

Review

Perspectives on World English(es): Perceptions of Italian EFL learners at secondary state schools with regard to grammar teaching, British and American accents and what model to aspire to when learning English as a second language

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide effective responses to three different articles that discuss the issues of grammar translation instruction, the differences between British and American accents, and, above all, what model to aspire to when learning English in order to investigate what the perceptions of Italian EFL learners at secondary state schools are with regard to these elements. The trigger for this analysis comes first from my EFL teaching experiences at Italian state high schools, where the syllabi employed tend to overlook these features and focus on conventional teaching practices. Secondly, the stimulus for this study comes from research articles in this field that I read before writing these responses in order to have a broader view of these themes. Each response describes in detail theoretical issues with regard to the articles selected for this analysis, and it also makes reference to the context identified for this investigation. This study was conducted in Italy, and the data gathering processes consist mainly of qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight participants (four EFL learners and teachers of English as a foreign language and English literature), interview transcripts, and content analysis techniques that I used to examine and interpret the data collected. Findings indicate that innovative EFL teaching and learning practices are needed in Italian state high schools, especially where the syllabi employed overlook these identified aspects of the language.

Keywords: grammar teaching; RP; GA; NS; varieties; EFL; authentic; ELT

1. Introduction

This paper presents responses to three articles, namely: 1) L3 and the new inner circle, IATEFL voices [1]; 2) Language Learners' Perceptions of Accent [2]; and 3) Foreign Language Education at the Crossroads: Whose Model of Competence [3]? These articles discuss the issues of grammar translation instruction, the differences between World English(es) accents, especially British and American pronunciation, and, above all, what model of reference to consider when learning English. Today, English is recognized as 'the lingua Franca' and regarded as the international language of global communication in the whole world [4–6]. Besides, it is the language of science and technology, business, and diplomacy [7]. However, when compared to northern European countries, in former times the spread of English in Italy was rather slow. Nevertheless, in recent times, the situation has started to change since the emerging importance of English has led to prioritizing this language in Italian schools [8]. Additionally, the worldwide expansion of the internet and media seems to give more opportunities to EFL students to have greater exposure to authentic English and

to effortlessly be in contact with English-speaking people throughout the world. In spite of what was stated above, there are still controversial issues, especially at Italian state schools regarding ELT, in particular whether grammar translation teaching is an effective methodology, what are the students' preferences concerning the different accents of English, and last but not least, which is the right model of pronunciation and accent to consider in EFL.

1.1. Rationale

The goal of this research is to investigate current beliefs and the complexities of teaching English as a foreign language in Italy, addressing important issues like grammar teaching, the influence of accents, and the debate over which model of English to adopt. The stimulus to undertake this study came firstly from my teaching experience in Italy and secondly from my interest in this field. In addition, the readings of articles from academic journals on similar studies [1–3,9,10] contributed to arousing my curiosity and prompted me to do more in-depth research in this area. Data collected through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with four Italian teachers of English as a foreign language and four high school students attending a state institution provided valuable insights into the current ELT methods and learning approaches and led me to draw some conclusions about the issues raised above. The purpose of this investigation was not to re-analyze former research about the positive aspects or possible drawbacks of grammar teaching and the importance of accent and pronunciation in language learning. It suggests practical implications for improving EFL teaching methodologies and curriculum design, potentially influencing educational policy and teacher training programs. The focus of this analysis is mainly on the perceptions of Italian teachers and students and the call for more innovative teaching practices, like CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), in order to make a significant contribution to the field of applied linguistics and education. I chose this topic because it appeared timely and interesting to me, and I examined the participants' viewpoints from the perspective of contributing knowledge and understanding in my own professional context.

The teachers that I chose to interview are not English native speakers and were asked to participate in this inquiry because they already had brief experiences regarding EFL grammar teaching and dealing with the problems of pronunciation and accent in their lessons. Hence, the talk with them provided a background on contemporary ELT practice at state schools, and in particular, it supplied valuable perceptions of what the learners' responses could be to this approach. Interviews with the students instead contributed to better understanding and analyzing what the main difficulties in ESL acquisition are and what their preferences are regarding the variety of English they find easier and better to learn. The questions that I asked at the interviews with the students aimed to discover whether grammar translation is an effective methodology that allows them to have a good grounding in the language and use it correctly, and also whether being taught only one type of English is a good practice so that they can copy it without being confused by other varieties, or whether this approach might limit their familiarity with other world English(es). Likewise, the questions asked of the teachers attempted to investigate whether conventional ELT

curricula designed for Italian state high schools are no longer effective and, therefore, what could be an innovative approach that may improve the situation and bring into the classroom activities that would take into account the issues hitherto raised?

