

Challenges of the Complexity of Spanish Grammar Structure among Students in Expressing Opinions and Ideas

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the difficulties and challenges related to lexical and morphological choices faced by Malaysian students when expressing opinions in Spanish as a foreign language. To achieve the study's objectives, data was collected through selected quizzes, oral exercises, and interviews with chosen students. A total of 60 students participated in this study, and their 60 responses were analyzed. The data, analyzed through a descriptive qualitative approach, reveals a series of difficulties encountered by students in terms of lexical and morphological selection, which hinder Malaysian students from producing grammatically correct sentences when expressing opinions in Spanish, supported by quantitative data. Other challenges faced by the students include sentence construction involving verbal conjugation, grammatical gender, and lexical mastery. The findings of this study can serve as a guide for planning to enhance the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language, making it easier to understand and shaping more suitable and effective activities to help students improve their language proficiency and ultimately produce grammatically correct sentences.

Keywords: Lexical, Morphology, Spanish Language, Malaysian Students, Foreign Language

Introduction: Learning Spanish as a Foreign Language in Malaysia

In Malaysia, interest in learning and mastering foreign languages has been steadily increasing among the public. This is due to the growing awareness of the importance of mastering languages other than one's mother tongue, which can be applied in daily life. Language plays a crucial role in the life of a society, and the advantage of mastering more than one language is invaluable (Jamian Mohammad, 2000). This statement is supported by Hieda & Maserah (2014), who assert that the need to master foreign languages has become increasingly important in creating a Malaysian society with high-quality human resources and the ability to communicate in multiple languages. The teaching of foreign languages is seen as essential to achieving this goal. Students in Malaysia study Spanish at higher education institutions, and it is offered as an elective course, with some universities offering it as a minor or audit course. In Malaysia, almost all public universities offer Spanish language courses. At Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, the Spanish language is taught at three levels: Levels 1, 2, and 3, which are basic levels. Students are taught basic conversation covering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation activities. They also learn the four basic skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the language. Throughout the learning process, students face several challenges, such as difficulties in using lexical and morphological elements to construct grammatically correct sentences. This is because learning a second language is a complex process, and the Spanish language system is very different from the mother tongue of Malaysian students (Mariyati & Nor Shahila, 2019). Students are not only required to memorize and use new vocabulary but also to master grammatical structures in order to communicate effectively. Learning a foreign language in an environment where its usage is limited is particularly challenging for students in Malaysia, and errors are inevitable. Most challenges arise from three linguistic elements: phonetics and phonology, lexical and morphological levels, and complex grammatical structures (Nor Shahila, Norazah, Beatriz & Mariyati, 2022).

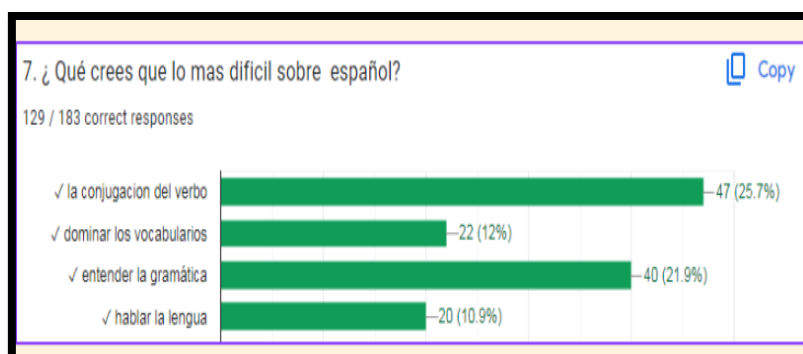


Figure 1 : Student's response

Figure 1 shows that out of 129 students taking Level 3 Spanish, 47 students (25.7%) identified verb conjugation as the most difficult aspect to learn, followed by 40 students (21.9%) who chose understanding the Spanish grammar system. Mastering vocabulary was also challenging, with 22 students (12%) selecting this statement, and 20 students (10.9%) finding it difficult to practice Spanish. This indicates that all students agree that the Spanish grammar system is complex and challenging, making it difficult to construct grammatically correct sentences.

Teaching Spanish at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)

At Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Spanish is taught as an audit and elective course, with an increasing number of students each semester, showing that this language is gaining popularity among UPSI students. For Semester 2 of the 2022/2023 session, 180 students registered for Level 1, 120 for Level 2, and 129 for Level 3. The instructors employ various materials and strategies to make the teaching and learning of Spanish more effective, with a focus on the grammar system and encouraging the use of the language in the classroom.

