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(Ed.)

# **ELF PEDAGOGY**

A research study on ELT practices

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## **Teachers' attitudes: learner's errors and standard norms**

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### *Abstract*

The aim of this chapter is to focus on the pedagogical implications of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as regards the reconceptualization of learners' deviations from native-speaker standard norms, traditionally referred to as *errors*. The author provides a preliminary historical overview of approaches to English language teaching (ELT) to highlight the evolution of psycholinguistic notions in the area of cognitive processes and second language acquisition. The phenomenon of language variation is seen through the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which leads to a different understanding of the learner's personal voice and of their identity in multicultural global communication. Finally, the author presents some of the results of a teacher's survey on the attitudes of a group of Italian teachers of English about the emergence of ELF in the English classroom.

### *Keywords*

ELF; language variation; learners' errors; cognitive processes; teachers' attitudes

*A good teacher understands the learners  
and this means taking the differences into account.  
(van Lier, 2004: 7)*

## **Introduction**

Second-language learners' errors have constituted a typical controversial issue within the wider framework of applied linguistics ever since foreign language teaching has been informed by different, if not antithetic, linguistic and psychological theories. As a consequence, methods and approaches have taken up alternative positions as

regards the phenomena connected to the production of phonological, lexicogrammar and discursal deviations from standard norms that usually characterize the students' output.

In the first section of this chapter it may be helpful, therefore, to give a brief preliminary overview of the main ideas that have emerged in scholarly debates about second language development and learners' errors, which have formed the intellectual background of several generations of foreign language teachers.

The second section expands on cognitivism, with a focus on second language acquisition, the phenomena connected to the learners' errors and the reconceptualization of variation from standard norms by way of the multilingual and multicultural dimension of English as a lingua franca.

The third section presents the main results of the teacher's survey that was administered during the field study that was part of the national interest research project discussed in this book.

Finally, in the concluding remarks I will summarise what appear to be typical teachers' attitudes and approaches to English as a lingua franca (ELF) and learners' non-standard use of English.

## **Second language teaching and learners' errors: From behaviourism to cognitivism**

The audiolingual method (Richards & Rogers, 1986: 44-63), which was based on the structural view of language and on behaviourist psychology (Skinner, 1957), marked the beginning of scientific research into L2 pedagogy and became very popular in the 1950s. Students' errors were considered manifestations of inappropriate language behaviours that had to be replaced by correct ones through *overlearning*, that is by means of intensive drill and pattern-practice exercise. The mechanic repetition and memorization of correct utterances and dialogues was supposed to lead to the development of automatic language skills and to the inductive learning of underlying grammar structures. As this method was essentially teacher-centred, the occurrence of errors was attributed either to insufficient teacher's input, or to the interference of L1 habits during the learning process. Hence, learners' *bad habits* and deviant language behaviours were expected to be eradicated by means of negative reinforcement, whereby the students' native tongue was considered a main hindrance to second language learning. Incidentally, it was in this period that contrastive analysis (CA) (Lado, 1957) showed the pedagogic potential of comparing two languages and cultures and their different systems (namely, the sound systems, the

grammatical structures, and the vocabulary systems). Structural differences between the L1 and the L2 were considered more complex and difficult areas in foreign language learning, hence it seemed possible to either predict what errors learners were expected to make (strong version of the CA hypothesis), or at least explain learners' errors a posteriori, by contrasting the L1 and L2 systems (weak version of the CA hypothesis). This assumption, however appealing and promising it may sound, did not prove entirely reliable, though. As data from applied research (e.g., Corder, 1981; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1974) later showed: a) learners do not necessarily make syntactic mistakes when the L1 and the L2 systems differ; b) interference structures (i.e. *positive* and *negative transfer*) do not seem to occur in children's output when they are learning a second language, while the incidence of these deviations is comparatively very low in adult learners; c) children who study a foreign language tend to commit the same *developmental errors* as L1 native children; d) *intralanguage errors* (e.g. overgeneralization, overextension, and underextension) appear to be necessary steps along the cognitive process of language acquisition, rather than the outcome of inadequate habit formation; and finally e) learners tend to use *interlanguage transfer* as a learning strategy, as well as a communicative strategy. Notably, Chomsky's (1959: 26-58) review of Skinner's (1957) book *Verbal Behavior* took an overall critical stance towards

