *maestra*, ‘teacher,’ and asks the students to supply the correct article and describe each item as *interesante*, ‘interesting’ (8). Thus, the final product would be, *La escuela es interesante*, ‘school is interesting.’ The subsequent task focuses exclusively on gender as it relates to nouns with a sexual referent, asking students to provide the articles for words such as *alumno*, ‘[male] student’ and *hermana*, ‘sister’ (8).

An additional task is titled *¿Dónde estudia Pepe el inglés?*, ‘Where does Pepe study English?’ and provides five terms without articles: *avión*, ‘plane,’ *clase de inglés*, ‘English class,’

*tren* ‘train,’ *sala*, ‘living room,’ and *escuela*, ‘school’ (10). Students must complete the sentence frame, *Pepe estudia en \_\_\_* ‘Pepe studies in \_\_\_’ and provide the correct gender for all of the provided locations. Thus, a correct answer would appear as, *Pepe estudia en la sala* ‘Pepe studies in the living room.’ Two of the five nouns provided, *tren*, ‘train,’ and *avión*, ‘plane,’ have non-canonical endings, and *clase de inglés* is unique in that students have to determine which part of the phrase receives the gender assignment.

A final activity on gender assignment requires that students complete the sentence frame *Pepita escucha \_\_\_* ‘Pepita listens to’ (10). Again, nouns are provided without articles, such as: *canCIÓN*, ‘song,’ *disco compacto*, ‘C.D.,’ *televisión*, ‘television,’ and *radio*, ‘radio’ (10). The only canonical ending within this list is *el disco compacto*, but *la televisión* and *la canción* follow the “typical” feminine endings as stated earlier in the chapter. *La radio*, however, has an atypical gender assignment.

A lesson on adjective agreement in gender does not appear until the thirteenth lesson in the unit, and there is an explicit connection made to the concept of number. The description at the beginning of the chapter explains, “Descriptive adjectives agree with their nouns in gender (masculine or feminine) and in number (singular or plural)” (146).

The explanation of gender as it relates to adjectives ending in *-o* states, “To form the feminine adjective, substitute the feminine *-a* for the masculine *-o* ending” (146). Two examples are provided for both masculine and feminine genders, as in *Pedro es rico. Tiene un coche nuevo* ‘Peter is rich. He has a new car’ and *Ana también es rica. Tiene una casa nueva* ‘Ana is also rich. She has a new house’ (146). The explanation of gender agreement concludes by stating that “ad-

jectives that do not end in *-o* are the same in both masculine and feminine forms” (147). The examples of *interesante*, ‘interesting’ and *popular*, ‘popular’ are provided to demonstrate this point.

All of the accompanying activities related to gender agreement only provide tasks of agreement with sexual nouns. For instance, students have to respond to questions such as *Juan es alto y elegante. ¿Y Juana?* ‘Juan is tall and elegant. And Juana?’ (148). Students would respond by using the same adjectives to describe Juana, thereby producing, *Juana es alta y elegante también* ‘Juana is tall and elegant, too.’ There are no tasks which require students to identify accurate gender agreement for non-sexual nouns.

### **Analysis of *Spanish Now***

The presentation of gender in *Spanish Now* contains both positive and negative components. One facet of the initial explanation, the statement that “in Spanish, things as well as persons are of either masculine or feminine gender” (6), is one of the more questionable aspects. It seems to suggest that nouns referring to “things and persons” belong to the same classification of gender, when in reality there is a distinction between natural gender as corresponding to sexual nouns and grammatical gender as an arbitrary morphosyntactic feature of non-sexual nouns (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). As English speakers are already partial to linking gender with sex given the solely natural gender system of their L1 (Mills, 1986), it would be beneficial to explain more explicitly that while all nouns possess gender, there is a significant distinction between the basis of this system depending on sex.

Although this description of gender has room for improvement, the textbook does succeed by providing such numerous examples of the gender of non-sexual nouns (6). By acknowledging that gender is assigned to non-sexual nouns such as *la pluma*, ‘the pen’ and *el cuaderno*,

‘the notebook,’ for example, students may recognize the difference between the gender systems of English and Spanish (Comrie, 1999). They will recognize that Spanish must possess a gender system distinct from that of English, as non-sexual nouns are still marked for gender.

Another positive aspect of *Spanish Now*'s gender presentation is its thorough coverage of feminine noun endings. The statement, “the typical feminine endings [are]: *-a, -dad, -ción, -sión*” (6). It is beneficial that this explanation includes so many endings beyond the canonical *-a*, as studies agreed that L2 learners have more difficulty with non-canonical endings (i.e. *-dad, -ción, and -sión*) than with canonical (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Reinforcing learning about non-canonical endings is therefore a helpful step. In addition, as research suggests a tendency on the part of L2 learners to over-assign the masculine gender in instances where the feminine is necessary (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and McCarthy, 2007), including a longer list of “typical” feminine endings may aid in steering learners away from the belief that all nouns with endings other than *-a* are masculine.

