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# Grammatical Gender Determination Strategies for the Native and Advanced L2 Spanish Speaker

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## Introduction

Correctly determining the grammatical gender of nouns is a task that is essential to the accurate production of the Spanish Language. To most Native Spanish speakers it comes naturally. However it can remain a challenge for even the most adept L2 learners. **This research study quantifies this difference in ability between the two types of speakers as well as highlights the differences and similarities in the strategies used when attempting to determine whether a noun is considered masculine or feminine.**

## What is Grammatical Gender?

**Grammatical gender is a noun class system that separates nouns into either feminine, masculine, or neuter categories.** The classification of the nouns may not have any correlation to semantic meaning or naturally occurring sex distinctions.

Gloss	Spanish	French	German
Chair	Silla (Fem.)	Chaise (Fem.)	Stuhl (Masc.)
Chess	Ajedrez (Masc.)	Échecs (Masc.)	Schach (Neuter)

Fig. 1 Examples of grammatical gender distinctions in three different languages.

Root	Feminine	Masculine
Perr- (Dog)	Perra (Female Dog)	Perro (Male Dog)
Niñ- (Child)	Niña (Girl)	Niño (Boy)

Fig. 2 In Spanish, grammatical gender that correlates to natural sex distinctions can be represented by a change in the final grapheme

Feminine Noun →	Feminine Article	Feminine Adjective	Noun Phrase
Silla (chair)	la	roja (Red)	la silla roja
Masculine Noun →	Masculine Article	Masculine Adjective	Noun Phrase
Libro (book)	el	rojo (Red)	el Libro rojo

Fig. 3 The grammatical gender dictates the formation of the surrounding articles and surrounding modifiers

<b>Masculine Final Grapheme</b>	-a, -ad, -ud, -ez, -ión, -umbre
<b>Feminine Final Grapheme</b>	-l, -o, -n, -e, -r, -s

Fig. 4 Generalizations used to determine grammatical gender (Bergen 1978).

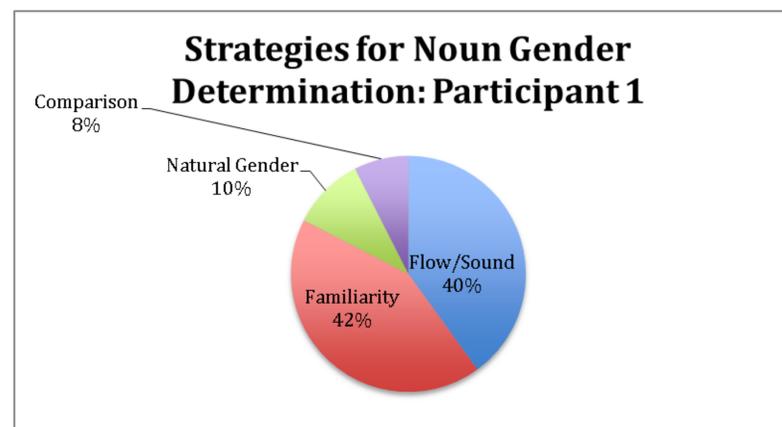
## Research Design

**Participants:** This study utilized one Mexican-American L1 Spanish speaker and one advanced L2 Spanish speaker who acquired Spanish through a mixture of life experiences and formal language training.

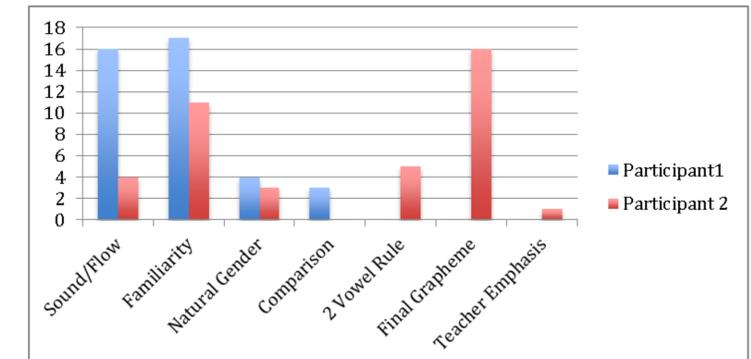
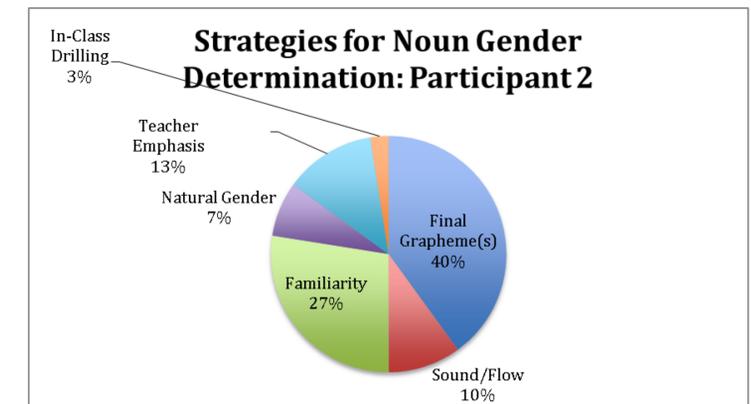
**Procedure:** Each participant completed a task-based survey comprised of 40 Spanish nouns. For each noun the participants had to choose the appropriate definite article (el or la) and label the noun as either masculine or feminine. Their surveys were then checked for accuracy. For each noun, the participants also verbally described the strategy they used to make their decision. The verbal responses were recorded and analyzed for trends.

## Results

Participant 1, outperformed the Participant 2 in terms of accuracy of grammatical gender determination. Out of the 40 nouns **Participant 1 only had 6 ½ errors** while **Participant 2 had 17 ½ errors**, nearly three times more than the native speaker. **The participants also differed drastically in the strategies used to classify the nouns.** Participant 1 relied heavily on the “flow/sound” and “familiarity” of the word. While Participant 2 relied mainly on the final graphemes of the nouns.



## Results Cont.



## Conclusion

This study and its findings are relevant because they do not align with past research studies (eg. Sagarra and Hershensohn, 2013; Foote, 2015; Alarcón 2011) that assert syntactical, morphological and semantic cues are the primary strategies used by native Spanish speakers when determining grammatical gender. This research highlights the need for more extensive research endeavors to clarify the most common strategies utilized by both L1 and L2 speakers. The results from such studies could then inform the efforts of future L2 Spanish learners as they work to improve their ability to determine grammatical gender.

## References

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