Tense, Aspect and Verb Form Errors in EFL Academic Writing Produced by Italian Learners

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Abstract

Errors in writing produced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners of different mother tongues have been widely analysed. Most studies have considered and categorised different types of writing errors and several facets within the same area of analysis (morphology, syntax, lexicon, etc.). Fewer studies, however, have specifically investigated errors in the form and use of verbs, which are quite frequent in the written production of EFL learners. The present paper deals with verb-related errors, with a main focus on tense and aspect. Given their own semantics, these grammatical categories are part and parcel of the communicative competence of EFL learners, as their misuse may easily lead to misunderstandings. The paper is based on the analysis of exam essays written by Italian students on a Primary Education Master's degree providing qualification for the teaching of English in Primary School. The high frequency of verb-related errors detected in the corpus, especially those concerning verb tense and aspect, suggests that despite the huge amount of time commonly devoted to the teaching of grammar to Italian EFL learners, the form and use of English verbs still seem to be problematic, and appears to indicate the need for a revision of approaches to the teaching of grammatical features.

Keywords: *EFL writing; writing errors; tense and aspect; English verbs; verb-related error analysis*

1. Introduction

Errors in the written output of learners of a Foreign or Second Language (FL, SL) have long been the focus of academic research. Such research has dealt with the topic from different perspectives, ranging from the discussion of the relevance of errors to language acquisition (e.g. [6]), to the description and classification of errors (e.g. [7]), up to qualitative and quantitative studies specifically reporting on writing errors made by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners with different mother tongues (e.g. [3], [4], [12], [13]). To my knowledge, only a limited number of studies have especially focused on verb-related errors in EFL writing (e.g. [1] [11], [14], [15]). Yet, the use of verbs is a core part of the grammar of any language, English included. This paper is meant to contribute to the provision of further data in this area by describing the type of verb-related erros made by 148 Italian university students in the context of summative assessment of their EFL writing.

The teaching of grammar has always represented a controversial issue amongst both scholars and practitioners (e.g. [8]). Although the importance of grammar in FL educational contexts seems to be undisputed, their is no general consensus over the actual usefulness of grammar instruction *per se* for a solid achievement of formal accuracy and, most importantly, for the fostering of language learning (e.g. [5], [9], [10]). Indeed, the wide body of studies investigating EFL writing errors provides ample evidence that, irrespective of their mother tongue, EFL learners make a considerable number of grammar mistakes – including verb-related errors – when they write in English, even after years of instruction and at advanced levels of overall proficiency.

A case in point is that of Italian EFL learners. In Italy, 90% of students learn English from the beginning of schooling until the end of upper secondary school, when they are expected to have reached B2 competence. At all levels of pre-university schooling, EFL classes are largely focused on the teaching of grammar, with plenty of mechanical drills being emplyed as the most familiar type of

grammar exercises. And yet, upon starting their university career, Italian students still struggle with English grammar, which is one of the reasons why they see writing as a daunting activity ([2]). The vast majority of freshers do not have the B2 level they are supposed to have gained, and, what is more, most of the times they have difficulties performing grammatical tasks even at lower levels. The purpose of the present paper is to address this issue by reporting the findings of a study which explored the errors related to a specific grammatical item, namely the English verb, in EFL academic writing produced in the context of an Italian university.

2. The study

2.1 Corpus and methodology

The question underlying my study is "What type of verb-related errors do Italian EFL learners still make after 13/14 years of English instruction?". To answer this question I compiled a corpus of 148 essays written by first- and second year students on a single-cycle Degree in Primary Education during several computer-based exam sessions held between June and September 2023. I divided the corpus into two smaller sucorpora, which I called SFP1 and SFP2 respectively. SFP1 includes 80 essays produced by first-year students, for a total of 9,648 running words. The essays in SFP1 are about a variety of topics, such as 'A particulary boring or happy day', 'Your musical tastes', 'The place you live in'. SP2 includes 68 essays produced by second-year students, for a total of 10,063 words. The topics are also varied, and mainly suitable for the production of an argumentative text (for example, 'the importance of giving rules to your children', 'the role of parents in choosing their children's carrers'), yet with the possibility of including examples from the writer's own life. The essays were collected directly from the e-learning platform where they had been produced, and then saved as Word files.

