



## *Towards a (Painful?) Paradigm Shift: Language Teachers and the Notion of “Error”*

by David Newbold

### 1. LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND ERRORS: A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP?

Language teachers like errors. They are a frequent topic of discussion in staffrooms, providing a source of amusement as well as ammunition in a perennial debate on supposed declining standards. At the same time, they offer insights into learning, and provide a focus for lessons. Whether or not to correct errors, and how to do so, is a fundamental theme in language teaching methodology which dates back at least to Krashen and Terrell (1983) and the distinction between “learning” and “acquisition”. It has spawned a vast amount of classroom-based research and considerable controversy on whether or not corrective feedback is useful or detrimental to learning;<sup>1</sup> no self-respecting initial training course would be complete without a session on error correction, and the topic continues to be discussed on Internet blogs and in chat rooms for teachers.<sup>2</sup>

But what is an “error” in a language class? And how can it be “corrected”? Most examples of linguistic behavior which allow immediate teacher intervention or correction in class are likely to be formal errors which deviate from a perceived standard, for example of grammar or pronunciation. These lend themselves to “recasting”, or implicit correction through repetition of what the learner has said, but using the correct form. Some pragmatic and semantic errors can be corrected in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellis 2009 for an overview of the debate.

<sup>2</sup> A good example of such a blog can be found at <<https://gianfrancoconti.wordpress.com/2015/06/25/six-useless-activities-foreign-language-teachers-do/>> (20 May 2016)



same way, but others may require meta-linguistic reflection, and yet others may be invisible (or inaudible) and escape the teacher's notice.

The development of error analysis in the 1960s (Corder 1967) introduced a typology of errors and reinforced the idea that errors were a negative form of behavior. Whereas the earlier field of contrastive analysis had suggested that most errors were due to transfer from another language, typically the mother tongue (James C. 1980), error analysis found that some learner errors were developmental, caused by inadequate knowledge of the target language, such as overgeneralization of rules, and other errors were simply derived from an incorrect model presented by a teacher. In short, learning a language meant negotiating a minefield of errors waiting to be activated by the slightest false step.

Error analysis was soon superseded as a main focus for second language acquisition studies by the notion of interlanguage (Selinker 1972), which cast every second language learner at a stage on a journey between a first language and the target language (L2). But it was a journey in which the final destination could never be reached, since it was based on a description of native speaker competence. At some point on the journey, the learner (or nearly all learners) reached a point beyond which he or she would never progress, characterized by the habitual errors they made. Selinker uses the metaphor of *fossilization* to refer to this state.

Fresh insights into errors began to be made available from the late 1980s through progress in computer based corpus linguistics and the creation of learner corpora, (Granger 2009, Granger et al. 2015), and the findings from them used to inform course books and, especially, learner dictionaries and grammars. Today, all the major EFL dictionaries include information on typical errors to be avoided, highlighted within the body of the dictionary, or as part of a supplement intended for self-study, for example in improving writing skills. Internet websites for learners abound with lists of errors with titles such as "50 common grammar mistakes in English" or "Embarrassing pronunciation mistakes in English", which may seem more likely to discourage than to motivate. Bozzo (2015) lists a number of dictionaries of common errors, including dictionaries which specifically target Italian learners, such as *Test Your English: trovare capire, correggere 501 errori tipici di inglese* (Torfs 2008).

Course books frequently feature remedial sections (with names like "the language doctor") focusing on errors, and the relentless emphasis on error avoidance in objective testing techniques shows no sign of abating, whether in low stakes assessment (such as a classroom progress test) or high stakes assessment (such as internationally recognized certification).

