

We agreed to disagree: Agreement patterns in learner English

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Introduction

This poster presents preliminary results of a PhD project with a focus on subject-verb agreement errors in English produced by young Norwegian learners.

Agreement is problematic for learners

- L2 learners often omit the 3rd person singular marker in English (Cook, 2008)
- L1 learners acquire the 3rd person singular marker as one of the last inflectional morphemes (Radford, 1990)
- Norwegian L2 learners often over-produce the 3rd person singular marker (overgeneralize the morpheme into all persons in both singular and plural)

RQ1: Which combinations of subjects and verbs are the most challenging ones for the Norwegian L2 users?

RQ2: Can the recurring issues with S-V agreement be explained by contrastive and/or processing reasons?

Material and Methods

Data

- written texts: 430 000 words
- 185 students (15-16-year-olds) followed for one school year

Methods

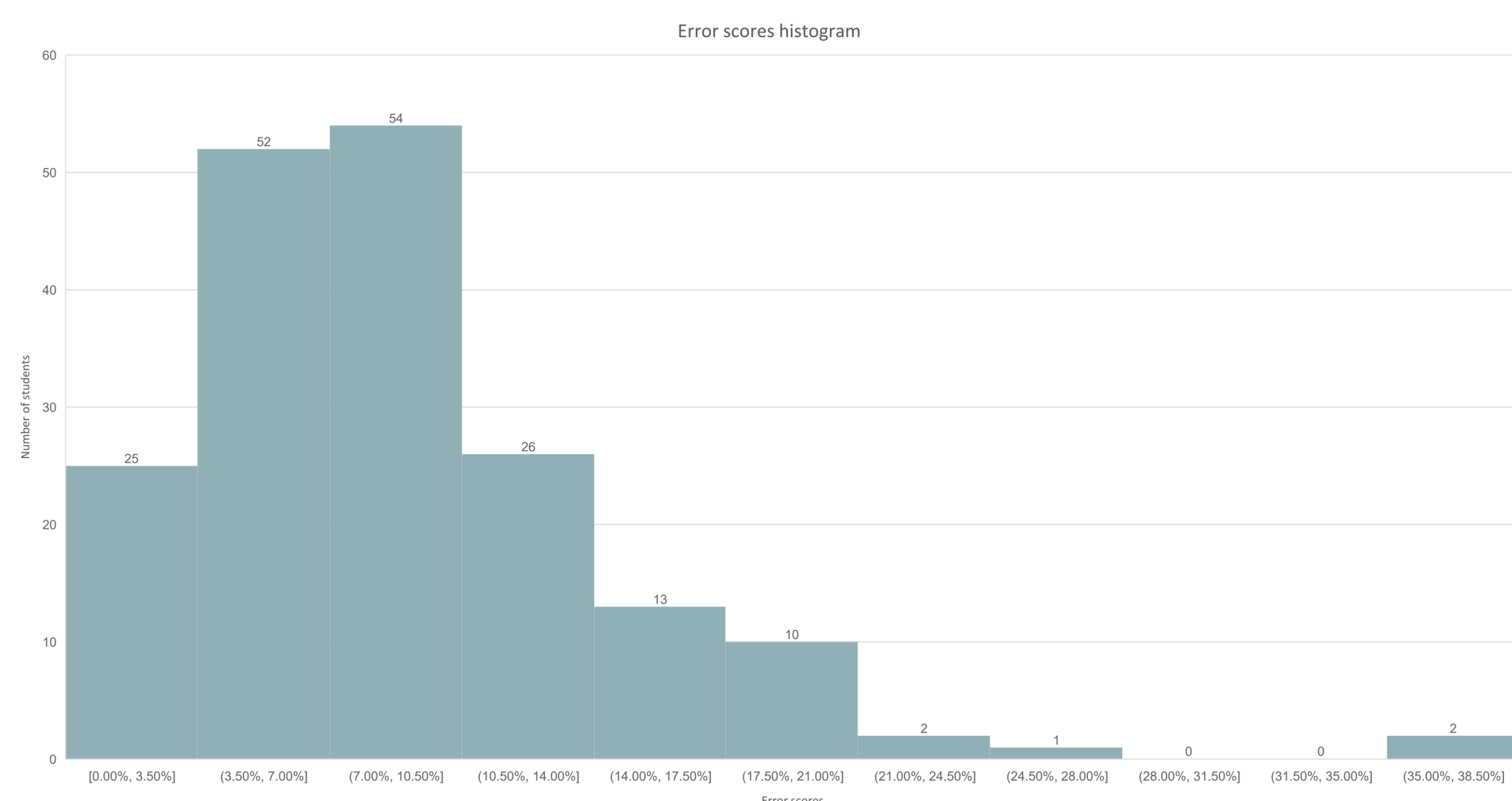
- S-V agreement errors extracted (2843 errors) and coded (number on V, type of S)
- Student error scores and progress scores calculated as inverted accuracy rates, i.e. the number of errors divided by the number of occasions where agreement could be overtly marked.

