

English for engineering: intercultural formal letter writing

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Abstract

Writing is a productive skill highly addressed in the ESP classroom. Students learning a foreign language have to learn how to create accurate structured texts with organised ideas to convey relevant meaning. The aim of this study is to analyse and categorize written mistakes produced by 1st cycle foreign students from different nationalities (i.e.: Romanian, Moroccan and Bulgarian) in the English for Engineering module at a Spanish university. The objective is to examine written language accuracy in formal letter writing such as enquiring and complaint letters, to detect any intercultural interference as to mother-tongue influence and other language varieties in the learning of curricular and linguistic knowledge. We believe that studies such as the one presented here allow teachers to provide students with written corrective feedback which may have a positive impact on students' writing skills (Li, 2000), in this case, foreign students enrolled in an ESP module at a Spanish university.

Keywords: *Formal writing; ESP; written corrective feedback, intercultural interference.*

1. Introduction

Writing is a productive skill highly addressed in the ESP classroom. Students learning a foreign language have to learn how to create accurate structured texts with organised ideas to convey relevant meaning. Written production is a preferred and demanded task in class to assess language learning progress since it is one of the most widespread forms to record students' performances (Whittaker et al. 2011). Other language elements that are of interest in the ESP classroom have to do with language accuracy, creativity, and corrective feedback. Some studies have analysed written corrective feedback from British spelling samples to be able to describe the lexico-grammatical errors committed by students for the assessment of their written outcomes (Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño, 2018; Zhang, 2011). Error analysis and later correction is fundamental for the systematic study of the learner's language (Corder, 1981), benefiting all participants in the learning process, that is, teachers, students and researchers.

The aim of this study is to analyse and categorize written mistakes produced by 1st cycle foreign students from different nationalities (i.e.: Romanian, Moroccan and Bulgarian) in the English for Engineering module at a Spanish university. The objective is to examine written language accuracy in formal letter writing such as enquiring and complaint letters, to detect any intercultural interference as to mother-tongue influence and other language varieties in the learning of curricular and linguistic knowledge.

In this pilot study, an initial number of ten texts have been analysed and corrected to provide a classification of errors committed by foreign students attending the English for Engineering module at a Spanish university. Spell-checker software and Grammarly (2009) have been used to spot mistakes. Errors such as: "I would be fine with removing shipping coste", "and for this se need tour" "un cash" "this are my informations", "will safe you money", "we would spend knowing what your options are to make the payment" or "standarts" have been detected among a range of different error typologies. Some of the errors encountered may have been originated by intercultural language interference, considering the foreign students mother tongue is other than Spanish or English. Wrong order choice, grammatical correlations or lexical errors are the most recurrent ones. The classification of errors generated in this study and committed by intercultural students is later compared with the typology of common errors produced by Spanish learners of English as a foreign language with the aim of generating a number of written corrective feedback strategies, namely direct feedback, indirect feedback, or reformulation among others (Ellis, 2009).

2. Methodology

To carry out this study we have gathered a selection of 10 texts corresponding to 67 writing assignments of formal letters. The formal letter writing is a task the students participating in

the study need to accomplish in the practical section of the subject (1st year Mechanical Engineering Degree). Specifically, the selected writing assignments consisted of an evaluated compulsory task included in the curriculum of the subject “English for Engineering”. The formal letters had to follow the structure and topic of ‘inquiry letter’ and ‘letter of complaint’. The instructions and standardization of ‘inquiry’ and ‘complaint’ formal letters are explained in the subject. Students have to hand in the letters as part of the final subject evaluation.

2.1. Participants

The participants taking place in this study are 1st year Mechanical Engineering students enrolled in their ESP English for engineering module at a Spanish university. A total number of 67 undergraduate students writing assignments were gathered, 62 of them were male and 5 female. As for their nationalities, their origin countries varied: Spain, Romanian, Moroccan and Bulgarian, being Spanish the majority of them (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants.

| Participants | | |
|--------------|----------|-------------|
| | Gender | Nationality |
| | 62 male | 60 Spanish |
| | 5 female | 5 Moroccan |
| | | 1 Bulgarian |
| | | 1 Romania |
| TOTAL | 67 | 67 |

The identity of students has been protected and the writings analysed in this study have been anonymised for a more objective analysis.

2.2. Materials and tools

The corpus of ten formal letters used in this study was analysed in search of different basic errors. To do so a previous error classification model was considered (Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño, 2018). Aside from that, a spell-checker software and Grammarly (2009) have been also used to detect those errors. This classification model included errors such as: Lexical, grammatical or spelling errors as well as wrong order choice. As to grammatical errors Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño include “verb tense, subject-verb agreement, fragments, word order and punctuation” (2018:110). Regarding lexical errors, these include: “articles, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, word choice and spelling” (Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño, 2018: 110).