[...] the general framework of behaviorist or neobehaviorist, or, more generally, empiricist ideas that has dominated much of modern linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. The conclusion that I hoped to establish in the review, by discussing these speculations in their most explicit and detailed form, was that the general point of view was largely mythology, and that its widespread acceptance is not the result of empirical support, persuasive reasoning, or the absence of a plausible *alternative* [emphasis added]. (Chomsky, 1959: 26)

This *alternative*, we may assume, was represented by Chomsky's (1965) seminal theory of transformational generative grammar (TGG) and by the hypothesis of the so-called *language acquisition device* (LAD), i.e. children's genetic endowment that provides them with innate linguistic abilities and with the principles of universal grammar (UG). The LAD, according to Chomsky, allows the child to discover and acquire the rules of a natural language in a relatively short time, even when they are exposed to a limited amount of adult language data. Although Chomsky's theories became the object of dispute in the 1970s (e.g., Hymes, 1972), for they mainly focused on the speaker's abstract abilities to produce grammatically correct sentences (*competence*) rather than on the functions of language and the speaker's pragmatic use of language

(*performance*), it should be observed that they had a significant impact even on applied linguistics, particularly because they supplied a general theory of language that was focused on cognitive processes, and because it informed research in a crucial area like error analysis, the aim of which was not only to classify learners' errors, but rather to elicit the psycholinguistic phenomena connected to second language learning and acquisition.

A strong impulse to scientific research in this particular field came from Selinker's (1972) hypothesis of the *interlanguage*, i.e. the way the American scholar referred to the evolving second language spoken by adult learners. As Corder explains:

The term *interlanguage* was coined by Selinker in the belief that the language learner's language was a sort of hybrid between his L1 and the target language. The evidence for this was the large number of errors which could be ascribed to the process of transfer. Corder (1981: 2)

Notwithstanding, as I have already pointed out, research in second language acquisition showed that the occurrence of transfer errors was indeed less frequent than expected, Selinker's hypothesis was bound to become one of the basic concepts in foreign language teaching, with a long-lasting impact on second language education. As we are going to see in section 3, a comprehensive reconceptualization and reconfiguration of the language learner's language was only developed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thanks to studies in the new area of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2003). This shift in perspective was due to the fact that the theory of interlanguage proved to be unsuitable to explain the process of language change and variation brought about by the international spread of English in the age of globalisation. In particular, Selinker intends second language learning as a linear progression from the L1 to the L2 (the target language), where the final goal is ideally to acquire native-speaker (NS) competence. To the contrary, the nature of ELF as a contact language is characterized by a dynamic relationship between English and local linguacultures, as evidenced by the emergence of phonological and lexicogrammar variability in non-native speakers' (NNSs) discourse. In addition, according to the interlanguage paradigm the learner's native tongue is supposed to *interfere* with the acquisition of the L2 (i.e. negative transfer), and in the vast majority of cases (almost 95%) results in the *fossilization* of deviant forms, whereas according to ELF theory the non-standardness and plurality of English in intercultural contexts challenges the notion of ownership of the language (Widdowson, 2003: 35-44) and questions the dominance of the NS model in English language teaching (ELT). In any case, even though today

ELF research has led to a critical understanding of the interlanguage hypothesis (e.g. Grazi 2013; 2020), it should be pointed out that Selinker's purpose was to focus on the learner's pragmatic use of the foreign language in order to elicit

[...] behavioral events [...] underlying 'attempted meaningful performance' in a second language. The term 'meaningful performance situation' [refers] to the situation where an 'adult' attempts to express meanings, which he may already have, in a language which he is in the process of learning". (Selinker, 1972: 210)

Here, the keywords "behavioral events" and "meaningful performance" are not seen through the lens of behaviourism, but rather through the lens of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rogers, 1986: 64-86; Widdowson, 1978; Wilkins, 1976), which revolutionised the pedagogical approach to foreign languages in the 1970s and, as regards the subject of the present chapter, led to a radical redefinition of the concept of second language learner's errors. Within the general framework of CLT, deviations from standard norms are conceived of as indicators of the psycholinguistic phenomena and strategies entailed in learning to communicate in a second language, hence the analysis of students' errors becomes the key to access the mental processes involved in the learning continuum towards the TL. Following Corder:

[...] firstly, any spontaneous speech intended by the speaker to communicate is meaningful, in the sense that it is systematic, regular, and consequently is, in principle, describable in terms of a set of rules, i.e., it has a grammar. [...] Secondly, since a number of sentences of that language are isomorphic first with some of the sentences of his target language and have the same interpretation, then some, at least, of the rules needed to account for the learner's language will be the same as those required to account for the target language. Therefore the learner's language is a dialect in the linguistic sense. [...] I suggest it is misleading to refer to the idiosyncratic sentences of the second language learner as *deviant*. I also suggest that it is undesirable to call them *erroneous* [...] because the rules of the target dialect are not yet known. [...] Now, one of the principal reasons for studying the learner's language is precisely to discover why it is as it is, that is to explain it and ultimately say something about the learning process. (Corder, 1981: 14-19)

Interestingly, neither Selinker or Corder take a prescriptive attitude as regards learners' deviations from standard norms, for their intent is essentially descriptive. Besides, it is suggested that interlanguage, which Corder (1981: 66) defines "transitional competence", had better be studied in authentic communicative settings, where



learners generate L2 utterances spontaneously. Instead, what normally happens in the foreign language classroom is that students have less opportunities to participate in real communication, whereas they are often involved in more formal activities. As Corder observes,

Learners typically produce a different set of errors in their spontaneously generated utterances, when attempting to communicate, than in their practice utterances. They appear to operate according to two differing sets of rules. Widdowson refers to these as ‘rules of use’ and ‘rules of usage’ respectively. Corder (1981: 69)

This, we may conclude, affects the data resulting from error analysis in the educational environment and, consequently, the information that teachers may get regarding how pupils progress in the interlanguage. In short, it seems advisable to prioritise research into second language learners’ performance that is based on data collected through the implementation of communicative tasks, which are supposed to provide samples of L2 discourse that are more unconstrained and focused on the pragmatic use of language. Besides, as Swain points out,

[...] output serves at least three functions in second language learning beyond that of enhancing fluency. These are the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing function and the reflective (metalinguistic) function. [These] three functions of output [...] have, I believe, the potential of promoting accuracy, an issue of concern to many second language educators. Research [...] has shown quite clearly that a communicatively oriented input-rich environment does not provide all the necessary conditions for second language acquisition, and that a focus on form within these communicative settings can significantly enhance performance. Swain (1995: 140-141)

In other words, Swain suggests that communicative activities within the foreign language classroom not only allow learners to improve their fluency, but also stimulate their “conscious reflection about language” (Swain, 1995: 132). This entails that the more students become aware of “gaps in their knowledge” (Swain, 1995: 130) the more they are likely to activate the cognitive processes that allow their L2 to develop through higher levels of competence. More importantly, Swain (1995: 135) considers the connection between learners’ dialogic activities and cognition from a Vygotskian point of view, whereby

[...] cognitive development, including presumably language development, originates on the inter-psychological plane. Through a process of appropriation, what originated in the social sphere comes to be represented intra-psychologically, that is, within the individual.

With Swain, we may then conclude that

[...] a close examination of dialogue as learners engage in problem-solving activity is directly revealing of mental processes. The unit of analysis of language learning and its associated processes may therefore more profitably be the dialogue, nor input or output alone. (Swain, 1995: 142)

Swain's cooperative, developmental approach to second language acquisition provides valuable insight into the study of interlanguage, which, we may add, could be the key to understanding the significance of learners' errors. As we have seen, mental processes are directly involved in this research, and therefore it is to the cognitive approach to language learning that we will turn in the following section.

### **Cognition and learners' errors**

One of the fundamental questions arising from both Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis and Swain's (2000) output hypothesis is if they can explain how communication may affect the second language learner's interlanguage and enhance its development towards the TL. Research has shown that even though communication tasks in the foreign language classroom indeed stimulate students' fluency, i.e. their ability to interact and negotiate meanings, this does not necessarily imply that accuracy increases accordingly. As Skehan (1998: 26) points out,

Since it is meanings which are primary, as long as the speaker feels that communication is proceeding satisfactorily, the need for precise syntax is diminished. [...] There is less need, for the older learner, to produce complete and well-formed utterances, because most interactions require collaborative construction of meaning rather than solipsistic party pieces. Further, when communicative problems occur, the strategies second language learners adopt are not likely to push forward underlying system change in any cumulative way. Finally, there is the issue that, even if conversation were by means of complete, well-formed utterances, *and* attempts to cope with communicative problems were useful, there is still the likelihood that attempts to cope with ongoing processing demands would not allow the learner to capitalize upon such a temporary break through, establish a memory trace of it, and use it in the future.