This is somewhat curious, in the light of the so called "communicative revolution" in language teaching (Widdowson 1978), in which success was related to communicative effectiveness rather than formal accuracy. The communicative approach to language learning and teaching has been a driving force behind the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Teaching and Assessment (Council of Europe, 2000), as well as the acknowledged inspiration for countless course books. But in reality, as Ur points out, we live in a post-communicative age, at least in English Language Teaching, and behind any



communicative functional/notional syllabus lurks a grammar-based syllabus which closely maps communicative functions to grammatical structures:

Very few teachers or textbooks have adopted the recommendations of the communicative approach to the letter and used them as a basis for all their teaching. Explicit language instruction in general, and grammar exercises in particular, have continued to play a major role in language teaching worldwide. The “post communicative” approach is one which most teachers and coursebooks today are using. (Ur 2012: 9)

In this context, the role of the language teacher is a potentially ambiguous one, at least when it comes to eliciting production. On the one hand, by getting students to do a range of communicative tasks and activities which mirror authentic language use, their role is to promote exchange of communication; but by monitoring and correcting production errors, the information exchange is likely to be compromised, and the communicative aim subordinated to formal correctness. This, of course, is at the heart of the feedback controversy mentioned above.

But the continued focus on error in the communicative classroom also maintains a relationship of distance between learner and teacher, which in its turn would be compromised in a context in which the teacher was merely a “facilitator”. The regular appearance of errors in the classroom, and the way in which they are handled by the teacher, maintain the status quo of a power relationship, to be exploited at will by the teacher; as evidence of learning, as evidence of failure to learn, as the basis of a lesson, or even as a source of endearment. As one university language teacher admits, writing recently in a professional newsletter, the first thing he announces every year to his first year students is “I love – really love... mistakes! [...] The more mistakes you make, the more I can help you and the happier I will be” (Gault 2015: 9).

## 2. STANDARD ENGLISH AND TEACHER ATTITUDES

Mistakes – or errors<sup>3</sup> – presuppose standards. An error is a deviation from a standard or an expected usage; in a language class, students inevitably see teachers (and teachers frequently see themselves) as gatekeepers for a standard form of the language, or as arbiters of correct and incorrect usage. But, as Trudgill points out, the notion of a standard version of a language may differ across languages; standard English is a (comparatively recent) construct, based on grammar, rather than accent or register, “a social dialect which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its grammatical forms” (Trudgill 1999: 125).

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<sup>3</sup> In applied linguistics the term *error* is traditionally used to refer to a systematic failure to produce a correct form, caused by a lack of knowledge of rules; while *mistake* refers to a failure to apply the rules, even if known. But the distinction, hanging as it does on a notion of *knowledge of rules*, is not clear-cut, and teachers often use them as synonymous. In this article we are primarily concerned with errors.



This may be so (and standard English may be a dialect used by a minority of native speakers), but for teachers of English, most of whom are non-native speakers, and for all those involved in the propagation of English Language Teaching, such as course providers, publishers and language planners, it provides a model. In the same way, in Europe at least, so-called “received pronunciation”, or a modified version of it, is still the most likely accent learners will be exposed to in pre-recorded course materials, even if less than three per cent of the UK population actually speak it (Crystal 2013).

The predilection of NNS teachers for standard English and a supra-regional accent is well attested in a large body of research which has accumulated over the last decade, in spite of, or possibly because of, the rapid growth in the use of English as the world’s lingua franca (ELF), and the deviance from standards which this inevitably implies. Soruc (2015) found that 45 NNS teachers from 5 countries “clearly indicated that they preferred to use native speaker (ENL) norms rather than features frequently associated with ELF” (Soruc 2015: 247). He asks respondents to rank a list of ELF features to avoid - by which he means non-standard forms which frequently occur in NNS interaction; at the top of the list comes the omission of third person -s. Sifakis and Sougari conclude their large-scale survey of Greek state school teachers by suggesting that the preference shown for native speaker norms in pronunciation is due to their “natural role as the legal guardians of the English language with respect to their learners” and to “their immediate identification of any language with its native speakers” (Sifakis and Sougari 2005: 483). Coskun (2011) finds similar entrenched positions among young teacher trainees in Turkey, which he assumes they will pass on to their students when they start teaching. In Italy, Vettorel investigates the attitudes of primary school teachers of English and finds that, although they are aware of the growing momentum of ELF, and the primarily communicative goals of their language teaching programmes, they “express [...] concerns about the acceptability of what they largely define as ‘mistakes’ and ‘deviant’ language forms” (Vettorel 2015: 150).