It would, however, be beneficial for the authors to provide specific, factual information on the usage frequency of the masculine and feminine endings that are provided. For instance, vague language such as “masculine nouns often end in *-o*” (6) may be insufficient for learners to grasp just how common this canonical masculine ending is. Providing statistics may provide a more practical and logical understanding, as expressing that 99.4% of nouns which end in *-o* are masculine and about 96.3% of those which end in *-a* are feminine offers more concrete information on the topic (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012).

Returning to the difficulty that L2 learners have been documented as having with assigning gender to nouns with non-canonical endings (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa

Rengifo, 2012), it is beneficial that such an extensive list of 15 non-canonical masculine nouns is provided (7). Notable is the inclusion of *el reloj*, ‘the watch,’ as *-j* is a particularly uncommon non-canonical ending and is usually not pronounced in Spanish (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Allotting specific attention to such uncommon endings may be helpful to give learners more exposure to memorize these cases.

However, one issue with the presentation of non-canonical endings is that *Spanish Now* provides no examples of non-sexual masculine nouns which end in *-e*, but contains multiple feminine nouns with *-e* endings, such as *la calle*, ‘the street’ and *la frase*, ‘the phrase’ (7). The lack of reference to the fact that non-sexual masculine nouns can also end in *-e* may lead students to believe that all *-e* ending sexual nouns are feminine. Inclusion of an example to counter this notion, such as *el tomate*, ‘the tomato,’ may therefore be useful in this textbook.

An additional issue in this textbook is the blanket statement that “nouns should be memorized with their articles” (7). A specification should be made that while non-sexual nouns can be memorized with their gender, as this is an unchanging component of their makeup, sexual nouns change gender depending on the sex of the referent (Pérez-Pereira, 1991).

Regarding the section on grammatical gender agreement between nouns and adjectives, it is likely a wise choice to first introduce adjectives that are represented identically when modifying both masculine and feminine nouns, such as *grande*, ‘big’ (6) and *interesante*, ‘interesting’ (8). As gender agreement between nouns and their adjectives has been noted to cause more difficulty for L2 learners than gender assignment to an individual noun (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and Alarcón, 2010), it is best to broach this subject sequentially and with progressive degrees of difficulty. Therefore, first introducing adjectives

that have the same endings when assigned to masculine and feminine nouns, and then presenting the more complex idea of the shifting endings of adjectives based on gender agreement, is likely a logical progression.

Another aspect of gender as it relates to adjectives that is presented in a positive manner in this textbook is the connection between adjectival gender and number. The textbook explains, “descriptive adjectives agree with their nouns in gender (masculine or feminine) and in number (singular or plural)” (146). The connection between gender and number as they relate to adjectives is logical, as both depend on the identity of the noun which the adjective modifies (Pérez-Pereira 1991). It is worth noting that such a connection does not exist between gender and number with regard to non-sexual nouns, as they have an unchanging gender but can fluctuate in number. Thus, the decision to link gender and number with regard to adjectives and not with nouns is well-conceived.

A final issue that is evident in *Spanish Now* is the fact that all of the accompanying activities related to gender agreement only provide tasks of adjective agreement with sexual nouns. This is a significant flaw because it may promote the idea that adjective agreement is limited to sexual nouns. As L2 Spanish learners already struggle with gender agreement between adjectives and nouns (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and Alarcón, 2010), as well as assigning gender to non-sexual nouns (Mills, 1986), this textbook would be more effective by providing opportunities to engage with these.

### **Gender Presentation in *Panorama***

*Panorama* is another textbook used in introductory Spanish classes of all high school grade levels. Grammatical gender is introduced in the first chapter of this book, within the sec-



tion on “nouns and articles” (Blanco & Donley, 2013, p. 10). The explanation of this topic begins by stating that, “Unlike English, all Spanish nouns, even those that refer to non-living things, have gender” (10). A distinction is made within this introduction to gender to the difference between “nouns that relate to living things” and “nouns that relate to non-living things” (10); that is, sexual and non-sexual nouns. The two noun types are depicted in two charts which are divided into masculine and feminine sections. Three distinct types of masculine, sexual nouns are expressed in the first chart: those ending in *-o*, like *el chico*, ‘the boy’; those ending in *-or* such as *el profesor*, ‘the [male] professor’; and those ending in *-ista* such as *el turista*, ‘the [male] tourist’ (10). Similarly, the three types of feminine sexual nouns that are presented are: those ending in *-a*, like *la chica*, ‘the girl’; those ending in *-ora*, like *la profesora*, ‘the [female] professor’; and those ending in *-ista*, like *la turista*, ‘the [female] tourist’ (10). To summarize the concept of gender as it relates to sex, they assert that “nouns that refer to males are generally masculine, while nouns that refer to females are generally feminine” (10).

Two additional charts refer to the grammatical gender of non-sexual nouns. The masculine chart provides the masculine endings of *-o*, *-ma*, and *-s*, with such examples as *el cuaderno*, ‘the notebook,’ *el problema*, ‘the problem,’ and *el país*, ‘the country,’ respectively. While the list of masculine nouns ending in *-o* (five examples) is longer than the lists of masculine nouns ending in *-ma* and *-s* (two examples each), the prevalence of these endings is not mentioned. The feminine chart for non-living nouns provides the endings *-a*, *-ción*, and *-dad*, featuring examples such as *la cosa*, ‘the thing,’ *la lección*, ‘the lesson,’ and *la comunidad*, ‘the community,’ respectively.