It should not go unnoticed that the mismatch of fluency and accuracy is a topical issue also in the field of ELF, although here the dominance of the standard NS model has long been challenged, and the notion of the plurality of English as an international

contact language has moved away from the monolithic concept of standard English (SE). Even if ELF is not (yet) an encoded variety of English, but rather a variable, emergent language system that is co-constructed in authentic communicative contexts by interlocutors who do not share the same L1 (e.g., see the definitions of ELF in Jenkins 2015; Mauranen 2012; Seidlhofer 2011), it seems that establishing an objective criterion to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable (i.e. *erroneous*) lexicogrammar forms in ELF discourse is all the more difficult. Because non-conformity to standard norms is considered a distinctive feature of ELF, which is characterised by its multilingual and multicultural nature, it follows that the interlanguage paradigm does not apply to it. Therefore, if conformity to the TL system cannot be used as the sole criterion to assess the ELF-user's accuracy, decisions regarding the *correctness* of ELF discourse should necessarily be based on alternative assumptions, e.g. the degree of comprehensibility of ELF utterances (e.g., see Jenkins, 2000), their pragmatic effectiveness, the appropriateness of the language register (Halliday, 1978) to different sociolinguistic codes and contexts, etc. Nevertheless, it should be observed that while the study of variability in the phonology of English as an international language (Jenkins, 2000) has led to the definition of the so-called *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC), which indicates the English segmental and suprasegmental features that learners are expected to master in order to avoid misunderstandings in global communication, research into ELF lexicogrammar features (e.g., through the compilation of ELF-based corpora like ELFA<sup>1</sup>, VOICE<sup>2</sup> and ACE<sup>3</sup>. See also Seidlhofer, 2004) has not (yet) developed a lexicogrammar LFC that indicates which structures deserve higher accuracy in the process of teaching/learning English, and which ELF variations are instead fairly acceptable. This poses a particular concern for English language teaching (ELT), especially as regards the way teachers should cope with learners' deviations from standard norms in today's changing scenario of ELF. As we shall see in section 3, this has important, practical implications for language teachers, whose daily routine includes making informed decisions about how learners' output should be tested, assessed and evaluated. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that while native-speakerism (Holliday, 2005) is still widely accepted as the dominant pedagogic principle in second language education – consider, for instance, the institutional role of the *European Framework of Reference for Languages*:

1 ELFA corpus, 2008. Director: Anna Mauranen. <<http://www.helsinki.fi/elfa/elfacorporus>>

2 VOICE, 2009. Director: Barbara Seidlhofer. <[www.univie.ac.at/voice/index.php](http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/index.php)>

3 ACE, 2014. Director: Andy Kirkpatrick; Researchers: Wang Lixun, John Patkin, Sophiann Subhan. <<http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/>>

*Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR)<sup>4</sup> within the European Union, and its use in the certification of learners' competencies<sup>5</sup> – the reality of English as the primary world language is that of an unstable, plurilithic, de-standardised language that, at least in the present situation, is not possible to teach as such<sup>6</sup>. In a nutshell, we may argue that a synchronic approach to ELT reveals the existence of two opposing tendencies in mainstream language education: on the one hand, the English of schooling is still the encoded NS variety that is commonly referred to as SE; on the other hand, the unprecedented global spread of English has accelerated the process of language transformation that is typical of language contact situations, and that should be the harbinger of a deep pedagogic renewal in second language education. It appears reasonable to conclude, therefore, that there has been no immediate correspondence between the results of scholarly research into ELF and the impact that these findings are expected to have on second language education. ELF studies are indeed giving a great contribution to enhance a deeper understanding of how natural languages tend to change in time and are co-constructed by their users in real contact situations. However, it seems inevitable that unless language changes develop and consolidate in the wider community of ELF speakers, divergent non-standard forms will still be considered to be part of a common, mutually intelligible dialect *continuum* that is unfit for the English classroom. It goes without saying that decisions regarding the acceptability of variant ELF forms are not exclusively based on a linguistic criterion (e.g. comprehensibility of utterances, pragmatic relevance of discourse, etc.), but rather depend, as it has always been the case, on sociolinguistic, sociopolitical and cultural factors. Taking the following comparison with due caution, and making all necessary distinctions, we may find a historical precedent of this situation when Latin became the official language of the vast Roman Empire, and the dominant lingua franca:

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4 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

5 Here in the list of certification boards officially recognized by the Italian ministry of education (MIUR, <https://www.formamentisweb.it/certificazioni-linguistiche-riconosciute-dal-miur/>).

