



Errors, (Legitimate) Deviations from the Standard, or What? An Analysis of Errors in Essays Written in English by Italian University Students

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Abstract

A number of studies have highlighted a widespread ‘writing emergency’ amongst Italian university students, who seem to show poor writing skills in their mother tongue [1]. Less attention has been paid to Italian (under)graduates’ performance in EFL writing [2], despite the fact that, given its role as the lingua franca of academia [3], English is increasingly being adopted worldwide as the medium of instruction (EMI) [4] in the process of internationalisation of higher education [5]. This study reports on the errors made by a sample of Italian university students when performing written assessment tasks in English. The study is based on a balanced corpus of 150 essays produced by Italian student teachers in the first and second years of a single-cycle degree in Primary Teacher Education. Firstly, the errors made by the first-year and second-year students are classified separately according to the traditional linguistic category and surface strategy taxonomies [6]. Secondly, they are analysed, compared, and commented on, taking into account the impact that both the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and Internet-based communication are having on the very notion of ‘error’ [7]. Finally, the paper discusses the implications, for English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners, material developers and language testers, of a careful evaluation of students’ errors in the light of the occurring changes in the nature and role of English.

Keywords: *English writing, error, ELT, EFL, ELF.*

1. Introduction

The debate around what constitutes an error in the oral and written production of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has long been based on the assumption of a monolithic Standard English (SE) corresponding to Native-Speaker (NS) usage [8] and conceived as “the prototypical model of correct English” [9:64]. Yet, both notions – ‘standardness’ and ‘NS usage’ – are in themselves fairly slippery and may be inadequate to function as a yardstick against which errors are judged as such. This is particularly evident when it comes to English. The instrumental role of English as *the* lingua franca (ELF) allowing active participation in a globalized society cannot but have implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) stakeholders. Even in the Expanding Circle, English is no longer ‘simply’ a Foreign Language (EFL) which is taught at school with the aim to enable learners to speak like (and only with) native speakers. As Ur [10:5] maintains, “this is for most learners an inaccessible goal; and these days it is not even an appropriate one”. It appears that the ultimate goal of ELT has changed: teaching how to use English fluently is still important, but using English fluently may no longer necessarily mean complying with the conventions of SE/NS usage. Rather, it means being able to use English to communicate effectively with international interlocutors in variable and dynamic contexts, where creativity [11] – often implying non-compliance with ‘standard’ norms – may in fact help interactants get their message across. As Wang and Jenkins [12:39] remark, “researchers have uncovered how ELF users, instead of conforming to established norms of English, adapt their way of using English to cope with international communication in various contexts”. Against this changing scenario, in which “the reality of English as the primary world language is that of an unstable, plurilithic, *de-standardised* language” [9:57], it seems worth reflecting on what constitutes ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ usage in EFL learners’ production.

2. The notion of error and the ‘new’ EFL learner

In ELT, errors have broadly been conceived as “learners’ deviations from native-speaker standard norms” [9:49]. In fact, today’s use of English as the global contact language in multilingual/multicultural ELF contexts is bound to impact on such notion and may offer further reasons to explain – and even legitimate – EFL learners’ deviations from the norm. Indeed, the ‘new’ EFL learner is both a *student*



and a *user* of English. As a *student*, he/she is required to give primacy to formal accuracy by conforming to an (assumed) monolithic form of SE; as an ELF *user*, the EFL learner needs, instead, to find – and even create – the forms and solutions that best meet his/her communicative objectives. As Grazzi [9:67] contends, EFL and ELF show “a tendency to converge and be complementary in the speaker/learner’s performance inside and outside the learning environment”, wherefore the objectives of ELT need to consider the wider framework of the current sociolinguistic reality/ies of English.

The ‘plurilithic’ and global nature of English is not the only reason why the traditional notion of error in ELT may no longer hold. There are also factors more broadly related to the major changes that have been occurring in communication practices. One such change has to do with the advent of digital communication. As the ‘new’ ELF learner today performs a great deal of their writing in technology-mediated settings, we can reasonably expect online-writing practices and the “in-between-ness” of digital language [13] to have an impact on writing in educational contexts [5], and on its norms.

3. Classifying errors

Dulay, Burt and Krashen [6] suggest a categorization of errors based on observable surface features rather than on their (inferred) sources, and propose descriptive taxonomies of errors which depend on the criterion of observation, as shown in Table 1.

Linguistic taxonomy	Surface strategy taxonomy	Comparative taxonomy	Communicative effect taxonomy
Morphological errors	Omission errors	Developmental errors	Global errors
Syntactic errors	Addition errors	Interlingual errors	Local errors
	Misformation errors	Ambiguous errors	
	Misordering errors	Other errors	

Table 1. Taxonomies of errors proposed by Dulay *et al.* (1982)

Dulay *et al.*’s descriptive taxonomies have been widely used as a framework for error classification. Indeed, they provide a ‘concrete’ guideline for ELT practitioners. A classification based on observable surface features which can be measured against fixed SE/NS-usage parameters arguably offers a clear grid for teachers when assessing their students’ production.