Results

Average word production: 2300 words

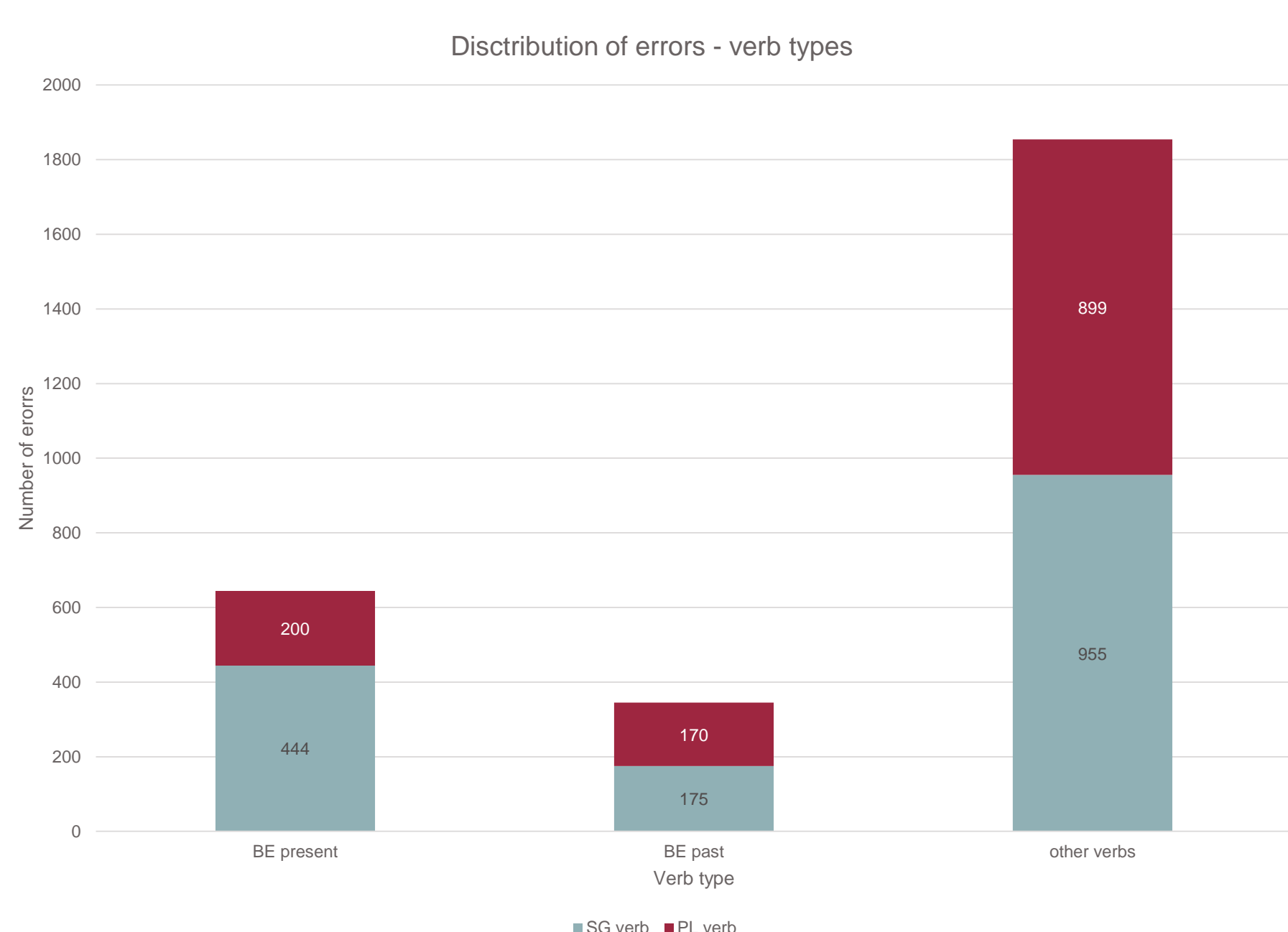
Mean error rate: 8.93%

Median error rate: 7.94%



Errors with BE: 989 (34.79%)