There is also a small section dedicated to irregular gender assignments, which states that “there are common exceptions to the rules of gender” (11). Three examples are given: *el mapa*, ‘the map,’ *el día*, ‘the day,’ and *la mano*, ‘the hand’ (11). A disclaimer is offered at the conclusion of this section, which explains that the gender of inanimate nouns “cannot be determined by fool-proof rules” (11). Ultimately, *Panorama* makes a recommendation that students memorize each noun with its corresponding article in order to acquire the concept of grammatical gender (11).

The following section in the chapter focuses on the distinction between definite and indefinite articles, listing the various articles based on their gender and number (12). There is an accompanying activity which requires students to supply the correct definite and indefinite article to various nouns, such as *maleta*, ‘suitcase,’ *lápiz*, ‘pencil,’ and *cuaderno*, ‘notebook’ (12). This activity connects gender and number, as students have to determine if the correct response is *una* (singular) or *unas* (plural) *maletas*, in addition to assigning the gender. Both sexual and non-sexual nouns are used in this activity, and the majority, with the exception of *lápiz* and *autobús*, ‘bus,’ are canonical.

The lesson on gender agreement appears in chapter three. Just as was the case in the section on gender assignment, there is an explicit reference made to English’s grammatical system. It is explained that, “In English, the forms of descriptive adjectives do not change to reflect the gender (masculine/feminine) and number (singular/plural) of the noun or pronoun they describe” (70). An example is provided to demonstrate this fact, which is *Juan is nice* and *Elena is nice* (70). The corresponding examples of *Juan es simpático* and *Elena es simpática* are provided, which demonstrates how the adjective *simpático/a* must change its gender in order to agree in gender with the noun it modifies.

The explanation on gender agreement continues to express that “in adjectives that end in -o...the feminine singular changes from -o to -a” (70). The accompanying example is *la muchacha alta*, ‘the tall girl’ in comparison with *el muchacho alto*, ‘the tall boy’ (70). It is also noted that “adjectives that end in -e or a consonant have the same masculine and feminine forms” (71). The examples *inteligente*, ‘intelligent’ and *difícil*, ‘hard,’ are provided to the point, as they do not change regardless of the gender of the noun with which they agree. Finally, a list of “common adjectives,” is provided, some of which are variable in gender such as *feo/a*, ‘ugly,’ and others which do not change their form, such as *grande*, ‘large’ (71).

All of the activities related to gender agreement deal with adjectives as they agree with sexual nouns. Activities include supplying accurate adjectives to specific nouns, such as *mi hermano es \_\_\_* ‘my brother is \_\_\_’ and *la profesora es \_\_\_* ‘the professor is \_\_\_’ (71). There are no gender agreement tasks which require usage of non-sexual nouns.

### **Analysis of *Panorama***

One of the most positive aspects of the manner in which *Panorama* presents grammatical gender is the fact that it provides an explicit explanation of the difference between gender in English and Spanish. The statement, “Unlike English, all Spanish nouns, even those that refer to non-living things, have gender” (10) conveys this idea well. There is a distinction made within the introduction between “nouns that relate to living things” and “nouns that relate to non-living things” (10); that is, sexual and non-sexual nouns. Given the preference that L1 English speakers have for gender as it relates to sex (Mills, 1986), it is useful to make a clear distinction between the classifications of these nouns. Still, it may be better to refer to “nouns with sexual referents” and “nouns with non-sexual referents,” as the concept of “living things” can apply to plants,

which are living but without biological sex and thus without natural gender (Pérez-Pereira, 1991).

Another facet of the textbook's presentation of gender is the list of typical masculine and feminine endings that are provided. *Panorama* offers *-o*, *-ma*, and *-s* (10) as masculine endings. The inclusion of the non-canonical *-ma* and *-s* may aid students in learning the gender of nouns with these less common endings, which is an important goal given the challenge that gender of non-canonical nouns present for L2 Spanish learners with L1 English (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Likewise, offering *-a*, *-ción*, and *-dad* as common feminine endings may allow students to extend their recognition of feminine endings beyond the canonical *-a* (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012).

However, what this section lacks is any reference to the frequency of the masculine and feminine noun endings which they offer. Although there are more examples of *-o* ending nouns than *-ma* and *-s* in the masculine section and more examples of *-a* ending nouns than *-dad* and *-ción* in the feminine section, it is not stated that these canonical endings constitute 68% of all Spanish nouns, and thus are more prevalent than the other endings (Gamboa-Renfigo, 2012). This information may be helpful for students to have a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns that they can expect to see in the representation of gender and noun endings.

One of the statements that this textbook offers students with regard to grammatical gender assignment is that it "cannot be determined by fool-proof rules" (11). This statement may be helpful for students, especially given over generalizations, particularly with masculine gender (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and McCarthy, 2007), as it will serve as a reminder that there are exceptions to patterns of grammatical gender assignment. However, the

section offers only three atypical gender assignment examples, which seems insubstantial. Similarly, in the task which requires students to provide an article for a list of different nouns (12), only two nouns are non-canonical. Perhaps more attention and opportunities for practice should be given to non-canonical nouns, as these atypical non-canonical endings prove more challenging for L2 learners than do the canonical endings, of which there are more examples throughout this section (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012).