1.2. Situation analysis of context

The teaching context that I selected for this investigation is the Italian state high school, where I taught English as a school subject in the past. The majority of all the classes in this institute are mono-national; however, there are some classes that have foreign students. Although these students have been studying English since elementary school, they have mixed levels that range from lower intermediate to upper intermediate (CEFR levels—from A2 to B2). According to their scores, many of these students have more developed reading abilities in comparison with their speaking skills, which seem to be still undeveloped. Besides, English is not widely spoken in the classroom, and unfortunately, there are not many opportunities to practice it outside the classroom [11]. The model that is customarily taught in this context is based on the standard Italian syllabus, which mainly focuses on English grammar and translation teaching and British literature. The textbooks used are anachronistic, as they focus only on one variety of English, which is standard British English. They are generally used as syllabi, which establish the learning outcomes and the teaching method [7]. The focus of the lessons based on traditional grammar translation practice is principally on the translation of English texts into Italian, through which students then learn English grammar rules deductively by rote [12] and consequently practice them while doing grammar exercises and translating sentences and texts. Research maintains that the main aim of grammar translation instruction is to enhance the students' reading and writing skills to a level in which they are able to read texts of English literature and write English essays without errors [12].

2. Response N. 1. “L3 and the new inner circle, IATEFL voices”

This article proposes an alternative way to classify speakers of English. It explores the learning and acquisition process of English language learners, focusing on their prior needs. The key to this article is that it is an alternative conceptualization of Kachru's circles. The main question is whether to give priority to grammar teaching for EFL beginners. According to this article, the first thing that could be done is to examine the people speaking different L1s that would gather and talk in English. The possible candidates could be non-native professionals such as businesspeople, attorneys, and reporters who have a very high level of English. Others could be non-native lecturers of English or students studying foreign languages who have managed to achieve high grades in the Cambridge (CPE) or IELTS exams.

If their pronunciation had to be analyzed, it could emerge that the majority of them would not speak RP (received Pronunciation) or GA (general American). On the contrary, they would speak a kind of English that could be very similar to one of these two. Emmerson also points out that RP/GA is simpler for non-native speakers to comprehend compared to the type of English spoken in London by the working class (Cockney, for example, or other English dialects such as Geordie, Brummie, and many others) [13].

Interestingly, this article made me reflect on the role that the study of grammar has for learners of English as L3. For example, a speaker of English as L3 who could have the correct word order but not enough choice of verb forms at his/her disposal, even with a good knowledge of the foreign words, could not know how to use them because of his or her limited knowledge of syntax and grammar. As a result, he/she would feel frustrated about knowing the words but not being able to use them or put them in the right order because of the lack of grammar and syntax [14]. The more learners manage to internalize new choices of form, the less they have to stop and reflect, and the more effective the flow of the language can become. Therefore, the study of grammar could be fundamental in second language learning, and consequently, it should be essential for L3. Sometimes, on the other hand, the only study of grammar could not be enough to be able to master the language effectively.

This is what happens in Italian schools: The method used to teach English in Italian secondary and high schools relies mostly on grammar teaching, where grammar translation lessons are commonly done in Italian. Generally, very little attention is dedicated to pronunciation exercises and conversation in English. The final result is that, even though learners have a good knowledge of grammar, they are not able to speak English effectively because of a lack of speaking training in class [15]. As a result, many students continue to regard speaking as a distant and difficult goal [9].

Besides, teachers in Italian schools, when teaching English grammar, tend to forget to make links to the cultures that are mixed with the language. The result is that the majority of learners then experience a great deal of difficulty recognizing and understanding the meanings of culturally loaded terms that they could encounter in other contexts, such as specific idioms, figures of speech, sayings, catchphrases, neologisms, and other World English(es).