Among the materials used are modules, interactive blogs, Canva, YouTube, songs, films, Kahoot, Quizlet, Wordwall, internet resources, and more. The course is taught for 2 hours a week, totaling 28 hours per semester. The content aligns with the guidelines in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and among the topics taught at Level 3 are how to ask and express opinions using five different types of question phrases, as shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 2 : Examples of asking an opinión in Spanish

Lecturer's notes

In **Figure 2**, there are 5 phrases for asking someone's opinion or view on a particular theme or topic. The phrases used include **¿Qué crees que..?**, **¿Qué opinas de..?**, **¿Qué te parece/n de..?**, **¿Qué piensas de...?**, and **¿Cuál es tu opinión de + tema?** All these sentence structures mean

"What is your opinion on...?" Examples of questions are as follows:

1. **¿Qué crees que de la clase de español?** – What do you think about the Spanish class?
2. **¿Qué opinas de los malayos?** – What is your view on Malaysians?
3. **¿Qué te parece de los españoles?** – What do you think about the Spanish people?
4. **¿Qué piensas de la ciudad más bonita del mundo?** – What do you think about the most beautiful city in the world?
5. **¿Cuál es tu opinión de las telenovelas españolas?** – What is your opinion on Spanish soap operas?

Figure 3 below refers to how to express opinions and views using the 5 phrases mentioned above.

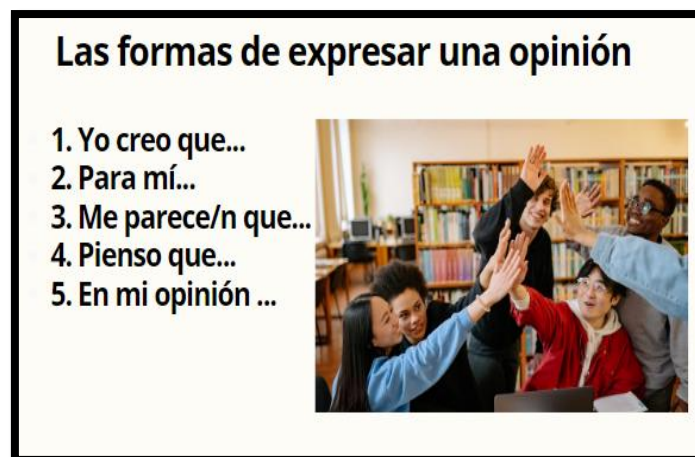


Figure 3: Examples of Phrases Used in Giving Opinions and Ideas

Source: Lecturer's notes

Figure 2 refers to the types of response phrases for the questions in **Figure 1**. All the phrases above mean "I think that..., In my opinion..., I believe..., and My view is...". Students need to complete these phrases by giving their opinions as follows:

1. **¿Qué crees que de la clase de español?** – What do you think about the Spanish class?
Yo creo que la clase de español es interesante y divertida. – I think that the Spanish class is interesting and fun.
2. **¿Qué opinas de los malayos?** – What is your view on Malaysians?
Para mí, los malayos son simpáticos y humildes. – In my opinion, Malaysians are friendly and humble.
3. **¿Qué te parece de los españoles?** – What do you think about the Spanish people?
Me parece que los españoles hablan muy rápido. – I think that the Spanish people speak very fast.
4. **¿Qué piensas de la ciudad más bonita del mundo?** – What do you think about the most beautiful city in the world?
Pienso que la ciudad más bonita del mundo es Roma. Esta ciudad es simplemente espectacular. – I think the most beautiful city in the world is Rome. This city is simply spectacular.
5. **¿Cuál es tu opinión del español?** – What is your opinion on the Spanish language?
 - **En mi opinión, el español es difícil por la conjugación del verbo.** – In my opinion, Spanish is difficult because of verb conjugation.



Figure 4: Example of Complete Phrases for Expressing Opinions/Ideas

Source: Lecturer's Notes

Students were introduced to the types of questions and answers for expressing opinions and ideas during the first and second weeks of the Spanish Level 3 course. They were also exposed to various activities and exercises in conveying ideas and opinions in Spanish. Additionally, students were required to apply the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions that they had learned in Spanish Levels I and II. **Figure 3** above shows an example of how opinions are given in Spanish using simple sentences. The sentence consists of the phrase "**Yo creo que**" ("I think that"), "**la clase de español**" ("the Spanish class"), "**es**" ("is"), which is a conjugation of the verb **ser** referring to the third-person singular noun **la clase**. "**Interesante y divertida**" ("interesting and fun") are adjectives used to describe the noun. These adjectives must agree in terms of grammatical gender, which in this case is feminine (**la clase**).