All companies are located in the UK, Ireland and Malta:

- Cambridge Assessment English; • City and Guilds (Pitman); • Edexcel /Pearson Ltd; • Educational Testing Service (ETS); • English Speaking Board (ESB); • International English Language Testing System (IELTS); • Pearson – LCCI; • Pearson – EDI; • Trinity College London (TCL); • Department of English, Faculty of Arts – University of Malta; • National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – Accreditation and Coordination of English Language Services (NQAI – ACELS); • Ascentis; • AIM Awards; • Learning Resource Network (LRN); • British Institutes; • Gatehouse Awards Ltd; • LanguageCert.

6 Jenkins, J. Personal communication, GlobEng: International Conference on Global English, University of Verona, 14-16 February 2008.

As a contact language, Latin spread mostly orally. [...] The majority of citizens were illiterate and uneducated, so they were not fluent in Latin, which was perceived as a foreign language, i.e. an L2. Consequently, they probably developed a local variety of Latin that suited their communicative needs, which resulted from the contact between the substrate and the superstrate languages. [...] Besides, we should also consider that there was a situation of diglossia within the Roman Empire, whereby literary Latin was opposed to local vernaculars, and the latter were gradually prevailing. [...] Vulgar Latin had begun its differentiation in the Mediterranean area, in a historical period that is difficult to determine precisely, but at some point between the late Imperial age and the High Middle Ages, giving rise to proto-Romance, and later on to Romance languages. (Grazzi, 2013: 28-29)

Today, English is spreading worldwide not only orally, but also in its different written genres and via a multiplicity of mass media, including the Internet. Moreover, it is taught in schools and universities as a compulsory subject and is used as a means of instruction for a growing international population of literate students. None the less, what we may observe is that even though NS varieties of English (particularly American English and British English) are normally considered *the real thing*, and SE is the dominant reference model in language education and academia, multiple forms of ELF are naturally emerging whenever English is used as a contact language in authentic multilingual and multicultural communicative contexts (e.g., on the Internet), or as the language learner's language. Because most ELF-users have been attending or attended institutional English courses, we may presume that the occurrence of deviations from standard norms may either be considered: a) developmental errors that are part of each student's idiosyncratic built-in syllabus (Corder, 1981); or b) the legitimate offspring of novel language forms that originate from the contact of interlocutors' different native tongues and English, in their attempt to negotiate meanings. Making a clearcut distinction between these two categories is a daunting task, first of all because, as it is often the case, the difference between ELF non-standard lexicogrammar forms and developmental errors is not superficially self-evident (i.e. they may look the same to an external observer, e.g. the language teacher), but may in fact be the outcome of different psycholinguistic processes or strategies<sup>7</sup>. In both cases, anyway, it should be observed that language variability should not be intended as evidence of deficient learning, but rather as a sign of ELF-users/students' *agency* (Bruner, 1990), that is their ability to interact

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<sup>7</sup> An overview of a European project entitled *Intercultural Telecollaboration: Italy-Finland* is presented in Grazzi, 2018: 139-169. Here the author discusses different typologies of ELF features from a small corpus that was compiled during field research with a group of Italian and Finnish high school students.

within a multilingual and multicultural communicative context and use language as a cognitive tool to co-construct knowledge about language. Following Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of mind, Swain (<http://www.celea.org.cn/2007/keynote/ppt/Merrill%20Swain.pdf>) calls this process “*linguaging*, i.e. using language to” mediate cognitively complex ideas.

Hence, it would be a logical assumption that the teacher's decisions regarding the acceptability of ELF forms within educational settings had rather be based on a compromise between two apparently incompatible purposes: a) maintain focus on NS English as a “*target language orientation*” (Kohn, 2011: 80); and b) allow learners to appropriate English and mediate the construction of their identity as successful L2-users by supporting their lingual “*capability [i.e. their] strategic ability to make communicative use of linguistic resources, including those of the learners' own language*” (Widdowson, 2013: 192) As Widdowson (2013: 191) points out,

[Learners] are likely to conform to prescribed forms only to the extent that these are taken to be functionally relevant, trying to do with the “*foreign*” language what they do with their own. [...] In this respect, the contexts of learning and use naturally converge. [...] The conventional view of language pedagogy [...] is that its purpose is to promote a conformist mode of learning that is teacher determined – in other words, not to relate learning to use but to conflate it with teaching. From this conventional point of view, any non-conformity is a learning failure, a mistake to be eventually corrected. But in the alternative view, it is evidence of learning as use, which is to be encouraged.