Table 2. Errors classification model (Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño, 2018).

| Grammatical errors | Lexical error |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Subject-verb agreement</i> | <i>Spelling</i> |
| <i>Punctuation</i> | <i>Capitalisation</i> |
| <i>Fragment</i> | <i>Prepositions</i> |
| <i>Verb tense</i> | <i>Word choice</i> |
| <i>Word order</i> | <i>Adverbs</i> |
| | <i>Pronouns</i> |
| | <i>Articles</i> |
| | <i>Verbs</i> |
| | <i>Nouns</i> |

This previous classification (Table 2) was initially used to analyse the corpus of this study in order to detect and classify the students' errors found. However, a closer look at the writings revealed that some of the categories included in the classification model were not found in the corpus. The relevant results are presented in the following section.

3. Results and conclusions

In this section, the results from students' writing performance on the formal letter task are analysed and discussed. Therefore, a classification of students' grammatical and lexical errors has been generated, based on the classification from the study carried out by Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño (2018). The errors have been analysed according to their frequency of occurrence and the percentage over the total number of grammatical or lexical errors and lastly, in Table 3 below, some examples from each type of error have also been provided.

The analysis of 10 samples of formal letters led us to the identification of students' most commonly committed errors. A difference in the use of grammar and lexis can be observed amid the Mechanical Engineering students. Grammatical errors embraced verb tense, subject-verb agreement, fragments, word order and punctuation, while lexical errors included articles, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, word choice and spelling.

From the results it can be observed that the greatest difficulties for the participants lie on punctuation, fragment, spelling, word choice and verbs. Fragment errors are understood as unfinished utterances as well as with grammatically and lexically incorrect utterances as a

whole. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that both grammatical and lexical categories show similar tendencies in the sense that students commit nearly the same percentage of errors.

Table 3 below shows the most common grammatical errors committed by the participants of this study. Surprisingly, the most frequently-made error types correspond to punctuation (30,5%) followed by fragments (10%). On the other hand, the number of errors is considerably lower when it comes to word order (4,3%), and subject-verb agreement (2%).

Table 3. Grammatical errors: Frequency, percentage and examples.

| Grammatical errors | Frequency | Percentage | Examples |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|---|
| Subject-verb agreement | 2 | 8,7% | “...and this are my information” |
| Punctuation | 7 | 30,5 % | “I look forward to hearing from you soon! Yours sincerely |
| Fragment | 10 | 43,5% | “After five years of close I need a good discount” |
| Verb tense | 5 | 13,04% | “We would like to knowing” |
| Wrong word | 2 | 8,7 | “We would spend knowing what your options are to make make the payment” |
| Total | 23 | | |

Focusing on lexical errors, it can be noticed that the most prominent error is that of spelling (32,7%). Another category to be highlighted is the failure of students to select verbs (16,3%) and the choice of words (14,3%). In the same line, prepositions (10,2%) are often substituted by other prepositions or adverbs.

Some of the errors encountered have been originated by intercultural language interference, since for some of the participants Spanish is not their mother tongue. Henceforth, most grammatical and lexical errors -which are the two major errors typologies-, may have a connection with the intercultural language interference. Lexical (spelling with a 32,7%), grammatical correlations (punctuation with a 30,5%) followed by fragments (10%) are the most recurrent ones. The classification of errors generated in this study and committed by

intercultural students is later compared with the typology of common errors produced by Spanish learners of English as a foreign language with the aim of generating a number of written corrective feedback strategies, namely direct feedback, indirect feedback, or reformulation among others (Ellis 2009).

Table 4. Lexical errors: Frequency, percentage and examples.

| Lexical error | Frequency | Percentage | Examples |
|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|---|
| Spelling | 16 | 32,7 % | “The consignment of plugs was succesfully sent to you adress”. |
| Capitalisation | 5 | 10,2% | “Thank you for you letter of 12 november..” |
| Prepositions | 5 | 10,2% | “payment of delivery” “payment un cash” |
| Word choice | 7 | 14,3% | “If you want we can send you one show, you can test it” “that will safe you money” “On all prime order” |
| Adverbs | 4 | 8,2% | “Also the procomo400 has raised our standarts...” |
| Pronouns | 3 | 6,12% | “We write you regarding the consignment for their company” “We would spend knowing what your options are...” |
| Verbs | 8 | 16,3% | “What kind of discount could you give me for stays and keep you in mind for next purchases”. |
| Nouns | 1 | 2,04% | “the possibility of upgradation” |
| Articles | 1 | 2,04% | “I need a available good discount” |
| Total | 49 | | |

Up until this point, one can construe that first year university students, and in this specific case, Mechanical Engineering students in their English module, have not been trained on the proper use of punctuation symbols in previous years at high school. English and other foreign language codes have many differences in the way punctuation symbols are used, that is to say, the usage of commas and semi-colon or colon in combination with cohesive markers. For this reason, more specific training on punctuation symbols may be convenient for first year university students. Furthermore, the participants of this study have also displayed errors in spelling and wrong verb choice, hence, more training on these aspects should then be implemented in the classroom syllabuses.

We believe that studies such as the one presented here allow teachers to provide students with written corrective feedback which may have a positive impact on students' writing skills (Li, 2000). In this case, foreign students enrolled in an ESP module at a Spanish university. Thus, detecting and indexing these intercultural errors to create classifications of identified wrong uses of literary translations or language correspondences in order to later explain them in class would definitely support students in their FL learning process.

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