The topic of expressing opinions is also included in students' written and oral exams at the end of the semester. Students must pass a final exam that includes questions related to grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction. Students must pass this exam to receive a language proficiency certificate if the course is taken as an audit, and for the elective course, students must retake it if they fail. In the oral exam, students are tested on four components: reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. The speaking exam also includes topics related to grammar, and students are required to use the vocabulary they have learned in both the speaking and writing tests.

In highlighting the importance of learning a foreign language and its complexities, the purpose of this paper is to provide educators with a brief understanding of the common challenges and obstacles faced by students in learning Spanish as a foreign language. This study aims to achieve its research objectives and answer the research question: What are the lexical and morphological difficulties and constraints faced by university students in expressing opinions and ideas in Spanish?

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research design (primary) supported by quantitative data (secondary). The data is described descriptively and in percentages. Data for this study was obtained from students' quiz answers conducted via Google Forms and in written sentences.

The quiz contained 20 questions, 14 objective questions, and 5 short-answer questions asking for students' opinions on UPSI, Malaysians, the use of mobile phones, the Spanish language, and the Spanish people. A total of 60 student responses were analyzed to identify the lexical and morphological challenges and difficulties students face in constructing grammatically correct sentences when answering the questions posed. Oral practice (speaking) was also conducted with 10 selected students aged between 20 and 23 years who were taking the Level 3 Spanish Communication course at UPSI. During the oral practice, the researcher showed a picture, and the students were asked to express their opinions about the picture shown. During the oral practice, the researcher identified the difficulties students faced in expressing opinions and ideas, recalling the vocabulary they had learned, selecting the appropriate vocabulary, matching the vocabulary with the correct noun gender, and conjugating the verbs used. The researcher also took a few minutes after the oral practice to ask about the difficulties and obstacles that prevented them from mastering the language. Findings from the oral practice and interview questions will be categorized and summarized in tables and percentages.

The interview involved only 10 students, with no specific criteria for selecting participants. The selection of respondents was based on voluntary participation. The interview was conducted in the researcher's office in a relaxed manner after the oral practice. The participating students were informed about the data collection, and they verbally agreed to participate. This encouraged them to feel more comfortable sharing their opinions. The interview was conducted entirely in Malay to make it easier for students to express their opinions regarding the difficulties and challenges they faced in answering opinion-based questions. Data was collected using a structured interview method. A list of open-ended questions was specifically developed to address the main objectives of this study. The answers to these questions were extracted into transcripts using alphanumeric combinations to refer to specific participants. For example, [P1] refers to the first participant, [P2] to the second participant, and so on, up to [P10], the tenth and final participant. To facilitate understanding for future readers of this study, we also provided Malay translations for the data written in Spanish.

Research Findings

In learning Spanish as a foreign language, students face various challenges and confusion in expressing ideas and opinions. Despite the instructors' efforts to explain and clarify to enhance understanding and assist students in constructing sentences, mistakes continue to occur and are unavoidable. These Level 3 Spanish students already have a basic understanding of the language, having completed Levels I and II, yet they still struggle to express opinions and ideas using grammatically correct sentences and to select the appropriate lexical items. The analysis of the data reveals that the challenges faced by students stem from the complexity of the Spanish grammar system, particularly in the selection of lexical and morphological elements. Consequently, the most frequent errors occur in the areas of verbal paradigms, lexical selection, and grammatical mistakes

Morphological Challenges

Verb Paradigm (Verbs)

In Spanish, verbs must be conjugated and their morpheme endings adjusted according to the subject performing the action. Verbs fall into three categories: regular, irregular, and reflexive. The conjugation process for these three types varies. For example, the irregular verbs *ser* and *tener* and the regular verb *comunicar* must be conjugated as follows:

Table 1

Verbs Conjugation

Subject	ser	tener	comunicar
Yo (I)	Soy (I am)	Tengo (I have)	Comunico (I communicate)
Tú (you)	eres (you are)	tienes (you have)	comunicas (you communicate)
Él/Ella/Usted (he/she/you)	es (he/she/you is)	tiene (he/she/you has)	comunica (he/she/you communicates)
Nosotros/as (we)	somos (we are)	tenemos (we have)	comunicamos (we communicate)
Vosotros/as (you all)	Sois (you all are)	tenéis (you all have)	comunicáis (you all communicate)
Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes (they/you all)	Son (they/you all are)	Tienen (they/you all have)	comunican (they/you all communicate)

The data indicates that students frequently use the verbs *ser* (to be), *tener* (to have), and *comunicar* (to communicate) incorrectly in relation to the subject performing the action. Examples from student responses include:

[P1] Me parece que, España y los españoles es interesante.