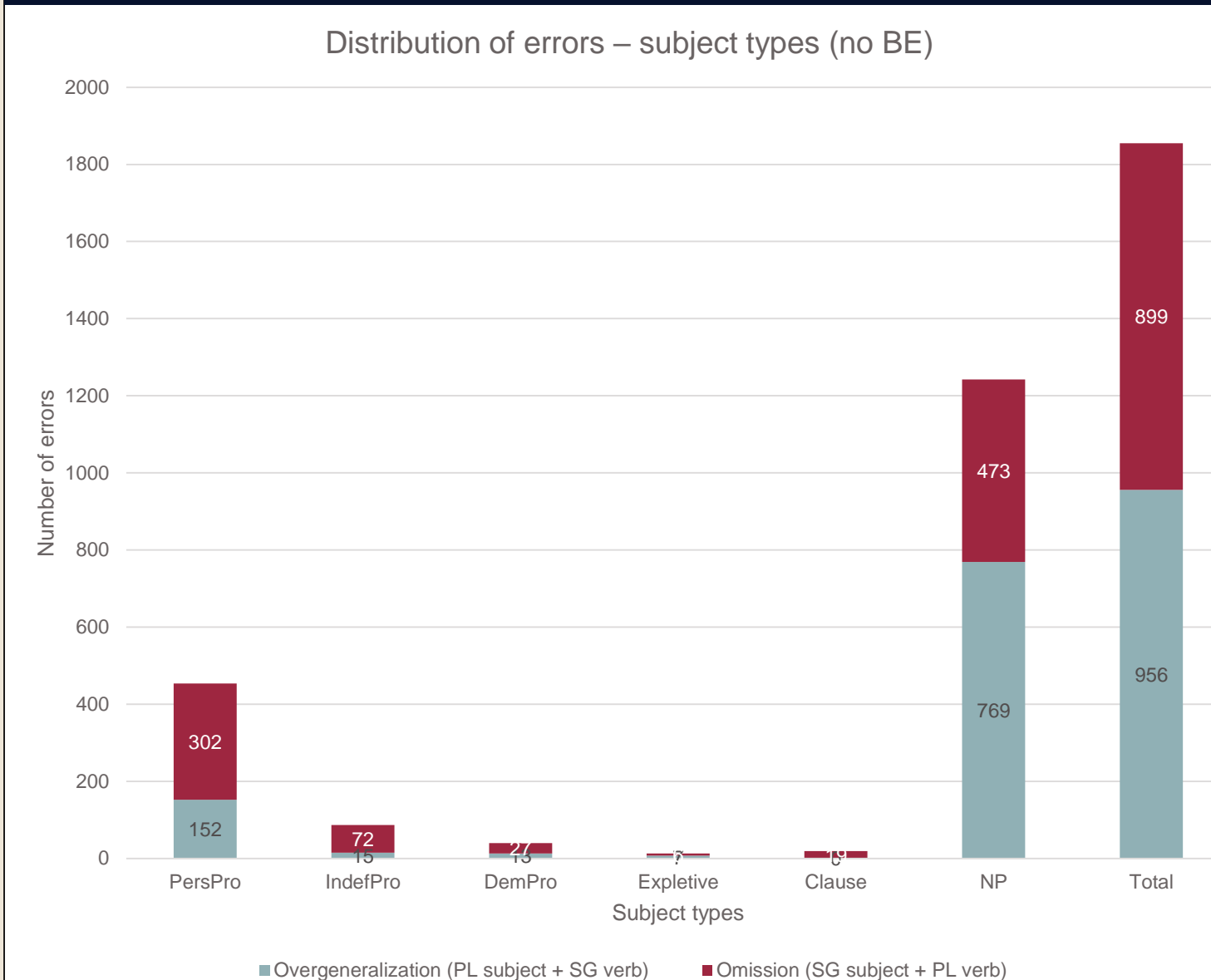
Errors with other verbs: 1854 (65.21%)



Omission errors (SG subject + PL verb):
899 (48.49%)
(1) Girl play football
(2) His mom ask him

Overgeneralization errors (PL subject + SG verb):
955 (51.51%)
(3) Friends gives us confidence
(4) Choices defines you