Essentially, we may assume that learners' language use becomes a unifying factor that shows the inconsistency of considering English as a foreign language (EFL) and ELF two entirely different concepts. In fact, we may argue that making a distinction between the identity of the second language student who attends a regular course and has to conform to the norms of SE, and the identity of the ELF-user who participates in authentic international communication and is not constrained by the same language paradigm is rather specious, as it would fragment the unity of the person. Instead, it would seem more appropriate to consider the contextual differences where L2 development takes place. Therefore, we could say that a focus on language use provides a common framework in applied linguistics, whereby it is the study of the learner/speaker's voice to be prioritised. As Grazzi (2013: 67) contends,

From a sociocultural point of view EFL and ELF shared the same conception of language as social action, and this explains their tendency to converge and be complementary in the speaker/learner's performance inside and outside the learning environment.

By way of concluding this quick synopsis of how the concept of second language learners' errors has evolved in the history of applied linguistics, I would like to take into consideration two fundamental principles, namely the *idiom principle* and the *open choice principle* (Sinclair, 1991), which have contributed to a redefinition of the cognitive processes behind language acquisition in the post-Chomskian era. Because of space constraints, I will not provide a definition of Sinclair's principles here, so I will assume that the reader is already familiar with them. In particular, my intent is to consider how these two principles work in second language development from a cognitive point of view, because they can also shed light on the genesis of learners' non-conformity to standard lexicogrammar norms.

Skehan (1998: 37) points out that

Producing speech seems to be much more a case of improvising on clause-by-clause basis, using lexical elements (localized sentence stems, or lexical phrases) whenever possible, to minimize the processing demands. Then, as ends-of-clauses are approached, improvisation skills allow us to tack one clause on to the next (usually, but not always) because we have a wide repertoire of lexicalized sentence stems which can 'fit' given syntactic constraints that have been set up by our previous lexically-based improvisations. And, in any case, as a last resort we can 'push down' to first-principled approaches and produce language generated from rules if we have to, because a satisfactory 'bespoke' ready-made lexicalized sentence stem has not presented itself. (Sinclair 1991)

This entails that fluency in natural speech depends on the accessibility of the speaker to a large, memorized repertoire of socially shared lexicalized sentence stems or lexical phrases (Nattinger & De Carrico, 1992), which are based on form-meaning relationships (usually referred to as *collocation* and *colligation*). The conventional meanings attached to language chunks is the prerequisite for mutual comprehension. In addition, "Such lexical elements are used, therefore, to pick one's way amongst agreed meanings, while minimizing the need for extensive ongoing speech planning." (Skehan, 1998: 37). Naturally, the individual speaker is able to either create brand new chunks or combine existing ones in new and non-conventional ways by generating new utterances that verbalize and negotiate new meanings. This allows their personal voice to be expressed. As regards language education, the idiom principle and the open choice principle have important pedagogic implications in second language learning/teaching. NS fluency and accuracy might in fact be defined as the NS's ability to select the appropriate memorized chunks, to produce accurate and pragmatically effective discourse. Consequently, when NS competence is the target model in ELT, they consider proficient learners those whose English may *sound idiomatic*, i.e., those

who say what a NS is expected to say. Hence, even though learners may produce accurate utterances, these would not be considered native-like if language chunks, and word collocations did not match the TL system. Such view, however, reinforces a conservative approach to ELT, that is based on native-speakerism rather than, as has already been said, on a plurilithic dimension of English (Pennycook, 2009; Graddol, 2006) which values the creative potential of NNS discourse. Thus, we may claim that because language and culture are intrinsically connected, the aim of a student/speaker of English is not necessarily to sound native-like in order to be accepted within the community of NSs, but rather to be able to express their different identity in intercultural communication, which is indexed by the use and/or creation of non-canonical expressions (e.g., see Batsiakas, 2016; Cogo, 2016; Pitzl, 2009; 2012; 2016; Vettorel & Franceschi, 2016). It seems quite obvious that the repertoire of language chunks that a NS has internalized, and their level of accuracy do not compare to that of a NNS, first of all because the contact time of a NS and of a NNS with English is out of proportion. As Swan (2012: 383) observes,

[...] the linguistic breadth and accuracy which young mother-tongue speakers have acquired after, say, 50,000 hours of exposure cannot conceivably be approached in the few hundred hours that are generally available to secondary-school language learners.