Lastly, a potentially negative component of the practice that the book provides regarding gender agreement between nouns and adjectives is that all of the nouns have sexual referents (71). There are no gender agreement tasks between adjectives and nouns with non-sexual referents. As research suggests that L2 learners typically have more difficulty with the grammatical gender of non-sexual nouns than they do with sexual nouns (Mills, 1986) and also have more difficulty with gender agreement between modifiers and nouns than with gender assignment between determiners and nouns (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and Alarcón, 2010), this practice may be improved by adding more opportunities to engage with non-sexual nouns.

### **Gender Presentation in *Claro que sí***

A textbook utilized in introductory level L2 Spanish classes at the university level is *Claro que sí* (Caycedo Garner, Rusch & Dominguez, 2012). This textbook is used in classrooms with students who have no experience with the L2, as it is their first Spanish class. The book's introduction provides generalizations about the presentation of grammatical structures as a whole. The authors assert that "grammatical structures are presented functionally and in a concise, clear form" (xiii). Following this logic, grammatical gender should be presented early in the

book, as the understanding and usage of all nouns depends on this. The glossary notes that “using correct gender and number” is taught in chapter two (iv).

Chapter two contains the only formal instructional section on grammatical gender within the book. However, grammatical gender is first introduced not as a solitary topic but instead in conjunction with number agreement. The essential, and most direct statement on the topic is that “all nouns in Spanish are either masculine or feminine (gender) and singular or plural (number)” (40). The textbook next makes a direct reference to the gender associated with sex. The authors explain, “generally, when nouns refer to males, they are masculine (*señor*) and when they refer to females, they are feminine (*señora*)” (40). There is no explanation offered regarding the distinction between natural and grammatical gender.

The section also includes a description that “the definite and indefinite articles agree in gender and number with the nouns they modify” (40). It lists definite and indefinite articles in a chart, noting each with their gender and number. For instance, the masculine, singular articles are *el*, ‘the’ (definite) and *un*, ‘a’ (indefinite). A side note on the margin of the page explains, “definite article= the” and “indefinite article= a/an, some” (41). The explanation does not state that gender is an intrinsic, unchanging component of each noun, but rather that articles agree with the nouns to which they are assigned.

The gender rules in this section include generalizations of noun endings and the gender with which they typically appear, as well as few examples and exceptions to each generalization. For instance, the authors explain that nouns ending in the letters *-l*, *-o*, *-n*, and *-r* are typically masculine, and includes the example *el televisor*, ‘the television’ and notes the exception *la mano*, ‘the hand’ (41). It is stated that nouns ending in *-a*, *-ad*, *-sión*, or *-ción* are typically femi-

nine, and a few counterexamples are provided, such as *el programa*, ‘the program’. An additional rule explains that “nouns that end in *-e* may be masculine, but there are many high frequency words that are feminine” (41).

An additional rule is that “most nouns ending in *-e* or *-ista* that refer to people can be masculine or feminine” (41). This again connects the assignment of gender to beings with sex, such as *el estudiante* or *la estudiante*, ‘the student,’ to the concept of grammatical gender as a whole. The section recommends using context clues to determine the referent in nouns that contain these endings, but does not specify whether this “context” should be linguistic or communicative. Also on this page, a note in the margin states that nouns contain gender in many languages, and suggests, “even in English we refer to a friend’s new car, saying ‘She runs really well’” (41).

A note in the teacher’s edition offers a variety of “gender/agreement drills” (41) which are recommended to be performed immediately after grammatical gender has been reviewed. One drill is purely centered around identification; it involves the teacher stating a word and the students raising their right hand to express that it is feminine, or their left hand if it is masculine. Two additional drills involve providing students with words, which the book says should be only cognates, and asking them to assign the correct article to them. It is noted that the teacher should always ask how the students know which gender is correct.

Gender agreement between adjectives and nouns is covered in the third chapter. A note on the margin informs students that “adjectives, including adjectives of nationality, agree in number and, in many cases, gender with the noun modified” (73). This is essentially an identical explanation to that of definite and indefinite articles, as seen in chapter two. A list of adjectives is then

provided, such as *simpático/a*, ‘nice’ and *bonito/a*, ‘pretty’ along with their English translations. It is notable that the vast majority of the listed adjectives appear to primarily describe animate nouns, and an accompanying activity instructs teachers to “use students as models” of adjectives, such as describing a student as *alto*. The entirety of the available activities in the book require students to describe other people in a way that employs correct gender agreement, such as “take turns describing people in your class and have the other person guess who is being described” (74), and never involves non-sexual nouns.