This unfortunately happens because the majority of Italian teachers of English have the tendency to concentrate their lessons only on the essential rules of English grammar without taking into account all the aspects and varieties of the language. Research maintains that the study of English grammar is important for speakers of other languages because it allows learners to build correct sentences and contextualize them in their language usage [16].

Unfortunately, it is not enough to know only the rules of grammar in order to be able to speak a foreign language effectively. Apart from grammar explanations and grammar exercises, good teachers of English in Italy should take into account, in their lessons, exercises that focus also on pronunciation, lexis, phonetics, and language conversation.

Therefore, instead of providing their students only with grammar exercises, teachers should organize and create interactive activities in order to motivate them to study English and to let them learn the language spontaneously [17].

An effective alternative could be to further experiment with CLIL methodology, which could represent an improvement of the common EFL teaching methods employed in formal education. It can prove to be better than other alternative approaches, which aim to improve current deficit situations in English-speaking development [18].

3. Response N. 2. “Language learners’ perceptions of accent”

This study examined the accent perceptions of two groups of students composed of thirty-seven English language learners and ten American undergraduate students (English native speakers). They had to listen to four English teachers with dissimilar accents of English, such as General American, British English, Chinese English, and Mexican English. Nowadays, international communication takes place among people who use different varieties of English. The first thing that this survey pointed out was the importance of global communication and understanding. These two groups of students offered to take part in the accent analysis and recognition experiment. After having listened to the four varieties of English, they were asked to make a choice between the chances of having a native accent or making themselves easily understood. The result was that 62% of the participants claimed that their aim was to speak with the same accent that native speakers have. However, when requested to recognize the four speakers’ countries of origin, EFL learners had some difficulties, whereas the task was straightforward for American undergraduates.

The ability to recognize accents is a hard task for learners of foreign languages. In order to easily distinguish the accent of the speakers, learners should have good linguistic analysis abilities, previous travel experiences, foreign friends, and other experiences in which they have been exposed to the foreign language for quite a long time.

Participants were then asked which accent they preferred and which one they considered easier to comprehend. Resultantly, 52% of the learners chose the American accent as they said it was definitely easier to understand and nicer to listen, hence they placed again importance on listening comprehension.

This experiment demonstrated a mismatch between these participants’ own accent aims and their cleverness to perceive and identify accents. Although the majority of them wished to sound like natives, only a few were able to recognize the accent they maintained and wanted to internalize. This study also revealed that these students tend to place a high priority on listening comprehension.

Taking into consideration instead the Italian context, with particular attention to Italian state high schools, I can say that in the past, EFL learners (from beginners to advanced users) and teachers as well came into contact only with one variety of English: Standard British English or Received Pronunciation (RP) [19].

This fact could mainly be attributable to the types of textbooks and listening materials (CD-ROM, MP3, etc.) used in Italian elementary, secondary, and high schools, which have invariably focused solely on British English culture and literature [20]. Therefore, Italian teachers and students have had, so far, no choice with regard to what type of English to copy and, consequently, have taken as a model to learn and teach the standard British English.

Italian schools have usually chosen to use British textbooks [21], intentionally selected to avoid any issue that could have been regarded as disputable [22]. Unfortunately, using only British coursebooks and teaching materials has, so far, created a sort of barrier for the development of intercultural competences as there is no room left for the teaching of varieties of World English(es), therefore not reflecting the status of the English language today.

However, the situation seems to be changing: the great diffusion of the Internet is increasing the opportunities to learn and teach English in and beyond the classroom. Thanks to the development of the media and the Internet, not only can people read texts written in British and American English, but they also manage to have greater exposure to authentic English spoken throughout the world. This makes it possible to easily interact in English with people speaking other varieties of English. Exposure to a foreign language is a fundamental element of second language acquisition [23].

In addition, the development of online videos and DVD materials is still on the rise, which could help Italian learners improve their EFL listening comprehension skills by watching movies in English with or without subtitles. Video exposure could also give the students the possibility to become familiar with the American English variety and other World English(es), as the majority of the foreign DVDs distributed in Italy come from the United States and not from the UK. The result is that the majority of Italians usually find General American (GA) easier to understand than British English and, at the same time, easier to copy since the GA speech rate appears to be slower for Italian speakers than standard British English.