An important insight into teacher attitudes in the higher education sector in Europe can be found in Mollin (2006). Here too, a clear preference for native speaker norms emerges. 435 respondents from universities across Europe, academics drawn from a wide range of disciplines, were asked (among other things) to make judgements about the acceptability of twenty sentences, seven of which (but this information was not revealed to respondents) were examples of standard English, while the remaining sentences were non-standard. As in the Soruc study reported above, the missing third person -s ranked at the top of the list, as the least acceptable non-standard form. This is curious, since neither study offers a sentence with a missing plural marker -s for comment. Arguably, however, loss of plural marker is a more serious error, since it may affect meaning, whereas third person -s is an anomaly, the last remaining inflection of a once complex system, the presence or absence of which does not compromise intelligibility. Other non-standard sentences which Mollin’s respondents were required to consider include NNS forms which are commonly heard in Europe, the result of transfer from both Germanic and Romance languages, such as



Ex 1 Already in 1999 they introduced 'English for kids' courses

in which *already* is used as a focus particle. Examples such as this are sometimes used as putative evidence of an emerging variety of 'Euro-English', and it is perhaps not surprising that a large majority viewed this non-standard form as acceptable. However, it sounds strange to native speakers, who might express the idea with 'as early as 1999' or 'back in 1999'. In second and third place for unacceptability respondents identified the all-purpose tag 'isn't it' (often in the phonologically reduced form *innit*) as in

Ex 2 He was elected in 1999, isn't it?

and the relative pronoun *which* used instead of *who* when referring to a human subject:

Ex 3 That's the woman which I met at the pub.

Like the zero third person *-s*, there is no loss of meaning with these non-standard forms. The first (frequently phonologically reduced to *innit*) is common in the London area (Tottie and Hoffman 2006) and may have been introduced, or at least facilitated, by the large immigrant community from the Indian subcontinent. The second is an example of overgeneralization which Seidlhofer (2010: 106) suggests is an emblematic ELF form, indicating "economy of processing effort" in which ELF users simply treat the two relative pronouns *who* and *which* as interchangeable.

Why should formal features such as zero third person *-s*, relative pronouns and question tags be at the forefront of teacher concerns about acceptability? One possible explanation concerns the (over) exposure they are given in coursebooks and practice materials; they are visible, the underlying rules can be clearly explained, and they can be easily tested. Question tags, in particular, get an inordinate exposure in intermediate level course books, no doubt in proportion with their difficulty for most learners, but out of proportion with their communicative usefulness in non-native speaker interaction. This kind of attention singles them out as features of a "core standard" – a notion which non-native teachers may already have acquired as learners themselves – which is enough to justify the kind of concern they show in the research quoted above.

Yet the language is changing, as teachers are well aware. In 2015 *ELTJ*<sup>4</sup> launched a new regular feature *Changing English*, intended to heighten teachers' awareness of change, especially in the light of the global role of English, and to ask whether, and how, ELT practitioners might accommodate such variation. In the first article (Baker 2015) the focus was on question tags, and the ongoing supplanting of the canonical tag with an invariant form. The speed and impact of this change, as we shall see, has

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<sup>4</sup> *English Language Teaching Journal*, a well-established professional journal for English language teachers.



brought with it the need for teachers to question the notion of a single standard as a target for their teaching, and consequently the need to reconsider the notion of errors; a shift in focus which, as we shall see, is likely to bring considerable challenges for teachers and, especially, testers.

### 3. DEVIATION FROM THE STANDARD AND THE CHALLENGES FACING TEACHERS

The advent of real-time communication through texting and social media, the development of new Englishes, especially in former colonies, and the rapid growth of English as a lingua franca everywhere, have all challenged the notion of standard English, although in rather different ways. As a consequence teachers will increasingly find themselves challenged in the choices they make about the nature of the language they should teach and the errors they should target. In this section we shall briefly reflect on this multi-faceted challenge, before going on (in section 4) to consider a possible change in priorities for teachers of English as a language for international communication.