An additional section within chapter four simply provides more information about gender agreement, explaining that “adjectives that end in *-o* agree in gender (masculine/feminine) and in number (singular/plural) with the nouns they modify” (77). The example *Francisco es bajo pero Francisca es alta*, ‘Francisco is short but Francisca is tall’ is provided. The book suggests that teachers quiz students on gender with a “transformation drill,” and the sample that they provide is *Juan es alto, pero Juana...*” (77). Again, gender within adjectives is limited to sexual nouns. Following the second and third chapters, grammatical gender is not reviewed nor explicitly referenced.

### **Analysis of *Claro que sí***

The explanation of gender in *Claro que sí* is that “all nouns in Spanish are either masculine or feminine (gender) and singular or plural (number)” (40). This summary is potentially unhelpful because it falsely equates “all nouns” as belonging to the same category of gender, when in reality, there is a distinction between grammatical and natural gender according to sex (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). Therefore it would be preferable to offer an explanation of the distinction be-



tween grammatical gender and natural gender and their respective arbitrary and sexual bases (Pérez-Pereira, 1991).

Furthermore, the aforementioned explanation makes a notable connection between gender and number. The gender of a noun is an intrinsic, unchanging lexical aspect of that unit, whereas the number attached to a noun fluctuates depending on context. For instance, *el diccionario* is always masculine, but is not necessarily singular; it is possible to speak of the plural *los diccionarios*, which clearly remains masculine. Whereas gender is arbitrarily assigned and, in the case of non-sexual nouns, devoid of meaning on its own (Pérez-Pereira, 1991), number is not; number signifies the quantity of a given noun, and therefore is neither intrinsic nor arbitrarily assigned. Therefore, gender and number thus seem too distinct to link so thoroughly in this explanation.

*Claro que sí* provides a rather extensive list of typical noun endings for each gender, explaining that the endings *-l*, *-o*, *-n*, and *-r* are often masculine and *-a*, *-ad*, *-sión*, or *-ción* are typically feminine (41). It is a questionable tactic to present these endings as common for each gender classification without offering some explanation as to the fact that *-o* and *-a* are overwhelmingly more common than the other endings, as nearly 70% of all Spanish nouns end in these two. While such a lack of emphasis on canonical endings may seek to focus students' attention on non-canonical endings, to which they have more difficulty assigning gender (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012), knowing the statistics regarding the prevalence of canonical endings may help formulate a deeper understanding of the language.

An additional statement that may improve if expressed differently is, "nouns that end in *-e* may be masculine, but there are many high frequency words that are feminine" (41). The vague

language of “may” and “many” serves little purpose. It would be preferable to provide a handful of examples of both feminine and masculine nouns ending in *-e*, in order to convey the fact that this ending can apply to either gender. An equal representation of both feminine and masculine *-e* ending nouns may help to avoid the tendency to over-apply the masculine to feminine nouns, as students will be able to see specific examples of feminine *-e* nouns (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002 and McCarthy, 2007).

A notable component of the explanation of gender in *Claro que sí* is the decision to include the explanation about how “even in English we refer to a friend’s new car, saying ‘She runs really well’” (41). While this is used in English, and addressing it may be helpful for students, it should be explained that it represents an exception to the norm in English, as the language does not have grammatical gender assigned to non-sexual nouns (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). Offering this connection to English as a way to make grammatical gender in Spanish more accessible does not seem valid, as the system of grammatical gender in Spanish applies to all non-sexual nouns, not just in some isolated cases.

One of the tasks that the textbook offers with regard to grammatical gender assignment to individual nouns is an identification drill in which the teacher states a word and the students raise a specific hand according to if it is feminine or masculine. This activity seems beneficial because it will likely lessen the communicative pressures that students feel early in the L2 learning process, as they are silently identifying gender as a group rather than individually producing it for a grade. As communicative pressures have been noted to make students less successful with grammatical gender tasks (Alarcón, 2011, and Prévost & White, 2000), it is likely beneficial that they will have the opportunity to engage with activities which minimize these pressures.

A final component of *Claro que sí*'s gender presentation is the focus that is placed on gender agreement between adjectives and sexual nouns and the absence of attention on agreement with non-sexual nouns. The agreement activities encourage learners to “use students as models” of adjectives (74), which may serve to promote the idea that gender and agreement is reserved for humans, thereby limiting learners’ perceptions of gender as a grammatical concept. Given the lack of grammatical gender in English (Comrie, 1999) it would likely be more helpful to focus more on nouns within this category with regard to adjective agreement, as it is novel to the L2 Spanish learners with L1 English.

### **Presentation of Gender in *Fuentes***

An additional and more recent textbook that is utilized within the university setting is *Fuentes* (Rusch, Dominguez, & Caycedo Garner, 2014). It is notable that the authors of this textbook also wrote *Claro que sí*, and thus many instructional approaches and explanations remain the same. This textbook is used in classrooms with students who have had a basic level of exposure to Spanish already, either in a semester or year-long course. The introduction asserts that “explanations recognize the knowledge gained during the first year and expand upon that knowledge” (5). Therefore, grammatical gender is not presented as an entirely new concept within this book, but as the authors promote the strategy of “recycling” material, there will be a review of this topic. The introduction expresses that attention is paid to “specific problem areas” which need more explanation (5), and given the considerable difficulty that grammatical gender has been noted to cause for L2 learners, it would seem likely that this topic would receive significant focus.