Correct Sentence: Me parece que España y los españoles son interesantes.

Translation: I think that Spain and the Spanish are interesting.

[P4] Para mi, España y los españoles es interesante.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, España y los españoles son interesantes.

Translation: To me, Spain and the Spanish are interesting.

[P6] Yo creo que España es un país hermosa y los españoles es muy amable.

Correct Sentence: Yo creo que España es un país hermoso y los españoles son muy amables.

Translation: I think that Spain is a beautiful country and the Spanish are very kind.

[P7] Mi opinión es que los españoles somos educados.

Correct Sentence: Mi opinión es que los españoles son educados.

Translation: My opinion is that the Spanish are educated.

[P9] Para mi malasios es interesante.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, los malasios son interesantes.

Translation: To me, Malaysians are interesting.

[P10] Para mí, de los malayos es simpáticos y buenos.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, los malayos son simpáticos y buenos.

Translation: To me, Malaysians are nice and good.

[P12] En mi opinión, los teléfonos móviles es divertidos.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, los teléfonos móviles son divertidos.

Translation: In my opinion, mobile phones are fun.

[P15] En mi opinión, UPSI tener muchos edificios.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, UPSI tiene muchos edificios.

Translation: In my opinion, UPSI has many buildings.

[P17] Para mí UPSI muy interesante porque tener muchos estudiantes internacionales.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, UPSI es muy interesante porque tiene muchos estudiantes internacionales.

Translation: To me, UPSI is very interesting because it has many international students.

[P20] Creo que es conveniente porque yo comunicar y familia.

Correct Sentence: Creo que es conveniente porque yo puedo comunicar con mi familia.

Translation: I think it is convenient because I can communicate with my family.

In these examples, students correctly use phrases for expressing opinions such as *me parece que*, *para mí*, *yo creo que*, and *en mi opinión*. However, the verbs used do not match the subject performing the action. For example, in sentences [P1], [P4], [P6], [P7], [P9], [P10], and [P12], the verb *ser* is used incorrectly for describing opinions about Spain, the Spanish, Malaysians, and mobile phones. The correct verb should be *son* (plural) instead of *es* (singular), as the subjects are plural. Sentence [P7] uses *somos* (we are) instead of *son* (they are), which does not match the subject *los españoles* (the Spanish). Sentences [P15] and [P17] show incorrect use of the verb *tener*, which should be conjugated as *tiene* (has) for the subject *UPSI*. Sentence [P20] also demonstrates incorrect conjugation of the verb *comunicar*, which should be *comunico* (I communicate) for the subject *yo* (I). Understanding subject-verb agreement and correct conjugation is crucial for constructing grammatically correct sentences in Spanish. This challenge is compounded by the fact that, in Malay, verbs do not have conjugations and are used uniformly across all subjects. Errors in verb usage are the most common mistakes among students (Mariyati, Radhiah, Salina and Harnani, 2024).

Grammatical Gender and Number Agreement

In Spanish, grammatical gender is an essential aspect of the language. All nouns, whether referring to animate or inanimate objects, are categorized as either masculine or feminine. Adjectives must match the gender and number of the nouns they describe. Similarly, plural nouns should be paired with plural adjectives, and singular nouns with singular adjectives. Research findings reveal that some students struggle to match nouns with adjectives in terms of gender and number, leading to ungrammatical sentences. The study by Mariyati, Lee Na, and Norhana (2019) highlights minimal understanding among students regarding grammatical gender in Spanish sentence construction. Students find determining the gender of nouns particularly challenging. For example:

Gender Agreement

[P16] En mi opinión, el español es un poco más fácil porque mi doctora es bueno enseñando.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, el español es un poco más fácil porque mi profesora esbuena.

Translation: In my opinion, Spanish is a bit easier because my professor teaches well.

Explanation: The noun *doctora* (female doctor) should match the feminine adjective *buena* instead of the masculine *bueno*.

[P23] Yo creo que español es facil porque me gusta español telenovela.

Correct Sentence: Yo creo que español es fácil porque me gusta la telenovela española.

Translation: I think Spanish is easy because I like Spanish soap operas.

Explanation: The adjective *española* must agree in gender with *telenovela* (feminine noun).