#### *3.1 Internet-based communication and the phenomenon of blurring*

People's lives seem to be fuelled by real-time communication through the Internet. Such a claim does not need to be supported by already outdated statistics listing the number of daily interactions using social media, emails, or instant texts; a short journey on a crowded bus anywhere in Europe can provide a reliable snapshot. Smart phones, easy to use applications, and the speed of connections have made the real time exchange of short texts a cheap, effective (and on crowded bus more private) form of personal interaction when compared with actual conversation. Speed is enhanced by the many short cuts used by texters (Crystal 2008), and although language mavens, not just for English, lament a decline in standards of the written language in texting, Crystal (2008: 65ff) finds intuition, innovation, and creativity.

But to judge texting and other Internet-based communication, such as emails, blogs, and "real time" updates on media websites, against more traditional forms of writing is to compare the incomparable. These texts have an impromptu quality reminiscent of speech, and the "errors" which are frequently to be found in them are performance errors, often related to phonological influences in the production process, such as the following recent examples noted by the writer:

Ex 4 (extract from a personal email)  
Secondly I will describe the Australian English (AusE) from a general **point of you**.

Ex 5 (extract from a personal email)  
Whilst we don't do services **to make Monet**, per se, we do charge quite a bit. The total for today & tomorrow is €1,400, plus whatever is given by the congregation.



Ex 6 (news update on *The Guardian* website, 14/7/15)  
Energy minister Panagiotis Lafazanis, who leads Syriza's Left Platform, has released a statement **damning** the agreement as "unacceptable".

These are one-off lapses, rather than systematic errors, indicating a process of thinking aloud, and a blurring between speech and writing; they only become "errors" when the channel changes from audio to visual, and there is no time (or need) to edit the text. What is not visible, of course, are the writers themselves, which can be a source of further blurring, as their identity may be in doubt. This is true of Internet texts generally, where a single text (such as an entry in Wikipedia, or a contribution to a forum) might have multiple authors, and a native speaker text may have been mediated or revised by a non-native speaker, or vice versa, so that the finished text, or current version of it, is neither "native speaker" nor "non-native speaker".

Of the examples above, the first was produced by a NNS, the second by a NS, and the third presumably, but not certainly, by a NS. What the first example, by an advanced learner of English, seems to reveal is "native speaker-like behaviour" rather than a learner error. No experienced teacher of English is likely to treat it otherwise. However, if the most written interaction now takes place via the Internet, teachers may need to adopt new approaches to teaching writing which reflect the phenomena of blurring, based perhaps on genre analysis; and with it, a new approach to errors.

### 3.2 *Language variety in the new Englishes*

The term "Englishes", to refer to postcolonial varieties of English as a second language, began to be used from the 1980s, most notably with the publication of the study by Platt et al (1984). It is an emblematic and effective term, which undermines the grammatical status of a noun ("English") previously behaving as a mass noun (i.e. having no plural form) and recycles it as a count noun. Emblematic, because the re-rendering of mass nouns as count nouns is a recurring feature both in the new Englishes and in ELF; and effective, since it provides a simple response to a need.

Crystal (2003: 62) lists 75 territories where English holds "a special place", usually as a result of a colonial past, and where it is evolving as an independent variety; each variety provides a vehicle which asserts the cultural identity of the people who use it, as well as guaranteeing a line of communication on the international stage. Schneider (2008) hypothesizes a five stage process of evolution, as the variety shakes itself free of exonormative control (monolithic standard English) and becomes a self-regulating, endonormative system (stage 5) with its own grammar, lexicon, and phonology, a fully-fledged standard for the territory in which it operates, and the potential to spawn its own regional and social varieties. Typically, the new Englishes have been adopted and validated by emerging new writers, particularly from India and Africa; indeed, some of the most vibrant writing in English today comes from the postcolonial territories. In 2015 the Man Booker prize was won by the Jamaican novelist Marlon



James for his *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. In a virtuoso display reminiscent of *Huckleberry Finn*, the voices of the multiple narrators in the novel occupy different positions on a dialect continuum ranging from gangster patois to Jamaican standard English.