Similarly to *Claro que sí*, this textbook opens with a preliminary chapter containing a review of introductory phrases and nouns. The activities that accompany this section ask students to describe people using adjectives, which are provided in a list on the page. One such task directs students to *habla con otra persona y descríbele a tu profesora*, ‘talk with another person and describe your professor’ (8). There are no activities regarding gender agreement with non-sexual nouns, and there is also no formal explanation of gender or agreement. The only reference to this topic is a note in the margin of the page which asserts, “to review adjective agreement, see Appendix C” (8). In fact, the only explanation of grammatical gender that is explicit in this textbook is found in the appendix; there is no specific chapter or section within the units dedicated to it.

The appendix features a review of grammatical gender, similar to that of *Claro que sí* but slightly more advanced and without a connection to number. The same generalizations of ending rules are provided, but there is an additional point that was not stated in *Claro que sí*. It explains that “feminine nouns that begin with a stressed *a* sound (*agua* [‘water’], *área* [‘area’], *arpa* [‘harp’], *hambre* [‘hunger’]) use the articles *el/un* in the singular, but still use the articles *las/unas* in the plural” (376). This is a more technical explanation, as it relies on an phonological understanding of stressed vowels, as opposed to many other rules provided to students about grammatical gender, which rely solely on the spelling of endings. The book goes on to explain that adjectives in agreement with such nouns will appear in the feminine; this point does not have any further explanation. No activities accompany this content.

An additional point that is made regarding grammatical gender in the appendix is that students should “memorize the gender of nouns that end in *-e*” (376). A few examples of both

masculine and feminine *-e* ending nouns are provided, such as *el accidente*, ‘the accident’ and *la fuente*, ‘the source.’ Next, it is explained that words that are borrowed from a language with an origin other than Latin, that is, non-Romance languages, are typically masculine. They provide the examples “hobby” and “casting” which are borrowed from English, and are consequently masculine (376). Lastly, they mention that nouns that end in *-ma* and *-ta*, such as *el idioma*, ‘the language’ and *el planeta*, ‘the planet’ are typically masculine, another point which was not mentioned in *Claro que sí* (376).

Finally, there is a brief segment on gender agreement with adjectives in this appendix, titled “the use and formation of adjectives” (376). This section also connects gender and number more thoroughly than the previous section did, and offer rules such as “adjectives ending in *-o* and *-or* agree not only in number but also in gender (masculine, feminine) with the noun they modify” (376). In this way, gender and number are presented as closely connected. The section on agreement is brief, and offers no more explanations than were provided in *Claro que sí*.

### **Analysis of *Fuentes***

The primary issue in *Fuentes* with the presentation of grammatical gender is the relative lack thereof. There is no lesson dedicated to gender within the body of the textbook, but instead a brief section within the appendix. It is likely assumed that learners using this book, as they have some previous exposure to the language, do not need extensive explanations of this topic. However, as research shows that even L1 English learners with extensive exposure to Spanish struggle with certain aspects of grammatical gender despite years of fluency (Franceschina, 2001), it would seem valuable to revisit this particular grammatical component with more depth and to provide activities for practice.

However, one aspect of the presentation of grammatical gender which is positive is the manner in which it is not presented as intrinsically connected to number. Unlike its sister textbook *Claro que sí*, which introduces gender and number within the same section, *Fuentes* avoids this, perhaps because gender is an inherent, unchanging component of nouns while number fluctuates (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). The textbook does present adjective and noun gender agreement as connected with number, which is logical because adjectives do change in both number and gender depending on the noun to which they are assigned.

A particularly unique aspect of *Fuentes*' presentation of gender is the unique and specific explanation that is allotted for feminine nouns that begin with a stressed *a* sound" (376). This explanation is likely included because the learners are more advanced, and such non-canonical nouns cause difficulty for learners (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). Such specific explanations about potentially challenging aspects of grammatical gender should be included in textbooks, in order to draw the learner's attention to difficult aspects.

Lastly, a final component of this textbook's teaching of grammatical gender is an urging for students to "memorize the gender of nouns that end in *-e*" (376). As non-sexual nouns ending in *-e* can be both masculine and feminine and there is no consistent rule to determine this (Gamboa-Rengifo, 2012), advising students to memorize the gender of specific words ending in *-e* that they use frequently is probably most useful.

## Summary

While all of the textbooks have the same intention of introducing the concept of grammatical gender to L2 learners, there are differences in their approaches. For instance, all four offer a selection of frequent noun endings for each gender, but these vary. *Spanish Now* provides -

*a*, *-dad*, *-ción*, and *-sión* for the feminine and *-o* for masculine, while *Panorama* offers *-a*, *-ción*, and *-dad* for the feminine and *-o*, *-ma*, and *-s* for the masculine. Meanwhile, both *Claro que sí* and *Fuentes* present the most typical endings as *-a*, *-ad*, *-sión*, or *-ción* for the feminine and *-l*, *-o*, *-n*, and *-r* for the masculine. This range is interesting, and calls into question how the authors decided to select these endings, as there is no explanation provided in any of the textbooks.