[P44] Para mi, aprender espanol el facil porque tenemos un buen profesora.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, aprender español es fácil porque tenemos una buena profesora.

Translation: To me, learning Spanish is easy because we have a good teacher.

Explanation: The adjective *buena* should match the feminine noun *profesora*.

[P54] Yo creo que España es un pais hermosa y los españoles es muy amable.

Correct Sentence: Yo creo que España es un país hermoso y los españoles son muy amables.

Translation: I think Spain is a beautiful country and the Spanish are very kind.

Explanation: *Hermoso* matches the masculine noun *país*. The verb should be *son* to agree with the plural subject *los españoles*.

[P30] Creo que sobre Malasia y los malasios es divertida y feliz.

Correct Sentence: Creo que Malasia y los malasios son divertidos y felices.

Translation: I think that Malaysia and its people are fun and happy.

Explanation: The adjectives *divertidos* and *felices* must agree in number with *los malasios*.

[P12] En mi opinión de los Malasios bonito.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, los malasios son bonitos.

Translation: In my opinion, Malaysians are beautiful.

Explanation: The adjective *bonitos* should agree in number with *los malasios*.

These examples illustrate students' difficulty in constructing grammatically correct sentences that align nouns and adjectives in terms of gender. For instance, in [P16], *mi doctora* (my female doctor) should use the adjective *buena* instead of *bueno*. In [P23], the adjective *española* must match the feminine noun *telenovela*. Similarly, in [P44], the adjective *buena* should be used instead of *buen* to agree with *profesora*. In [P54], *hermoso* should match *país*, and *son* should be used with *los españoles*. In [P30], *divertidos* and *felices* must agree with the plural noun *los malasios*. Lastly, [P12] should use *bonitos* to match *los malasios*.

Number Agreement

In addition to grammatical gender, adjectives must also agree with nouns in number (singular or plural). Both nouns and adjectives should have the appropriate morpheme endings, adding *s* for words ending in vowels and *es* for words ending in consonants to indicate plural form.

Examples of student sentences with number agreement issues include:

[P2] España y el español es un lugar y un idioma únicos para aprender.

Correct Sentence: España es un lugar único y también el español es un idioma único para aprender.

Translation: Spain is a unique place, and its language is also unique to learn.

Explanation: The adjective *único* should be singular to agree with the singular nouns *lugar* and *idioma*.

[P3] Para mí español es complicados y hablar la lengua que es defícil en dominar los vocabularios.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, español es complicado y hablar la lengua es difícil, sobre todo para dominar los vocabularios.

Translation: To me, Spanish is complicated and speaking the language is difficult, especially for mastering vocabulary.

Explanation: The adjective *complicado* should be singular to match the singular noun *español*. The adjective *difícil* should also be singular.

[P11] En mi opinión España y los españoles es fantástico.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, España y los españoles son fantásticos.

Translation: In my opinion, Spain and its people are fantastic.

Explanation: The verb should be *son* to agree with the plural subject *España y los españoles*. The adjective *fantásticos* should also be plural.

[P18] Para mi, España y los españoles es interesante.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, España y los españoles son interesantes.

Translation: To me, Spain and its people are interesting.

Explanation: The verb should be *son* to match the plural subject *España y los españoles*. The adjective *interesantes* should also be plural.

[P21] En mi opinión que sobre España y los españoles es atractivo y interesante.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, España y los españoles son atractivos e interesantes.

Translation: In my opinion, Spain and its people are attractive and interesting.

Explanation: The verb should be *son* to match the plural subject. The adjectives *atractivos* and *interesantes* should also be plural.

[P31] Mi opinión los Malasios es muchas etnia.

Correct Sentence: En mi opinión, Malasia tiene muchas etnias.

Translation: In my opinion, Malaysia has many ethnic groups.

Explanation: The noun *etnias* should be plural to match *muchas*.

[P56] Para mi, Malasios es hermoso.

Correct Sentence: Para mí, los malasios son hermosos.

Translation: To me, Malaysians are beautiful.

Explanation: The adjective *hermosos* should be plural to match *los malasios*.

These examples highlight common errors in number agreement, where adjectives and verbs need to align with the nouns they describe. For instance, in [P2], *único* should match the singular *lugar* and *idioma*. In [P3], *complicado* and *difícil* should agree in singular form. In

[P11], *fantásticos* should match the plural subject. Similarly, in [P18], *interesantes* should be plural, and in [P21], *atractivos* and *interesantes* should match the plural subject. In [P31] and [P56], the nouns and adjectives must be in the plural form to agree with the context.