How is the language teacher to account for so much variety in the language class? One approach, of course, is to ignore it; but this is becoming increasingly difficult as students are exposed to global varieties on a daily basis, on the Internet, in other forms of mass media, and simply through the movement of people and peoples, through economic migration, or displacement as a result of conflict and persecution. English language course books, by nature conservative, as we noted above, are beginning, albeit timidly, to acknowledge the non-monolithic nature of the language, typically focusing on the global nature of English and varieties for their curiosity value, rather than to propose a change in standards. In the classroom, however, teachers may have to make bolder choices; in the increasingly multicultural and multiethnic classrooms in Europe, especially at primary and lower secondary levels, they may find themselves with pupils who have recently arrived from African or Asian countries with some knowledge of English as a second language. Many teachers will (justifiably) want to use these children as a resource for the language class, in spite of the non-standard forms they might use.

The real dilemma for teachers concerns choices about grammar. Lexical and phonological variation are easier to accommodate in the classroom, as part of an individual's idiolect; grammar less so. So what happens when a student produces forms such as:

Ex 7 (Standard American English)  
*He just arrived*

Ex 8 (Standard Indian English)  
*We are having lots of mango trees in our garden*

Ex 9 (Many varieties of ESL)  
*I go to temple with my family?*

All of these are "standard" uses somewhere in the world, but non-standard in the UK. Many teachers in Europe, having learnt British English, and using British (or British-inspired) course books, are likely to sanction the above examples as errors, especially in a test. But one might rebut that 7 (use of *just* with simple past) is increasingly heard in the UK; that a whole generation has grown up with 8 (dynamic use of stative verb) in the slogan *I'm lovin' it*; and 9 (zero article) has a close analogy in standard British English, *I go to church*.

The teacher's awareness of language variety and ongoing change may of course inform his/her attitude towards the gravity of any given "error", but it is likely that most teachers have a black list of errors which cannot be "let pass", to use Firth's (1996) term. The following example is a case in point:





Ex 10 WE DON'T GOING BACK

This message appeared several days running in European news media in June 2015. It had been written on a placard attached to a tent pitched on a beach in the south of France by sub-Saharan economic migrants who were threatened with expulsion. The non-standard *don't* must have leaped to the eyes of even quite low level users of standard English. But, more importantly, so would have the context, the plight of a group of migrants caught up in the nightmare suspension of the Schengen agreement and the closing of borders. Far from compromising comprehension, if anything the basic error added poignancy to the communicative effectiveness of the message. It also transmitted a subtext: the language needed to communicate with the world is English, whatever form it might take.

### *3.3 The phenomenon of English as a lingua franca*

The final assault on standard English is being launched from what Kachru (1985, 1992) calls the “expanding circle”, those countries where there is no ‘special relationship’ with English, but where most of the world’s users of English are now to be found.<sup>5</sup> As English has taken over as the language of international communication, in contexts ranging from informal to institutional, so the study of English as a lingua franca has become one of the fastest growing areas of research in applied linguistics over the last decade.

Initially this research focused on commonalities among lingua franca speakers which differed from native speaker forms. Thus Jenkins (2000) proposes a “core phonology” of features which she considers to be essential in international communication (such as rhythm and nuclear stress in sentences, or the distinction between long and short vowels), and “non-core” features (such as loss of interdental fricatives, or misplaced word stress) which are typical of non-native users but the absence of which (she believes) does not hinder communication. Jenkins uses the distinction to propose a new approach to errors in language teaching:

There is really no justification for doggedly persisting in referring to an item as 'an error' if the vast majority of the world's L2<sup>6</sup> English speakers produce and understand it. (Jenkins 2000: 160)

Early research done by Seidlhofer focuses instead on morphological and syntactical features of lingua franca interaction, such as over-generalization (e.g. the use of *which* as a default relative pronoun, to which we referred above) or redundancy reduction (e.g. loss of 3<sup>rd</sup> person marker *s*) both of which most teachers, she claims

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<sup>5</sup> Crystal (2003) suggests that NNS outnumber NS by 3:1. More than a decade later, the numbers of NNS will be even higher.

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins is here referring to all NNS.



“would consider in urgent need of correction and remediation” (Seidlhofer 2003: 18), even though, crucially, they do not compromise communication.