So, it seems reasonable to believe that lexicogrammar differences between NS varieties of English and ELF may originate in the different implementation of the idiom principle and the open choice principle. For instance, whereas a NS may resort to the former to combine a number of ready-made language chunks when creating utterances, a NNS who has not internalized such lexical phrases may either resort to the open choice principle, and create utterances that could be correct, albeit not native-like, or resort to their L1 and transfer language chunks that carry a stronger linguacultural connotation.

Research, as has been previously pointed out, has approached the reality of ELF with an open attitude that rejects the idea that ELF features should be automatically classified as errors. Instead, what has been suggested is that such language variations should be accepted as optional uses of English, provided they do not affect comprehensibility. It should be made clear, in any case, that it is up to the language teacher to decide whether, in the local situation, it is better to: a) accept deviations from standard norms; b) provide learners with corrective feedback; or c) stimulate students' mutual scaffolding in a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

In the next section, I am going to comment on some relevant findings of a teacher



survey on ELF that was carried out in Italy as part of the national interest research project (PRIN) that constitutes the main topic of this book. In particular, I am going to focus on how respondents have approached ELF and learners' non-standard use of English in the language classroom.

### **The teacher survey on ELF: teachers' attitudes towards language variation in the English classroom<sup>8</sup>**

This section discusses the responses from the following sub questions of the teacher questionnaire referred to above: Q21.2, Q21.4, Q21.5 and Q21.12. Respondents were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements contained in each item using a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

- *Q21.2 Teachers should correct learners' errors in class because these tend to cause a breakdown in communication.*

This item is about a critical issue the research team wanted to explore in our questionnaire for teachers of English, that is their attitude towards learners' deviations from standard norms (i.e. errors). Data in Table 1 indicate that most respondents (57.86%) tend to avoid extreme forms of agreement or disagreement, and express a less radical stance, with values ranging mostly between 2 and 3. This could be interpreted as a form of teachers' flexibility when they have to decide if and when learners' errors should be corrected. This gives them broad discretion in setting priorities as regards learners' accuracy versus learners' fluency in English. We may argue that this is in line with the principle of intelligibility that is inherent to ELF theory. Therefore, even though respondents normally adopt SE as their reference model in ELT (as will be shown in the following point), they are prone to tolerate students' errors as part of the learning process and opt for a selective approach to correction, whereby learners' achievement of their pragmatic goals in communication takes priority over conformity to standard phonological and lexicogrammar norms. Data in Table 1 also show that the percentage of respondents who expressed a more marked disagreement with the statement in Q21.2 (columns 0 and 1), or a more marked agreement with it (columns 4 and 5) is essentially the same: 20.71% and

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<sup>8</sup> This section contains material that has already been published in section 1 of Grazzi, E. & Lopriore, L. (2020). ELF awareness for teacher education in Italy: attitudes and actions. *Estudos Linguísticos e Literários*, N. 65 (2020), 69-89.

21.42%, respectively. This indicates that more extreme positions regarding the correction of learners' errors should not be considered to be negligible.

*Table 1*

	0 (Strongly disagree)	1	2	3	4	5 (Strongly agree)	Total
Q21.2 Teachers should correct learners' errors in class because these tend to cause a breakdown in communication	3.57% 5	17.14% 24	27.86% 39	30.00% 42	15.71% 22	5.71% 8	140

■ *Q21.4 Non-native English language teachers should adopt standard English as their target model*

As we can see in Table 2, data show that most respondents expressed great appreciation for the traditional SE model in ELT. If we combine the figures of those who answered 3, 4 or 5, we have a total percentage of 71.43% of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement in Q21.4, against a minority of 28.57% of those who answered 0, 1 or 2 to express their disagreement. Provided that our sample is not representative of all teachers of English in Italy, these results suggest that native-speakerism is still heavily influencing the orientation of the target L2 pedagogical model in this country. This entails that it is still the monolithic conception of SE that inspires language teachers and permeates the Italian educational approach to ELT, notwithstanding the plurilithic dimension of English as the primary global lingua franca, and given the high variability factor that is intrinsic to World Englishes. Everything said, however, it would be misleading to portray language teachers as the committed gatekeepers of orthodoxy, for the teacher survey has revealed that in fact they tend to encourage learners' linguistic creativity (Pitzl, 2012) as part of the communication process, as we shall see in the next point.

