

## **Spanish Gender Agreement: Are Adult Heritage Speakers and Second Language Learners really incomplete acquirers?**

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Gender in Spanish represents a difficult grammatical category to acquire for English speakers. A recurrent claim of research (e.g. Montrul et al. 2008) on the acquisition of gender concerns the limits of ultimate attainment in the L2 grammar, arguing that L2 learners cannot reach results at native-like level because of maturational constraints. From this perspective, L2 learners display a high number of errors regarding gender assignment and agreement despite many years of studying the foreign language (Corbett 1991; Germany & Salazar 1998; Alarcón 2006; Doughty & Long 2008). With regard to heritage speakers, scholars (Montrul 2002; Montrul et al. 2008) argue that language loss, due to exposure to English, negatively affects gender assignment. Yet, the degree of competence that intermediate and advanced L2 learners of Spanish have in contrast to heritage speakers has not been widely investigated. The present study examines the knowledge of Spanish gender assignment and agreement in a written test by 49 English-speaking learners of Spanish at two different university levels (intermediate and advanced), with 24 heritage speakers as a baseline. The responses were recorded and analyzed for differences in the number and error patterns of gender assignment and agreement errors between the three different groups. Results of the test showed that intermediate L2 learners produced more gender errors than advanced L2 learners, suggesting that the proficiency level and the underlying vocabulary and grammar knowledge affect gender accuracy. In general, heritage speakers were more accurate than L2 learners. A closer examination of the written productions revealed that advanced proficiency L2 learners and heritage speakers have gender in their underlying grammars and do not display incomplete acquisition. Further results of the study indicate that all three groups show sensitivity to the noun's gender and morphology when exhibiting correct gender agreement. Finally, a significant masculine default effect has also been found in the L2 learners and heritage speakers.