Results

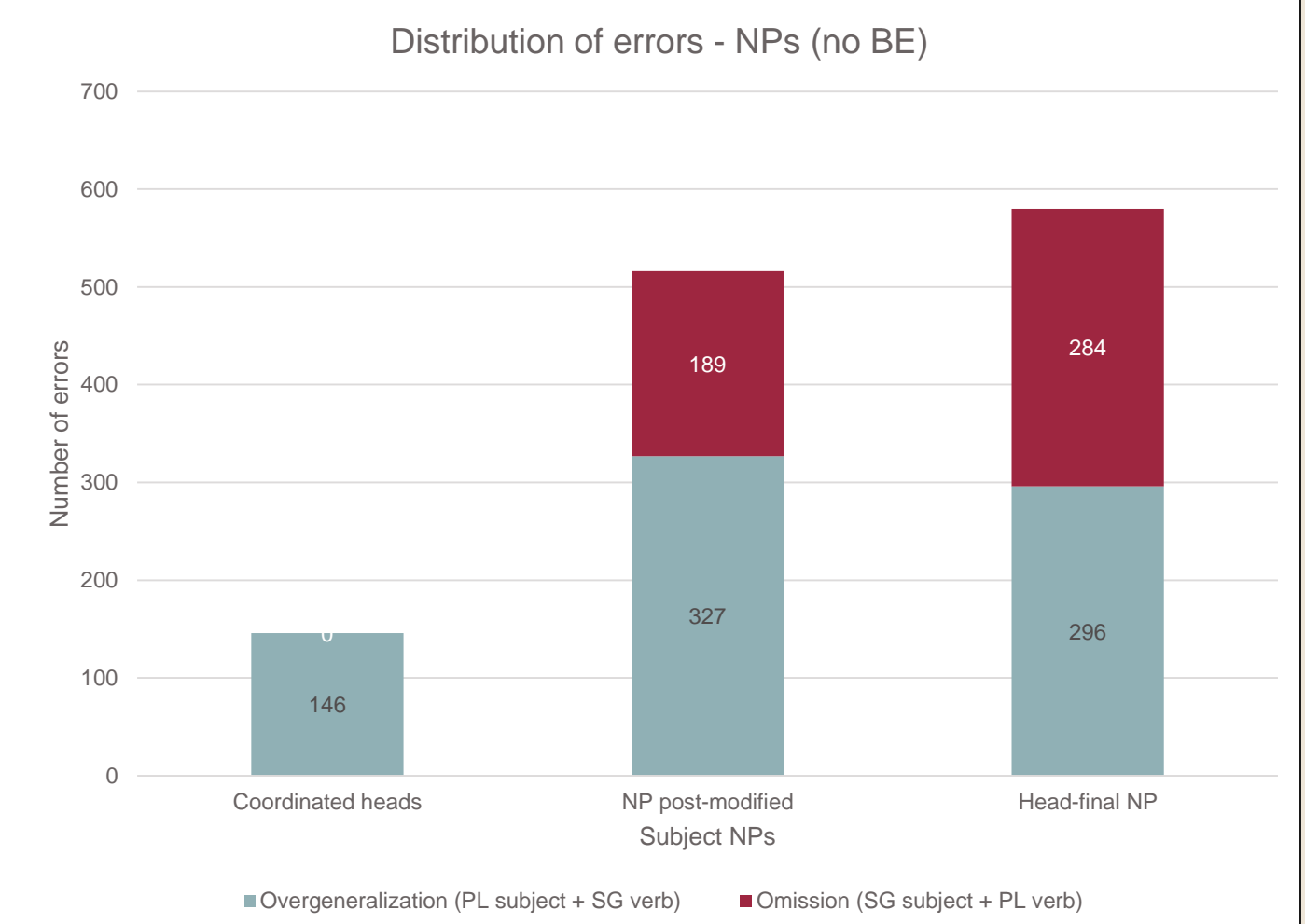