As the research effort grew, attention turned to creativity in language use (where “creativity” might range from derivational morphology to idiom creation), to specific contexts of lingua franca use (such as academic English), to strategies adopted by users to facilitate communication (such as convergent accommodation). Thus the plural use of a normally mass noun (*evidences, researches*) may be seen to usefully plug a gap, as can experimenting with affixation to produce non-standard forms such as *clearness, undust* or *unmerciful*. Callies (2016) points out that coinages like these come some way in closing the paradigm gap between new Englishes and ELF; he does not bring native speakers into the comparison, but the forms may well be attractive to native speakers too, which would account for some of the several hundred thousand hits each form can boast on Google.<sup>7</sup> Here we are back with the phenomenon of blurring, and the difficulty in making pronouncements about what a standard form actually is; and consequently, about where deviation from a standard occurs.

Creativity is based on analogy, but it may have a lexical rather than a grammatical origin. Take for example a conference advertised on a European university website:

Ex 11 Is Japan a safe heaven country in the middle of collapsing world order?"<sup>8</sup>

For the native speaker this looks like an error, or possibly just a typo: *heaven* has been selected in place of *haven*. But for the NNS recipients for whom the message is intended, the phrase *safe heaven* may carry more meaning than the collocation *safe haven*, and shed more light on the actual content of the lecture. The error, if it is an error, can be justified on this count, or even as an intentional play on words. The prescriptive norm-referencing teacher of English corrects it at her own peril. In the academic world, where academics are required or expected to publish in English, it is becoming increasingly common for journals not to have articles proof read by native speakers, and even to publish disclaimers to the effect that it is not the policy of the journal to go through this kind of revision. Unsurprisingly, this is the case with *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, but the need to focus on content, rather than formal correctness of English, is also evident in scientific publications, such as in the following editorial for the American journal *Molecular Biology of the Cell*, which urges

When possible, reviewers and editors of manuscripts should look beyond errors in grammar, syntax, and usage, and evaluate the science.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Checked on 18 May 2016.

<sup>8</sup> <[http://www.unive.it/nqcontent.cfm?a\\_id=63&gruppo=0&event\\_id=3286590](http://www.unive.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=63&gruppo=0&event_id=3286590)> (4 May 2016). Interestingly, the term *safe haven* is a pleonastic term, and from this point of view the ‘ELF version’ might be said to be an example of redundancy reduction.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in an article ‘English is the Language for Scientists’ by Boer Deng for the online news magazine Slate (January 2015) at:



This is a potential area in which the native speaker could be seen as an intruder, or, to put it with Graddol:

Increasingly the problem may be that few native speakers belong to the community of practice which is developing amongst lingua franca users. Their presence hinders communication. (Graddol 2006: 110)

#### 4. ELF: AN EMERGING NEW PARADIGM FOR EFL TEACHERS?

Graddol's claim has implications for the classroom, where a traditional classification of teachers into two groups - native English speaker teachers (NESTs), and non-native English speaker teachers (non-NESTs) is no longer clear cut. The supposed advantages and disadvantages that each category may bring to bear on their language class has long been debated (see Wahyudi 2012 for an overview); NESTs are assumed to be more proficient in the language, and to provide cultural models, while non-NESTs are assumed to have more useful insights into the learning difficulties of their students, since they share the same mother tongue. But a third category is emerging, due in part to the huge global demand for English language teaching, but also to the increasing number of opportunities afforded by educational exchanges: the mobile non-NEST teacher. This category includes (to cite examples just from Italy) students from non-English speaking countries in Europe taking up posts as language assistants in Italian schools, and Italian graduates taking up posts as English teachers in China and elsewhere. In these classroom contexts, all communication is necessarily via the use of English as a lingua franca, and a new community of practice is born, in which teacher and students need to co-construct meaning with linguistic resources which are different from those available to a native speaker, and in which the role of formal errors is likely to receive less attention than effective communicative strategies.