With reference to the student writers, it is important to highlight that in Italy an MA in Primary Education automatically qualifies for the teaching of English in primary school. In other words, students who graduate in Primary Education are the ones that will teach English to 6 to 11-year-old children. During the 5-year Degree, student teachers attend five English laboratories (one per year) of 32 hours each. At the end of each Laboratory, students take an exam (either written or oral, depending on the year of attendance) for which they are not given any mark, but only a fail or pass.

After reading all the essays, I decided to divide the detected verb-related errors into the following 8 error types: 1) Wrong use of 3rd person sing. -*s* morpheme (e.g. *Nobody* **listen** *or* **try** *to understand.* (SFP2)); 2) Wrong subject-verb agreement (e.g. *Every famous person is perfect and* **have** *a perfect life.* (SFP2)); 3) Wrong verb form, where I included incorrect forms for the infinitive of purpose (e.g. *I will spend 3000 euros* **for to repeat** *the experience of last year.* (SFP2)); wrong forms after a preposition/adverb/conjunction (e.g. *Instead of* **explain**… (SFP1)); after expressions like *it's difficut*, *it's important*, etc. (e.g. *Is important* **teach** *the rules.* (SFP2)); after a modal verb (e.g. *Friends are the best thing that* **could happened** *to you.* (SFP1)); wrong form of irregular verbs (e.g. *Now I have* **understand** *that …* (SFP2)); wrong form of subject verb (e.g. **Educate** *people can give everyone the possibility to use and live…* (SFP2)); nouns used instead of a verb (e.g. *We had to stop many times to* **recovery** *the energy.* (SFP1)); 4) Wrong use of participles (e.g. *Children will so* **exciting**! (SFP2)); 5) Wrong verb pattern (e.g. *I will want* **that children proving** *new and typical food.* (SFP2)); 6) Omission of verb (e.g. *I* **proud** *of you.* (SFP2)); 7) Wrong use of auxiliaries (e.g. *They asked us if we had a video of that morning, but we* **hadn't**. (SFP1)); 8) Wrong tense/aspect (e.g. *It was raining so much that we had to stay all day in the b&b we* **rented**. (SFP1)).

2.2 Findings

In SFP1, 62 out of 80 essays (78%) contain at least one verb-related error, with an average of 3 verb-related errors per essay. In SFP2, 63 out of 68 essays (93%) contain at least one verb-related error, with an average of 4 errors per essay.

Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 below provide a summary of the findings.

Corpus	Verb-related errors other than tense/aspect	Errors related to tense/aspect	Total number of occurrences of verb-related errors
SFP1	101	99	200
SFP2	223	79	302
Whole	324	178	502

Table 1. Total number of verb-related errors

Error type	Total number of occurrences per error type
Wrong use of 3rd person sing. -s morpheme	41
Wrong subject-verb agreement	29
Wrong verb form	142
Wrong use of particples	11
Wrong verb pattern	48
Omission of verb	11
Wrong use of auxiliaries	42
Wrong tense/aspect	178

Table 2. Total number of occurrenses in the corpus per error type

SFP1	Most frequent error other than tense/aspect	No. of occurrences
	Wrong verb form	41
	Most frequent error related to tense/aspect	No. of occurrences
	Present Simple instead of Past Simple	21

Table 3. Most frequent error types in SFP1

SFP2	Most frequent error other than tense/aspect	No. of occurrences
	Wrong verb form	101
	Most frequent error related to tense/aspect	No. of occurrences
	Past Simple instead of Present Simple	19

Table 4. Most frequent error types in SFP2

2.3 Discussion of findings

As we can see from Table 1 above, occurrences of verb-related errors in SFP2 are much higher than in SFP1 (302 vs 200). The Table also shows the differences between the two subcorpora. In SFP1 the number of verb-related errors other than tense/aspect is much lower (101 vs 223), and the number of errors related to tense/aspect is only slightly higher (99 vs 79). Table 2 provides data about the number of verb-related errors per error type in the whole corpus. As we can see, the highest number can be found in the 'Wrong tense/aspect' category (178 occurrences) and the 'Wrong verb form' category (142 occurrences). Tables 3 and 4 show the most common error types in the two subcorpora respectively. As for errors other than tense/aspect, in both subcorpora the most frequent error concerns the form. SFP1 contains fewer instances of 'Wrong verb form' than SFP2, thus confirming that in the 2nd year of their university studies, students still make errors like ***For going*** to the restaurant ***for eat*** fish i need much money, or In this way the children ***construction*** their personality, or This year we ***would to do*** the same camp. (SFP2). Tables 3 and 4 also show that in SFP1 the most common error related to tense/aspect concerns the use of the Present Simple, in particular its being wrongly employed instead of the Past Simple, as in It was such a relief inside the castle, but ***I'm*** not well, so my boyfriend decided to take my bag. The castle was so full of people and I'm very short that we accidentally separated, so we lost each other. I ***don't have*** my phone with me because it was in my bag, or Last year I ***go*** to concert with my friends. The concert ***is*** amazing!! The situation ***is*** unique and I ***cry*** and ***sing*** (SFP1). In SFP2, instead, the most common error related to tense/aspect concerns