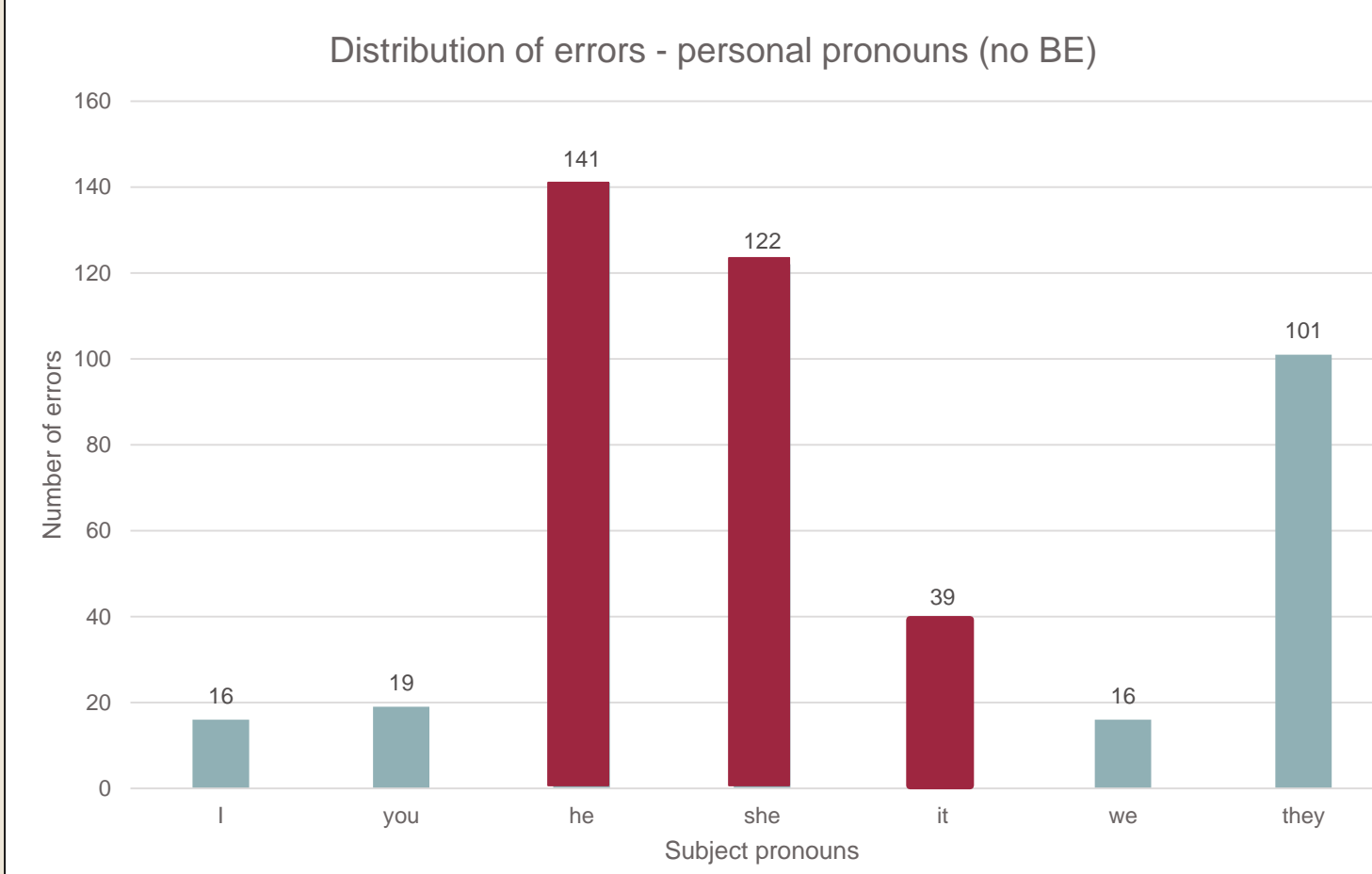