The textbooks also differ in their reference, or lack thereof, to the system of gender in English. *Spanish Now* makes no mention of English, while *Panorama* mentions how the system of gender in Spanish is distinctly different from that of English. *Claro que sí* attempts to make a connection to English through a reference to the fact that cars are occasionally referred to as “she,” while *Fuentes* includes no reference to the English gender system.

There is also a distinction to be made according to whether or not the textbook introduces gender and number as two connected concepts. For instance, *Claro que sí* simultaneously introduces gender and number as they relate to assignment to individual nouns, whereas the other textbooks only make an explicit connection to number and gender in terms of their assignment to adjectives.

Still, there were notable similarities between the manners in which the textbooks presented gender as well. None mentioned the frequency of the gender endings that they provide, so there are no statistics in terms of how many Spanish nouns have those endings. In addition, no textbook makes an explicit distinction between grammatical and natural gender nor between sexual and non-sexual nouns; the closest that one comes is *Panorama*'s reference to both “living things” and “non-living things” having gender (Blanco & Donley, 2013, p. 10). Lastly, none of the four textbooks include any activity which requires gender agreement between adjectives and

sexually inanimate nouns; every one, with the exception of *Fuentes*, which has no specifically gender-related activities, provides tasks that require agreement between the gender of a sexually animate noun and its adjective. The findings and analysis from this textbook review will inform the subsequent section of this thesis, in which pedagogical recommendations for the teaching of grammatical gender in L2 Spanish classes will be made.



### **Pedagogical Recommendations**

Based upon the research that was examined in the literature review, as well as the text-book analysis presented in the previous section, some recommendations can be made for L2 Spanish teachers instructing learners whose L1 is English on grammatical gender. As this is a topic that has been identified as causing difficulties for this group, particularly in a classroom setting post-childhood, it is important that teachers have a thorough and well-informed understanding of how to best present it. Efficient instruction will ideally minimize the difficulty that students face when acquiring this aspect of Spanish grammar.

#### **Natural vs. Grammatical Gender**

Perhaps most important among many valid points which teachers should address when presenting Spanish grammatical gender to a group of L2 Spanish learners is the distinction between natural and grammatical gender. The teacher should make an explicit reference to the fact that there are two different classifications of gender in Spanish, and that one, natural gender, has a basis in the biological sex of the referent, whereas the other, grammatical gender, is an arbitrarily assigned functional category of non-sexual nouns (Pérez-Pereira, 1991).

Mills (1986) found that when acquiring grammatical gender in an L2, English native speakers relied heavily on the sex of the referent, because English contains a gender system which, with a few rare exceptions, consists entirely of natural gender (Comrie, 1999). Therefore, L2 learners should be made aware of the distinct system of gender in the language they are learning, and teacher should avoid unclear terminology such as “living/non-living things,” and instead refer to whether or not the referent has a biological sex which is associated with the gender assignment. As grammatical and natural gender serve to represent two entirely distinct types of

nouns (Pérez-Pereira, 1991), it would likely be beneficial to separate instruction and practice of these components of L2 learning. The subsequent recommendations concern the teaching of grammatical gender.

### **Noun Type Frequency**

A unique characteristic of L2 learners is their capacity for developing metalinguistic awareness (Montrul et al., 2008 and White, 2007). That is, these learners can think about the language they are learning in addition to acquiring lexical and grammatical components of the language. It may be useful, then, to appeal to this capability by providing statistical information about Spanish grammatical gender, so that the rules which individuals learn are less abstract and they can identify patterns within these rules. For instance, teachers can inform students that 99.4% of nouns which end in *-o* are masculine and about 96.3% of those which end in *-a* are feminine (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012). This will allow them, when they recognize that a specific noun ends in one of these two canonical endings, to perhaps more quickly assume its gender. Of course, there is still a small window in which they will be incorrect in applying the masculine to *-o* ending nouns and the feminine to *-a* ending nouns, but provided that they memorize those which do not follow this rule, as was mentioned in the subsection on non-canonicals, they will recognize exceptions.

The language which the teacher uses to explain grammatical gender should be as specific as possible. Vague language such as “many,” “some,” and “frequent” should be avoided, instead opting for clear and factual information regarding the frequency of different nouns and their genders. For instance, the teacher can also mention that nearly 70% of words are canonical (Gamboa

Rengifo, 2012), which will help students know what to expect when they are faced with producing grammatical gender.

### **Corpus Usage**

It is worthwhile to note that there are aspects of gender, specifically related to the gender assignments of non-canonical endings, which will simply require memorization. Because there are no universally-applicable rules regarding noun endings and gender assignment, there will likely be instances in which mastery of words with atypical gender assignments requires memorization and frequent exposure to the language on the part of the L2 learner. To this end, it may be useful to use a corpus, or a collection of the most common words in a language, to select the nouns upon which learners should initially focus when learning grammatical gender. As a corpus lists the most frequently used words in the language, focusing on the gender of these words will ensure that students are exposed to linguistic input which they will receive in natural communicative environments. This will be beneficial, because while it is impossible to instruct on every feasible noun and its gender, using a corpus to select common nouns will provide a narrowed and relevant list. A potential corpus that might be used is that of the *Corpus del Español* (Davies, 2017).