The sentences above illustrate errors in the use of nouns and adjectives concerning number, i.e., singular and plural forms. For sentences [P2] and [P3], the subject referred to is Spanish, which is singular, so the adjectives describing the subject should also be singular. However, students made errors by using plural adjectives such as *complicados* (complicated) and *únicos* (unique). Similarly, in sentence [P56], students omitted the article *los* from *los malasios* (the Malaysians) and used the singular adjective *hermoso* (beautiful) instead of the correct plural form *hermosos*. In contrast, in sentences [P11], [P18], and [P21], which use the plural noun *los españoles* (the Spaniards), the adjectives are in the singular form. These adjectives should be pluralized by adding the morpheme 's' to adjectives ending in a vowel, resulting in *fantásticos*, *interesantes*, and *atractivos*. Sentence [P31] demonstrates a similar issue where *etnia* (ethnicity) is used in its singular form, although the phrase refers to multiple ethnic groups. The quantifier *muchas* (many), which is used with plural nouns, is not correctly applied.

Grammatical Challenges

Verb Conjugation Errors:

- **Issue:** Incorrect conjugation of verbs such as *ser*, *tener*, and *comunicar*.
- **Example:** Using *es* instead of *son* for plural subjects.
- **Suggestion:** Emphasize the importance of subject-verb agreement in practice exercises. Use charts and tables to show conjugation patterns.

Gender Agreement:

- **Issue:** Incorrect matching of adjectives with nouns based on gender and number.
- **Example:** Using *bueno* (masculine) instead of *buena* (feminine).
- **Suggestion:** Provide exercises that focus specifically on matching adjectives with nouns, including both singular and plural forms.

Number Agreement:

- **Issue:** Mismatch between singular/plural nouns and adjectives.
- **Example:** Using *unicos* (plural) instead of *único* (singular).
- **Suggestion:** Include drills that require students to modify adjectives to agree with the number of the nouns they describe.

Lexical Challenges

Lexical Reduction:

- **Issue:** Missing or incomplete words that make sentences unclear.
- **Example:** *Para mi español... difícil porque la gramática* missing verbs and conjunctions.
- **Suggestion:** Implement vocabulary-building activities and exercises that focus on constructing complete sentences.

Lexical Addition:

- **Issue:** Addition of unnecessary words or phrases.
- **Example:** *...de los Malasios bonito* instead of *...los Malasios son bonitos*.
- **Suggestion:** Teach students to identify and remove redundant words, and practice sentence trimming.

Lexical Selection:

- **Issue:** Incorrect choice of words or phrases.
- **Example:** Using *un buen* instead of *una buena* for feminine subjects.
- **Suggestion:** Use contextual exercises to help students choose the correct words based on their meanings and grammatical roles.

General Recommendations

- **Interactive Learning:** Use interactive exercises and role-plays to help students practice correct usage in context.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Provide immediate feedback on written and spoken exercises to help students recognize and correct their errors.
- **Additional Resources:** Incorporate resources like grammar guides, vocabulary lists, and language apps to support independent learning.

Spelling

Spelling also presents a significant challenge for students in producing correct and grammatical sentences. This issue arises because some words that are pronounced somewhat similarly in Malay are spelled differently in Spanish. In this context, the influence of the students' native language, Malay, and their second language, English, plays an important role. Here are some spelling challenges and errors made by students when expressing opinions and ideas.

[P4] Yo creo que mas difcil porque **enteder** la gramática.

Correct sentence: Yo creo que es más difícil porque entender la gramática.

I believe that Spanish is difficult because understanding its grammar.

[P14] En mi opinion, opinas del espanol es difcil que espanol hablar la **lengue**.

Correct sentence: En mi opinión, español es difícil hablar la lengua.

In my opinion, Spanish is difficult to speak.

[P20] En mi opinion, del español es muy difcil que la conjugacion del verbo es muy **complicatido**.

Correct sentence: En mi opinión, español es muy difícil porque la conjugación del verbo es muy complicada. *In my opinion, Spanish is very difficult because verb conjugation is very complicated.*

[P44] Yo creo que España y los españoles es **interensenta**.

Correct sentence: Yo creo que España y los españoles son interesantes.

I think that Spain and its people are interesting.

[P51] en mi opinion sobre UPSI muy **magneficion**

Correct sentence: En mi opinión, UPSI es magnífica.

In my opinion, UPSI is excellent.