4. The study: An analysis of EFL students’ errors in essays

4.1 Corpus and methodology

This paper focuses on errors in the *writing* of EFL learners by analysing a corpus of 150 essays on a variety of topics produced by two groups of Italian student teachers in academic year 2020/2021 during their final formal assessment following a 32-hour English laboratory. The two groups were formed by students on a Primary-Teacher Education single-cycle Master’s Degree, in the first and second year respectively. Two different subcorpora were created, one for the first year (Subcorpus 1, 75 essays, 11.065 running words), and one for the second (Subcorpus 2, 75 essays, 11.033 running words). All the essays were manually analysed to detect the presence of surface features deviating from the rules of SE/NS usage. The errors were then classified bearing in mind Dulay *et al.*’s [6] taxonomies. As shown in Table 1, these include the linguistic (morphological and syntactic errors), and the surface strategy (omission, addition, misformation and misordering) taxonomies. Given that surface-strategy errors are in themselves either morphological or syntactic errors, I decided to group linguistic and surface-strategy errors into the two broad categories of morphology and syntax. I identified as ‘morphological errors’ those concerning word number (e.g. *A lot of flower*), word form (e.g. *instead of keep*), and word class (e.g. *punishments aren’t frequently*), whereas I classified as ‘syntactic errors’ those concerning subject-verb (S-V) agreement (e.g. *She prefer*), prepositional phrases (PP) (e.g. *A meeting for describe the activity*), cohesive devices (e.g. *There are many actions who people do*), word order (WO) (e.g. *Show children how important is nature*), omission (e.g. *Is important to know that...*), addition (e.g. *We can reduce the pollution*), verb pattern (e.g. *I say them*), verb tense (e.g. *She has had 5 children while she was at university*), and active/passive (A/P) construction (e.g. *Finally the departure date was arrived*). I also thought it helpful focusing on another type of ‘surface’ errors, that is, lexical errors. Lexicon appears to be the area where the creativity of today’s students/users manifests itself most patently in their endeavour to communicate [11], whatever their grammatical accuracy. In the ‘lexical errors’ category I identified deviations concerning lexical



phrases – fixed expressions (e.g. *I think it*), collocations (e.g. *Do some changes*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *I had to ask help* – and word choice (e.g. *I have very good reminds of my school*).

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Subcorpus 1

The results of the manual count of errors in Subcorpus 1 are reported in Tables 2 to 5 below.

Morphology

Number	Word form	Word class	Total
50	78	40	168

Table 2. Occurrences of morphological errors in Subcorpus 1

Syntax

S-V agreement	PP	Cohesion	WO	Omission	Addition	Verb pattern	Verb tense	A/P	Total
32	8	15	28	58	41	44	29	12	267

Table 3. Occurrences of syntactic errors in Subcorpus 1

Lexicon

Fixed expression	Collocation	Phrasal Verb	Word choice	Total
51	16	18	43	128

Table 4. Occurrences of lexical errors in Subcorpus 1

Category	Subcorpus 1
Morphology	168
Syntax	267
Lexicon	128
Morphology+Syntax+Lexicon	563

Table 5. Total number of occurrences of errors in Subcorpus 1

As we can see from the Tables above, the highest number of errors in Subcorpus 1 is in the area of syntax. The most recurrent error is omission, with articles (e.g. *To become teacher, I need...*) and subjects (e.g. *For pupils is very important to change*) being the most frequently omitted components (26 occurrences each). The definite article is omitted (e.g. *During Covid period*) more frequently than the indefinite, and the omission of the subject mainly concerns the 'dummy it' (e.g. *When I buy online is because I want...*). The main verb is omitted in 4 cases (e.g. *Students didn't the homework*), and the auxiliary in 3 (e.g. *We done online classes*). As for addition, the most frequently added items are articles, mainly the definite article (e.g. *The online teaching is...*). The problems with cohesive devices mostly concern the use of relative pronouns (e.g. *The T-shirt who I have bought*). As for morphology, the most recurrent error concerns word form (e.g. *They can improve theirselves*), while with reference to lexicon, most errors concern the use of fixed expressions (e.g. *For me it is a bad action because...*). About word choice, of the 43 occurrences, 9 are false friends (e.g. *An interesting argument to talk about*), 24 words with the wrong meaning (e.g. *Students do not wear aprons but normal clothes*), 10 invented words (e.g. *I was introvers*).

4.2.2 Subcorpus 2

The results of the manual count of errors in Subcorpus 2 are reported in Tables 6 to 9 below.