As research has noted that assigning gender to sexual nouns with non-canonical endings causes significantly more difficulty for L2 learners than does the assignment of gender to the canonical endings of *-a* and *-o* (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010 and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012) and that feminine nouns cause more difficulty than do masculine (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002 and McCarthy, 2007), teachers should be mindful of the way in which they present these nouns using a corpus. Davies' (2017) corpus includes multiple non-canonical and

feminine nouns, such as *el día*, ‘the day’ and *la cosa*, ‘the thing,’ respectively. Providing these as examples in instruction and tasks may help students become more familiar with common samples of these noun types.

### **Grammatical Gender Activities**

While the manner in which the teacher presents grammatical gender plays a highly significant role in the success of the student, a considerable opportunity for learning also comes in the form of student activities related to the grammatical aspect. One recommendation with regard to grammatical gender activities is that the teacher begins by tasking students with comprehension related activities instead of production. As Montrul et al. (2008) found that L2 learners acquiring gender make the most mistakes in oral production, it is logical to begin with individual, silent activities and slowly progress to oral tasks of increasing complexity. This may limit the possibility that students will develop an affective filter (Krashen, 1982), which would lead them to being less willing to engage in productive tasks.

Similarly, in preliminary activities, students should be allowed to refer back to the explanation of gender in the textbook or to their own notes, and initial focus should be placed on understanding the tenets behind grammatical gender, rather than on accurately producing it. Compliance with these recommendations will align with Alarcón (2011)’s research, which suggests that a significant factor of L2 learners’ difficulty with grammatical gender is the communication pressure that they feel in specific scenarios. It is likely that testing scenarios and graded assignments provide a similar pressure, and thus the teacher should limit the stress of the learning environment, perhaps by not grading homework assignments for accuracy or by not testing students on themes like grammatical gender until they have had ample exposure and time to practice it.

Finally, teachers should provide, using a corpus, a wide variety in the nouns that they utilize in these activities, and students should have opportunities to practice aspects of grammatical gender which are most difficult for them. Therefore, it would be most beneficial to provide ample practice with non-canonicals (McCarthy, 2007, Alarcón, 2010, and Gamboa Rengifo, 2012), feminine nouns (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002 and McCarthy, 2007), and gender agreement between nouns and adjectives (Franceschina, 2001, Bruhn de Garavito & White, 2002, and Alarcón, 2010). A corpus can also be used to retrieve common nouns across dialects, so that learners can practice assigning gender to nouns that they will actually use in a specific region or scenario.

### **Summary**

While there is no definitive manner in which to present grammatical gender, the aforementioned recommendations adhere to recent research on which components of this topic are most difficult for learners to acquire, and thus it is likely that they will be beneficial for implementation in L2 Spanish classrooms. Focusing on the distinction between natural and grammatical gender, the frequency of different types of nouns, the most common nouns and gender samples in relevant corpora, and the employment of activities that are conducive to low levels of communicative pressure are all valid strategies for Spanish teachers. While grammatical gender may remain a facet of Spanish grammar that causes difficulty for L2 learners, the proposed recommendations will assist in acquisition to the extent that it is possible.

### Conclusion

The acquisition of grammatical gender in Spanish can cause considerable difficulty for L1 English speakers, as this grammatical feature is not present in their L1 (Pérez-Pereira, 1991). In fact, compared to Spanish, English's grammatical system is less extensive, as it only consists of natural gender, or gender as it relates to nouns with sexual referents (Comrie, 1999). Spanish, on the other hand, contains both natural and grammatical gender, which entails gender as a functional grammatical category which is arbitrarily assigned to non-sexual nouns (Gamboa Rengifo, 2012).

Given the fact that English's gender is less complex than that of Spanish, acquiring this grammatical component can prove difficult for L2 learners whose L1 is English, and some demonstrate incomplete acquisition even after years of exposure to the L2 (Franceschina, 2001). This difficulty has been accounted for by multiple SLA hypotheses, including the FTFA, FFFH, MUSH, and MSIH. While their explanations differ, there are commonalities in the studies that have yielded these diverse theories, and nearly all agree that the most difficult components of acquiring grammatical gender are gender assignment to non-canonical nouns, over-application of the masculine to nouns requiring the feminine, and gender agreement between nouns and adjectives. Many others also noted an increased difficulty in production than in comprehension, and a potentially detrimental influence of communication pressure.

An analysis of the presentation of grammatical gender in four high school and university level textbooks found that there is a wide variety in the manner in which this feature is presented. There is certainly room for improvement in the way in which grammatical gender is put forward

in textbooks, and given the difficulty that it has been noted to cause for L2 learners, it may be beneficial to reconfigure these presentations.

Finally, the information from the literature review and textbook analysis helped to formulate pedagogical recommendations for teachers who teach Spanish as an L2 to L1 English speakers. A focus should be placed on the concepts that cause the most difficulty for this demographic, and efforts should be made to reduce communication pressure and offer a variety of noun types and activities. There is ample room for future research on this topic, as much remains unknown about the manner in which L2 learners acquire grammatical gender, the difficulty that they have with it, and the best manner to address it.

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