Spelling errors occur when students make mistakes in spelling the vocabulary they use. These errors can be observed in some of the analyzed sentences. For example, in sentence [P4], the verb *entender* (to understand) is misspelled as *enteder*. The error occurs because students leave out the letter 'n' in the second syllable, likely because the 'n' is pronounced slowly and

students might assume it is not present in the word. In sentence [P14], the influence of English and French is evident in the word *lengue*, which is similar to *language* in English and *langue* in French. Students are confused and spell it incorrectly. In Spanish, the word for "language" is *lengua*. Next, the adjective *complicado* (complicated) is misspelled as *complicatido* [P20], influenced by the English word *complicated*. The correct spelling in Spanish is *complicada*. Finally, the spelling for the word *magnífica* (excellent) in sentence [P51] is misspelled as *magneficion*, and *interesante* (interesting) is misspelled as *interensenta* in sentence [P44]. These misspellings also reflect the influence of English words such as *magnificent* and *interesting*.

Oral Exercise Findings

The oral exercise lasted one hour in the research room. Students were called in one by one to answer questions. This exercise was undertaken by 10 students voluntarily. During the oral exercise, the researcher showed a picture, and the students needed to express their opinions about the picture based on questions related to it, as illustrated in Figure 5 below:



Figure 5: Image and Oral Exercise Questions

Questions

1. What do you see in the image?
2. In your opinion, where are these people, and why are they there?
3. How do they feel? What are the similarities and differences among them?
4. What do you think about the old woman, and what is her character like?
5. In your opinion, where were some of these people before coming to this place?
6. What do you think they will do after this event ends?
7. What will they do with the pictures and videos that were taken?

Students' answers were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify the challenges they faced in expressing opinions in Spanish. During the oral exercise, the researcher identified difficulties students had in constructing sentences, remembering learned vocabulary, selecting appropriate vocabulary, matching vocabulary with the correct noun gender, and conjugating verbs. Errors made by students in the oral speech test were analyzed, transcribed, and categorized into tables and percentages as shown below.

Table 2

Challenges in Oral Exercise Responses

Type of Error	Percentage
Verbal paradigm errors in verbs	50%
Grammatical gender errors	30%
Lexical selection errors (articles, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, verbs)	10%
Unnecessary lexical additions	5%
Necessary lexical omissions	5%
Total	100%

The findings from the oral exercise align with the results obtained from the student quiz answered in the Google form. The results show that verb conjugation is the most frequent and common error with 50 errors, followed by grammatical gender (30 errors), lexical selection errors (10 errors), unnecessary lexical additions (5 errors), and necessary lexical omissions (5 errors). After the oral exercise, the researcher spent 10 minutes asking students about difficulties and barriers preventing them from expressing opinions and ideas in Spanish. The findings from student interviews are shown in the table below:

Table 3

Difficulties and Barriers in Spanish

Type of Difficulty and Barrier	Number
Various verb conjugations	10
Too many vocabulary words to memorize	9
Difficulty determining gender for animate and inanimate objects	8
Spelling and pronunciation confusion	5
Complex grammar	5

Examples of difficulties reported by students during interviews include:

[P1] It is quite difficult to determine which words are masculine and feminine, especially for inanimate objects; it takes time to form sentences.

[P2] There are many verb conjugations, ending in -ar, -er, and -ir, regular and irregular... confusing when changing and forming sentences.

[P3] There are too many vocabulary words to remember; sometimes I recall them in class, but when faced with a situation like this, I forget them.

[P4] Spelling and pronunciation are also challenging, especially with letters that have different sounds, like 'j,' 'g,' 'c,' and 'e.'

[P5] The most difficult for me is using articles in sentences, determining masculine and feminine articles, as well as singular and plural forms.

[P6] I like learning Spanish, but thinking about the complicated grammar makes me want to give up, though I will try harder.

[P7] To construct sentences and express opinions, I need to think about many things, such as vocabulary, appropriate verbs, and matching adjectives with gender... it's quite overwhelming.

[P8] For me, the biggest challenge is remembering vocabulary and conjugating verbs spontaneously when asked.

[P9] Conjugating verbs is hard; once I master it, I forget other vocabulary like nouns and other words.

[P10] I remember the phrases to give opinions, but continuing the sentence is challenging because I'm unsure which verbs and adjectives to use... I also forget things.