the use of the Past Simple, but still in relation to the Present Simple, as in *These are the rules for parents with their children. The **had** to be patient with their kids. They **had** to learn to understand their needs. When children grows up parents **had** to hear them. It's also important that parents don't choose who their kids **had** to become"* or *"Last year I knew my boyfriend online and now we **lived** together*. (SFP2). The findings suggest, therefore, that two basic tenses like the Present Simple and the Past Simple are still a problem for the students who wrote the essays in the corpus. It is worth highliting that the lower frequency of errors with other tenses and verb structures (such as, for example, Present and Perfect conditional in if-clauses, or perfect tenses in the duration form) is only to be related to the fact that they are rarely used in both subcorpora, and when they are, they are normally wrong, as in *If I hadn't decided to stay at home I **would have going out** with my boyfriend* (SFP1), or *If the parents used simple rules since children was little it **was** better* (SFP2), or, again, *I took my dog on 28*[th] *September 2022. […] It **was born** for 12 months* (SFP1), and *My mum and dad for all their life **helping** me to tought what I would have like in my life*. (SFP2)).

The overall larger amount of error occurrences in SFP2 might in part be due to the slightly higher number of words in the 2nd-year subcorpus. Yet, one would expect an increase of grammatical accuracy from one year to the next, rather than a decrease or a levelling off. In the case of the student teachers that wrote the exam essays in the corpus, it must be said that the English Laboratories they attended during the the first and second year respectively before taking the final exams had been exclusively devoted to the consolidation of their language skills. Indeed, even though the five 32-hour English Laboratories that students attend during the single-cycle MA in Primary Education are supposed to be mainly devoted to the consolidation of the language skills mostly useful for the teaching profession and to the presentation of approaches and methodologies for the teaching of English to young learners, the low level of language proficiency students show when they enter university requires the first two years to be entirely dedicated to the revision of what students are supposed to have learnt in the previous 13 years, including, more than anything, the revision of grammar. And yet, as the Tables above show, they still struggle with (basic) grammar features after 13/14 years of English instruction.

3. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The size of the corpus anlaysed in this study does not allow any generalisable conclusions. Still, the data presented herein seem to suggest that despite long exposure to the teaching of grammar, Italian EFL learners do not seem to have achieved a level of grammatical accuracy that one might reasonably espect after many years of instruction. This may be due to a number of reasons that can only partially be ascribed to L1 (First Language) interference ([5]). Other reasons might need to be taken into account. For instance, the fact that as a result of its being used as the lingua franca of the globe (ELF), English has become a moving target, which has made the gap between what learners are taught at school and what they experience outside become bigger and bigger. Italian EFL learners are at the same time ELF users, and they may have realised, more or less consciously, that not all grammatical errors have the same weight in communication. This does not mean that grammar teaching should be removed from the EFL classroom. What the present and similar studies instead suggest is that alternatives to traditional methods should be found. First of all, rather than being isolated in a vacumm, grammar needs to be integrated into the EFL class – and possibly in other disciplines' classes, as it happens with the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology. Second, grammar needs to be contextualised. As Collins ([5:300]) suggests, "[Let students] create contexts for given forms, rather than forms for given contexts". Third, students need to know the reasons why an accurate use of the form has an impact on meaning and communication. They need to be made aware, for example, that the use of the wrong verb tense/aspect may hinder communication, generate misunderstandings, or even non-understandings, especially in writing, which does not allow a direct and immediate negotiation of meaning. Fourth, "if exercises are used to practise a form, [the teacher should] make sure that they reproduce language likely to be found in naturally occurring discourse situations" ([10: 480]). And finally, if we want our students to improve

their writing skills (which implies a good command of grammar), we need to "teach grammar *in* writing, not *for* writing" ([9] :78).

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