Distribution of errors – subject types:

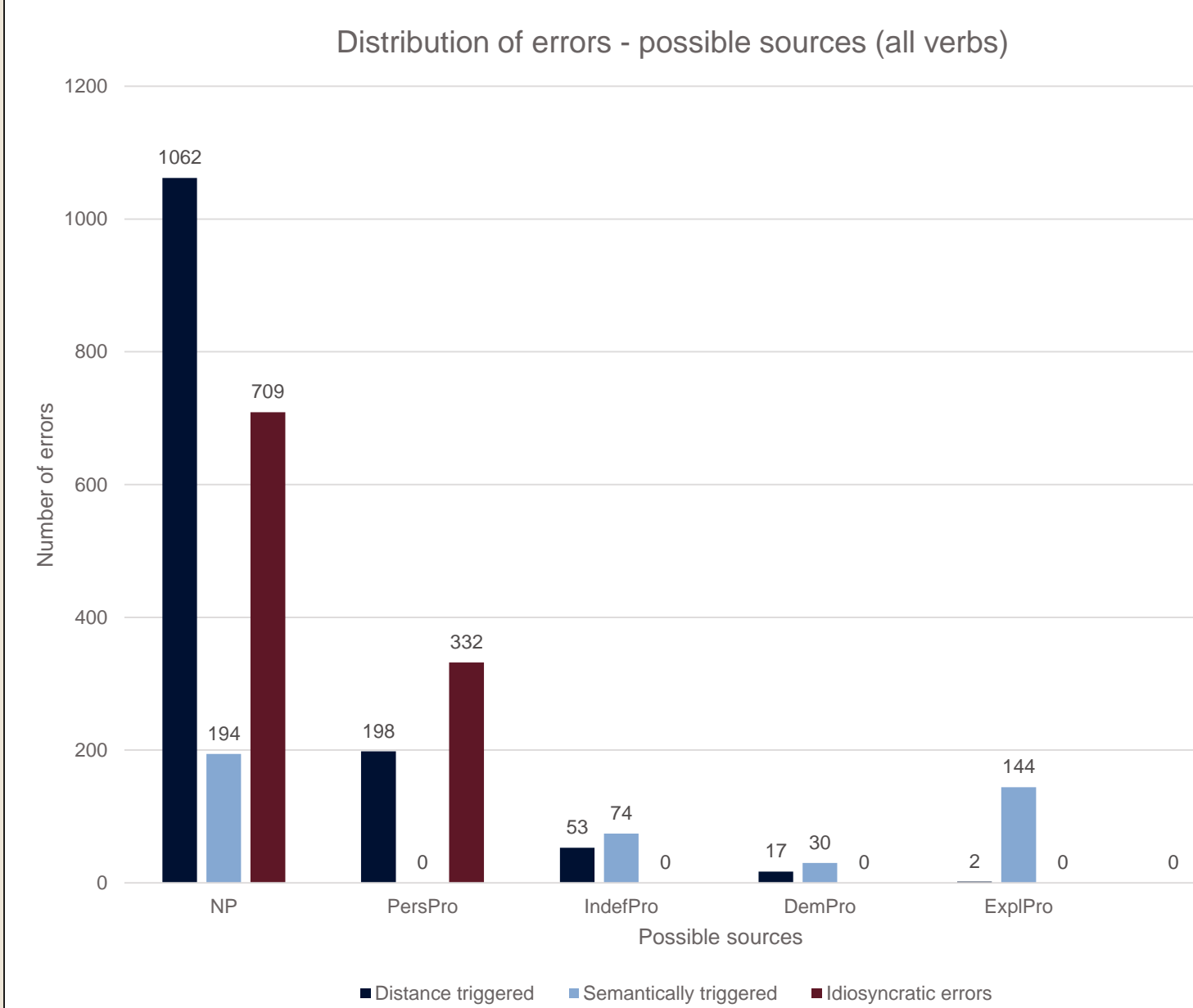
NPs: 66.99%
PersPros: 24.49%
Others: 8.52%

NP subjects appear mainly with overgeneralization errors (61.98%)

Pronominal subjects appear mainly with omission errors (66.52%)



Possible sources of errors (all verbs)



Distance triggered errors:

- Proximity agreement
- Processing & short-term memory limitations

Semantically triggered errors:

- Irregular nouns
- Countability

Idiosyncratic errors:

- Overgeneralizing of the L1 pattern (verbs in present are marked with a distinct morpheme)
- Overgeneralizing of the learned rule
- Verbal morphology not acquired yet

Discussion and Further Research

➤ Result of a normal acquisition process

- Rarely reported for advanced learners (cf. Granger et al., 2009).
- If reported then minority of the errors (cf. Breiteneder, 2005; Dröschel, 2011)

➤ Processing and short-term memory limitations

- Processing limitations – intrusive elements between the NP head and the verb (occurring in the speech of native speakers)
- Proximity agreement – agreement with the closest noun instead of the head of the subject NP (common in the speech of native speakers)

➤ Performance errors

- Acceptability judgements (Jensen et al., 2017) show similar error pattern as the corpus data

➤ Transfer of the L1 pattern

- Norwegian does not mark agreement, only finiteness – almost all verbs in the present tense carry the suffix –r
- The L1 pattern could be misinterpreted by the learners and used as a null hypothesis in their L2 learning
- Similar overgeneralizations are reported by Thagg Fisher for Swedish learners (Swedish is closely related to Norwegian, cf. Thagg Fisher, 1985)

➤ Something else?

- Didactics – lacking or insufficient instruction or feedback
- Overgeneralization of the “one -s principle” (cf. Thagg Fisher, 1985) – the expectancy that agreement should be marked with at least one, but not more than one -s

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Selected References

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