To conclude, the use of videos (DVDs and online videos) as FL learning tools could also improve ELT methods commonly employed in Italian secondary and high schools, which are still very conservative [19].

As they are not produced for FLT, they screen the language that is used in real-life situations filled with idioms, sayings, and slang expressions, not the one that is simplified for FL learning materials [24]. This fact is very important in countries like Italy, where English is studied as a foreign language and is therefore not authentic as it is not spoken out of the class [25].

Finally, the advantage for EFL learners of using videos in English is that they not only help students enhance their listening comprehension skills but also their speaking skills, and the latter seems to encourage the development of other language skills [9].

4. Response N. 3. “Foreign language education at the crossroads: Whose model of competence?”

This paper discusses some of the complicated hypotheses about what model to aspire to when learning a foreign language. The native speaker has usually been the model to aim at. Native competence has been the customary benchmark for foreign language teaching. Linguists contend that foreign language students need the NS as a model, as an objective, and not as a measure.

At present, linguistics researchers are still divided in their suppositions and considerations about what is the right model to follow when learning and teaching English as a foreign language.

If, on the one hand, they agree that the model to aspire to is the native speaker and that the teaching of a standard language is the perfect solution in terms of correctness and clarity, on the other hand, they sustain that languages change over the years because they are influenced by other languages. Therefore, it is no longer appropriate to teach just one type of English, and a good learning and teaching activity would be to introduce other varieties of English. Consequently, the model that learners

should aspire to would be World English(es), as English has become an example of an international language, or better yet, *Lingua Franca*.

Michael Byram is one of the main linguists who has been against the choice of considering the NS as the model to aspire to when learning a foreign language. Byram [26] regards the NS as an impossible goal that will only lead learners to fail. The NS model could cause “linguistic schizophrenia” in students, as they are forced to divide themselves from their own languages and cultures and get the sociocultural ability of the natives. Besides, the NS does not necessarily have the right cultural ability for FL learners because:

A native speaker cannot be the authority on the cultures of a country and cannot give authoritative opinions on what is wrong or right, as might be possible with language. It can be significant to follow the authority of the native speaker in terms of linguistic competence, but intercultural ability is a completely different matter [26].

In Italy, the teaching of just one standard norm of English as a foreign language has always been the most common teaching practice. Italian teachers of English at state high schools have always had the tendency to take into consideration only British English as a model to aspire to. This fact is mainly due to the types of coursebooks used in state and private schools, which have usually focused on British English only [20]. Learners are generally and mainly taught only this variety, ignoring the fact that English is an international language, influenced by other World English(es).

The standard Italian school curricula, which are very conventional, have, so far, relied mostly on traditional grammar translation practice and on English literature instruction. Listening and speaking practice have long been overlooked, and not enough attention has been given to pronunciation or any other communicative features of the language [19].

The result is that the majority of EFL learners tend to have poor command of the needed speaking skills, which should be strengthened in the secondary stage [9].

English started to spread in Italy after the Second World War, but compared to other European countries, its spreading has been slower [27].

This issue could be attributable to the fact that EFL exposure is mainly confined within the four walls of the classroom and that learners have not been considering further opportunities to practice the language outside their learning environments [8]. In addition, the social context has not helped: English has always been hardly spoken as a foreign language in Italy; therefore, opportunities to use it outside of the classroom have been very limited so far [11].

However, the situation seems to have changed in the last fifteen years thanks to the development of the Internet, which is giving more possibilities to Italian learners to improve their EFL skills and to have better exposure to other varieties of English.

As far as EFL teaching is concerned in Italy, and according to a survey that I did at an Italian state school where I taught in the past, it emerged that the majority of Italian students and their parents prefer to have teachers who are native speakers of English. They see the NS English teacher as a person who uses the language correctly; he/she does not mix varieties and does not make linguistic mistakes. Hence, their views seem to be in accordance with what Duguit states regarding the NS English teacher as the perfect model of linguistic precision to copy and therefore the best candidate to teach the foreign language.

Students assume that they have better chances of learning to speak English effectively if their teachers are native speakers. They think that it would be easier to copy their correct pronunciation, as the Italian teachers of English could not speak English effectively and could not have a good pronunciation and accent [19].