Discussion

The process of learning Spanish among Malaysian students at public universities is highly challenging. This is due to the complexity of grammar and significant differences between Spanish and the students' native language, as well as the geographical distance from native speakers and the lack of practice opportunities. Students need to explore various alternatives to master the language, with continuous frameworks needed to aid them in communicating fluently. This study examines the challenges faced by Malaysian students learning Spanish as a foreign language at public universities in Malaysia, focusing on the difficulties in expressing opinions and ideas in Spanish by analyzing the challenges encountered. Findings from quiz responses, oral exercises, and interview results during classes show that the biggest problems students face are related to linguistic and grammatical aspects of Spanish, specifically morphology and lexical proficiency. Spanish has a rich and diverse grammatical structure. Each verb needs to be conjugated, considering who is performing the action and when. The type of verb also needs attention, whether it is regular, irregular, or reflexive, to determine the conjugation and changes in the verb endings. This is due to the presence of irregular verbs in Spanish that do not follow the regular verb conjugation patterns. Additionally, grammatical gender is crucial and must be well mastered to produce grammatical and accurate sentences. Determining the gender of nouns, whether masculine or feminine, is a significant challenge. There are rules for checking the morpheme endings of nouns for inanimate objects and gender for animate objects, but these rules cannot be applied rigidly as there are also exceptions. This makes gender determination difficult, especially when students do not know the meaning of a word. The influence of students' native languages and English appears to hinder their mastery of Spanish pronunciation and spelling. Limited vocabulary proficiency also prevents effective communication of ideas and opinions, leading to incomplete sentences. This results in unnecessary additions and necessary omissions in the sentences produced by students. Vocabulary selection also becomes problematic. Each student needs to learn new words, record and memorize them, and master grammatical rules to achieve fluency and communicate effectively. It is undeniable that the most challenging task is for students to remember all words and know how to use them correctly (My Duong et al., 2021). Limited vocabulary proficiency and insufficient practice due to the linguistic environment cause students to struggle with acquiring new vocabulary and easily forget it. It is believed that a linguistic environment can help students develop sufficient proficiency in the language more quickly and effectively (Mohd Faiz & Mohamed, 2021). The findings of this study align

with those of Nor Shahila et al. (2022), who stated that the main challenges faced by Malaysian students learning Spanish are linguistic aspects such as pronunciation, grammar rules, lack of contextual linguistic environment, and the scarcity of teaching and learning materials for Spanish.

Mastering a foreign language like Spanish requires careful planning, consistent effort, and significant time investment. Non-native speakers need extensive practice to achieve proficiency. There are several strategies to enhance Spanish learning:

1. **Classroom Learning:** Quality teaching in the classroom should focus on key aspects such as grammar and pronunciation.
2. **Self-Directed Learning:** Students can use online resources for additional practice, such as:
 - [SpanishSpanish](#)
 - [Lingolia](#)
 - [StudySpanish](#)
 - Qisyadni@blogspot.com
 - [Duolingo](#)
3. **Media Usage:** Engaging with Spanish media—such as telenovelas, newspapers, magazines, and comics—can help improve vocabulary and pronunciation. Listening to and singing along with Spanish music also aids pronunciation.
4. **Consistent Practice:** Regular practice both inside and outside the classroom is essential. Students should maintain a notebook to record new vocabulary and practice sentence construction.
5. **Technology and Digital Tools:** Utilizing modern technology, such as gamification, virtual reality, AI, MOOCs, 3D printing, and project-based learning, can make the learning process more interactive and engaging. These methods align with 21st-century teaching strategies that emphasize technological integration to enhance learning experiences.

It is crucial for Spanish language instructors to refine their teaching methods and strategies. By incorporating innovative teaching approaches and utilizing technology, educators can help students become more engaged and motivated, leading to improved proficiency in the language.

Despite the challenges of learning Spanish in Malaysia, the course remains popular among students each semester, reflecting their interest and effort to master the language. This finding suggests that educators should continue to enhance their teaching methods to better meet students' needs. According to Salina Husain et al. (2022) and Norhana, Kamilia and Mariyati (2017) the use of technology in language teaching enriches the learning process with the latest applications, making it easier for students to access information and practice the language effectively. Additionally, considering learners' interests and behavior is essential for the development of their language abilities (Tahir et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2020; Prasangani, 2019; Omar & Kussin, 2017; Ismail et al., 2012; Ismail et al., 2010; Mansor et al., 2022). The teacher's role should be more embodied in tracking progress and giving feedback instead of teaching, a large amount of time in language learning should be given back to

students to do independent learning, since mastering a foreign language also depends heavily on students' own initiatives to acquire the language beyond the classroom context (Tianxiu Qi et al (2025); Myartawan & Latief, 2013; Salleh et al, 2017, Mariyati et al, 2024).

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