Morphology

Number	Word form	Word class	Total
68	95	44	207

Table 6. Occurrences of morphological errors in Subcorpus 2



Syntax

S-V agreement	PP	Cohesion	WO	Omission	Addition	Verb pattern	Verb tense	A/P	Total
51	22	8	33	68	67	29	29	3	310

Table 7. Occurrences of syntactic errors in Subcorpus 2

Lexicon

Fixed expression	Collocation	Phrasal Verb	Word choice	Total
50	49	21	92	212

Table 8. Occurrences of lexical errors in Subcorpus 2

Category	Subcorpus 2
Morphology	207
Syntax	310
Lexicon	212
Morphology+Syntax+Lexicon	729

Table 9. Total number of occurrences of errors in Subcorpus 2

Also in Subcorpus 2 the highest number of deviances from SE is in the area of syntax. Here, again, the most recurrent error is omission. Most of the times, omission concerns either articles (e.g. *Protect environment*), or subjects (e.g. *Is important to know that...*), with 28 and 25 occurrences respectively. In almost all occurrences of article omission, the definite article is left out (e.g. *We went to lake*). As for the omission of the subject, in nearly all cases it occurs with the 'dummy *it*' (e.g. *Moreover, is expensive*). In 9 cases, the main verb is omitted (e.g. *I very happy with myself*), especially when there is an auxiliary in the same clause (e.g. *The recycle will possible*). In turn, the auxiliary verb is sometimes (6 occurrences) left out (e.g. *While I washing my teeth*), with negative forms occasionally presenting only the negative particle *not* (e.g. *Until she not tries on her own*). Examples of addition are also recurrent. Articles are mostly added, mainly the definite article (e.g. *The water is important for the life*). Interestingly, there are also 5 occurrences of double subject (e.g. *My family and I we decided to go...*), and 3 cases of double main verb (e.g. *Last year was be a particular year*). The problems with cohesive devices are all related to the use of relative pronouns (e.g. *There are many actions who the people do*). As for morphology, the most recurrent error concerns word form (e.g. *Now humans must change his habits*). Finally, with reference to lexicon, most errors concern word choices. Some words (42) have a meaning which does not suit the context (e.g. *Take cure of the environment*), some others (22) are false friends (e.g. *I have an agenda in my bag*), others (17) are invented (e.g. *Separing rubbish is very important*). In 4 examples, there are words in the student's L1 (e.g. *I can close the rubinetto*).

5. Discussion of findings

Against approximately the same number of running words in the two subcorpora, my data show a higher number of errors in the essays produced by the students in the second year. Considering that the students involved in the present study received ELT instruction throughout the first and second years (besides having received English instruction for at least eight years before university), one may infer that such instruction is not enough or adequate to achieve the formal accuracy required of EFL students. Indeed, the highest number of errors in both subcorpora is in the area of grammar (syntax and morphology), an area on which the teaching of English in the Italian educational context is primarily based.

In line with the findings of ELF research into the morphosyntactic features of ELF [14], my data show that elements perceived as unnecessary to transfer the message – for example the dummy subject, auxiliary verbs, the third person *-s*, and even the plural *-s* – tend to be omitted. Vice versa, unnecessary elements that are deemed to reinforce the message – for example double subjects – may be added. Deviances from SE are mostly present in the use of articles, with the definite article being the most frequently added and at the same time omitted determiner in the corpus. This might have to do with the fact that the definite article is used differently in different languages, or with the fact that NSs themselves often have doubts about how to use it, or – again – with the perception that articles are not essential for intelligibility, wherefore they may or may not be there. As for the use of



linkers like relative pronouns, *who* and *which* are used interchangeably in the corpus. Finally, the data also show a tendency to use the prepositional phrase *for*+bare infinitive instead of the *to* infinitive. With reference to lexicon, three main aspects are worth mentioning. First, my data suggest that EFL students seem to have problems with the use of lexical phrases. A reason could be that the meaning of fixed expressions, collocations, and phrasal verbs is perceived as opaque and therefore not communicative. Consequently, the student tends to adopt solutions that he/she deems clearer, for example by using non-idiomatic forms or by adapting them to his/her L1. Secondly, it is quite interesting to notice that EFL students may switch to their L1 when they do not know the word in the L2, showing a trend to exploit their whole linguistic repertoire. Thirdly, my data confirm the lexical creativity of EFL students in their solving their vocabulary-shortage problems by trying out invented words that allow them to maintain the flow of communication. In this regard, it seems reasonable to assume that the lexical creativity fostered by online writing practices is 'intruding' into academic writing. Indeed, the user-centred context offered by online communication does encourage verbal creativity, which inevitably implies deviance from (or flouting of) the norm.

6. Conclusions

Despite the unquestionably limited amount of data of the present study, this paper aims at encouraging a new approach to the notion of 'error', one that considers not only the ever-changing nature of English as a globally-spread language in the hands of an increasingly higher number of NNSs, but also the new kind of literacy that today's EFL learners bring with themselves into the classroom. ELT teachers, material designers and language testers may find it worth considering a notion of proficiency that is based on EFL learners' "Englishing" [8] – that is, what *students/users* can actually do to communicate effectively in *the* global language – rather than on compliance with an alleged monolithic standard.

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