*Table 2*

	0 (Strongly disagree)	1	2	3	4	5 (Strongly agree)	Total
Q21.4 Non-Native English language teachers should adopt standard English as their target model	7.14% 10	6.43% 9	15.00% 21	25.00% 35	27.86% 39	18.57% 26	140

■ *Q21.5 Teachers should encourage students to experiment with new language forms to communicate meaning*

Statements in Q21.4 and Q21.5 were sequenced together on purpose. They represent two opposite attitudes in language teaching: the former tends to reaffirm the exonormative role of SE, which is conceived of as the prototypical model of correct English; the latter, instead, emphasises teachers' open approach towards learners' natural tendency to resort to language creativity and communication strategies to carry out verbal interaction successfully. Consequently, one would expect answers to Q21.4 and Q21.5 to be diametrically opposed. Instead, data in Table 3 show that none of the respondents expressed their strong disagreement with the statement in Q21.5 (0% answered 0 or 1), a minority expressed a mild disagreement (2.14% answered 2), 13.57% answered 3, expressing a mild agreement, and finally a large majority (84.28%) expressed their strong agreement answering 4 or 5.

At a first glance, results in Table 2 and Table 3 might be considered totally contradictory and inconsistent: on the one hand, respondents are openly supportive of NS standards in ELT; while on the other, they do not disregard students' attempts to learn English even through deviations from traditional standard norms. None the less, the analysis of these apparently conflicting results reveals that the learning process that normally occurs within the English classroom depends on the dynamic interplay between the educational reference model (i.e., the idealised competent NS) and the linguacultural, contextual factors that characterise the learning environment. In this view, L2 language learning entails a transformative potential that leaves room for students' experimentation and creativity. Presumably, what the teacher survey has shown through Q21.5 is that respondents either have a clear understanding of, or sense the importance of learners' agency, i.e. their ability to transform target language forms and meanings and adapt them to their linguacultural identity. Therefore, it is reasonable to hold that non-conformity is a typical feature of second language development, regardless of the distinction between EFL and ELF.

*Table 3*

	0 (Strongly disagree)	1	2	3	4	5 (Strongly agree)	Total
Q21.5 Teachers should encourage students to experiment with new language forms to communicate meaning	0% 0	0% 0	2.14% 3	13.57% 19	40.71% 57	43.57% 61	140

- *Q21.12 When it comes to English language learners' assessment and evaluation, teachers should only refer to standard English*

Table 4 shows that data are almost equally distributed between teachers who express a variable degree of disagreement with the statement in Q21.12 (47.86% answered 0, 1 or 2), and those who instead express a variable degree of agreement (52.14% answered 3, 4 or 5). This seems to indicate that although most respondents believe that SE is the appropriate reference model in ELT (see Table 2), the leading principle to assess and evaluate learners' competences should not exclusively be based on the students' conformity to the norms. These results are consistent with figures in Q21.2 (Table 1) and Q21.5 (Table 3), so we may assume that most respondents adopt a critical stance towards native-speakerism whenever learners' performance is at stake. This, we should observe, is not only an essential feature of ELT, that prioritises fluency over accuracy, but also of ELF theory, which legitimates variability in Global Englishes.

In conclusion, answers to item Q21.12 suggest that respondents do not have a clearcut, united position on learners' assessment and evaluation. This shows that perhaps language teachers are getting ready to make a "necessary conceptual shift" (Jenkins, 2007: 16) towards an ELF-aware approach to ELT.

*Table 4*

	0 (Strongly disagree)	1	2	3	4	5 (Strongly agree)	Total
Q21.12 When it comes to English language learners' assessment and evaluation, teachers should only refer to standard English	12.86% 18	15.71% 22	19.29% 27	22.14% 31	20.71% 29	9.29% 13	140

## Conclusions

The teacher survey has shown that standard English is still considered the uncontested reference model in ELT by a large majority of respondents, thus revealing that language education is essentially centred, albeit theoretically, on the monolingual paradigm of EFL. Nevertheless, data also indicate that in terms of teaching practice the notion of English as a closed system is actually changing. Findings regarding: a) the correction of learners' errors; b) learners' creative power in language use; and c)

the assessment and evaluation of learners' competencies paint a far more complex picture of the way teachers cope with the current multicultural dimension of second language development.

It seems reasonable to conclude that respondents' tendency to stick to native-speakerism is gradually giving way to a more open-minded attitude towards language variability, which is inherent to the cognitive process of second language acquisition. Hence, it is advisable that in the future the topics investigated by the teacher survey on ELF may be coped with through large-scale teacher-development courses, in order to develop an ELF-aware approach to language education.

### Author's bionote

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