These may be isolated cases, but they are indicative of global changes in the nature and role of English (as well as a shortage of EFL teachers), which teachers everywhere (whether NESTs or non-NESTs) are likely to be aware of. Growing awareness of ELF, however, does not imply that teachers are ready to reject standards, as we noted in section 2 above. Maley (2010) scorns the idea of ELF as offering a potential alternative syllabus within an EFL framework, and more recently refers to "substantial challenges to the ELF brand at all levels" (Maley 2015). Nonetheless, awareness of the dynamics of ELF may lead teachers to a realignment of their approach to errors. In the same issue of the IATEFL newsletter in which Maley airs his concerns, one teacher describes how he "practises ELF in the [...] classroom" where, nonetheless, "standard English is not entirely ignored" and where students "can be asked to correct errors they themselves notice" (Deacon 2015: 6). It is likely that many

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<[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2015/01/english\\_is\\_the\\_language\\_of\\_science\\_us\\_dominance\\_means\\_other\\_scientists](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2015/01/english_is_the_language_of_science_us_dominance_means_other_scientists)> (30 October 2016).



teachers today find themselves in similar ambivalent positions between a standards-oriented approach and a desire to promote strategies for successful international communication which necessarily allow for considerable individual variation.

But teachers are bound to curricula, and to descriptions of language such as that provided by the CEFR, functional in inspiration, but often anchored to native speaker norms. Crucially, they are also bound to assessments. As long as language tests and certifications perform a gatekeeping role for native speaker norms, non-standard forms will be considered as errors. Assessment, to put it with Widdowson is the “last frontier”, since “only when that is crossed, or bypassed in some way, can there be any real advance in English teaching informed by an understanding of ELF” (Widdowson 2015: 231).

The receptive skills are easily approached. To assess understanding of texts (written or spoken) produced by non-native speakers, whether or not they contain formal errors, is justifiable from perspectives of validity and authenticity. Newbold (2012) reports on an experimental entrance test for European university students which gets students to listen to non-native lecturers; a test which proved to be “unproblematic and uncontroversial” in spite of, or perhaps because of, naturally occurring phonological and grammatical “errors”. Indeed, it is hard to understand why high stakes international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL still only offer native speakers in their listening tasks.

More problematic is to reconcile formal errors with production in tests of speaking and writing. Hall (2014) foresees a future conceptualization of English testing which moves beyond accuracy, and the reproduction of standard English, to “Englishing”, or a demonstration of a basic set of skills. This, he warns, will require more than just an adjustment to existing tests, but rather a reappraisal of “fundamental beliefs about what English is and how it is learned and used” (Hall 2014: 384).

The alternative assessment he seems to be advocating could find itself as part of a future paradigm for English teachers, in which an initial choice about the primary aims of the course – whether the focus should be on native speaker English, or on developing skills for international communication – would need to be made, top-down, by language planners, and a skeletal framework (Table 1) fleshed out by course designers, materials writers, and teachers.

<i>English for Language and Cultural Studies</i>	<i>English for International Communication</i>
Native Speaker Norms	ELF Strategies
(Mostly) Native Speaker Input	(Mostly) International Input
Traditional Tests	Alternative Assessment

Table 1. A skeletal framework for language planning

But language change is of course a notoriously bottom-up process. It happens, because (as Dr Johnson famously observed in the preface to his dictionary) a language cannot be “fixed”. In the future, it is possible that non-native speaker “errors” will be consolidated in English language dictionaries as native-speakerisms because of



widespread acceptance internationally. This is true for lexical items, but it is also true for structures. The third person -s is a case in point; since English has managed to rid itself of all the other inflections for the present tense, and since (given the non-pro-drop status of English) the third person -s is a redundant marker, not necessary for comprehension, one might hypothesize that exposure to this ELF form will eventually lead to native speakers dropping it too.

Structural changes like this do not normally occur overnight. But we live in the age of the Internet, and of global language testing organizations, and both phenomena are new potential agents for rapid linguistic change. When, finally, language testers decide to engage with the use of English as a lingua franca, they will need to get to grips with the notion of "error"; one possible future scenario is that the language testers "de-prescribe" native speaker norms, perhaps for speaking only. In this scenario the process of "de-prescription" would involve rolling out the lists of example errors which currently help raters to establish benchmarks, and recycling them as examples of possible linguistic behavior in ELF interaction. Admittedly, it is a scenario which may still seem a long way off, but it would have the merit of sanctioning the fact that communication between non-native speakers, flying in the face of lapsed or broken norms, and innumerable formal errors, still manages to take place.

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