Non-native (L2) speakers’ sensitivity to morphological marking is influenced by the relative processing burden imposed by non-canonical word orders (e.g., Hopp 2010). Canonical Spanish word order is SVO, but SOV and OVS word orders are also allowed. OVS imposes the highest processing cost (Gonzalez, 1997). The present study investigates whether processing costs imposed by non-canonical word orders influences L2 Spanish speakers’ (L1 = English; n = 27) ability to use the gender on clitic object pronouns to interpret sentences. Participants completed an aural comprehension task. Stimuli were constructed so that each sentence had either SVO, SOV, or OVS word order and included a feminine or masculine clitic object pronoun, as in (1).

1. Julio cree que Paco quiere comprarlo en Walmart.
Julio think.3rd.sg that Paco want.3rd.sg. buy.it.masc.sg. in Walmart.
'Julio thinks that Paco wants to buy it in Walmart.'
Stimuli were followed by a comprehension question, as in (2). Each comprehension question had four possible answers. Two of these matched the gender of the clitic, and two did not.

2. ¿Qué quiere comprar Paco? 'What does Paco want to buy?'
A. Un cuaderno ’a notebook’ (correct gender)
B. Un camarero ’a waiter’ (correct gender)
C. Una blusa ’a blouse’ (incorrect gender)
D. Una iglesia ’a church’ (incorrect gender)

Participants had ten seconds to respond. Answers that matched the gender of the clitic were counted as accurate.

Results indicate that the L2 Spanish speakers scored significantly above chance for feminine clitics in sentences with SVO and SOV word orders, but at chance in sentences with OVS word orders. Accuracy rates with masculine clitics were at chance for all three word orders. These results suggest participants’ ability to exploit gender cues decreases as word order becomes more difficult to process.

Keywords: gender, processing, word order.