This prejudice, unfortunately, can be attributable to the fact that the majority of Italian teachers who studied foreign languages do not always have an effective preparation of the language they are teaching, and their knowledge of English is not always good enough in order to teach good models of pronunciation that students can learn [28].

This problem could derive from the fact that prospective Italian teachers of English who wish to become FL educators at both state and private schools are trained quite late, almost at the end of their university education [8].

To further explain, prospective teachers who study foreign languages at Italian universities customarily study EFL grammar and literature either for Bachelor or MA degrees, as generally the set of lectures does not include exams that concentrate on pedagogical practices. Moreover, since the recruitment system is continually changing in Italy, especially concerning the effectiveness of teacher training courses that have not always been considered mandatory, depending on the latest school reform of the present government that holds office, the result is that many FL graduates become teachers without having attended specific training courses. Besides, the situation is often exacerbated by the fact that TEFL or CELTA/DELTA certificates are not compulsory for EFL teachers at state Italian schools. The outcome is that they do not have the adequate preparation and experience to teach Italian students how to speak English fluently and correctly and what methodology to employ. Complicating matters further is the fact that in Italy, teachers commonly stay in the posts for a long time and do not engage in continuing professional development (CPD) [28].

In light of the issues hitherto raised, the greatest difficulty stems from the fact that when they have to teach a native model of English to non-native speakers [29], they could experience a lack of confidence. Therefore, they could end up relying on safer and more conventional teaching methods such as direct grammar instruction and constant use of Italian rather than English. The direct consequence is that they tend to neglect effective interactive activities in the target language through which the students could develop communicative abilities and acquire good English pronunciation. Consequently, after many years of English study done at school, and despite the fact that they could have a good mastery of grammar and vocabulary, the majority of learners tend to experience difficulty speaking English confidently and fluently [11].

All things considered, taking into account that speaking is generally the language skill that is most frequently used [9], proper teacher training courses for EFL teachers are therefore essential. The role of teachers is fundamental, and they should have a sound educational background. Italian teachers of English should have a thorough knowledge of English, a good level of fluency, and a good pronunciation that students could take as a model to aspire to. Moreover, since English has become the language of international communication, useful activities would be to bring into the classroom examples of other World English(es) to give students greater exposure to authentic English spoken worldwide. This could be an innovative teaching practice that could

allow learners to become familiar with new aspects of the language rather than being only exposed to the standard national syllabus, which focuses only on grammar, English literature, and the analysis of the main differences between British and American English. As stated in the first response, the CLIL methodology could give both students and teachers a greater occasion to study new things in an original manner, to teach the language taking into consideration other school subjects, and above all, other varieties of English, which can best motivate students in FL learning [10].

5. Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability refer to two scientific terms that originated in quantitative research and were then applied to qualitative studies with distinct definitions [30]. In qualitative research, validity usually tends to be attached to literature and to the significance that individuals attach to them; consequently, instead of being a matter of certitude, it is more a question of the reliability of the research [31]. Hence, a crucial need for a researcher using a qualitative approach is to acknowledge his/her role in the investigation and contextualize the research within the socio-historical background [32]. In this case, I am a fully qualified EFL teacher who knows very well the Italian school system. I am overqualified for this job as I have three degrees (a B.A. in Foreign Languages and Literatures, an M.A. in Literary and Technical-Scientific Translation, and a second M.A. in TESOL and Applied Linguistics). In addition, I have also completed a professional teacher training course (T.F.A.), and I am doing a PhD. I also have experience in EFL teaching at Italian private and state secondary schools.

This insider status guarantees that consideration and judgments with regard to the description and analysis of the context, the participants, and ELT in this environment are valid [33]. It would have been more difficult for an external researcher to be trusted by the interviewees and analyze and interpret their perceptions and the statements that they made about EFL teaching/learning practices in Italy. In qualitative research like this one, data collected from interviews is generally acknowledged to be rather subjective and may present contradictions, which could lead to conclusions that remain unclear [34]. However, these inconsistencies do not tend to invalidate the investigation; on the contrary, they show the intricacies of human understanding and supply valuable elements for further analysis and reflection [35].

6. Suggestions for further research

Overall, the key points that emerged from both interviews with students and teachers are, firstly, that the traditional teaching practices at Italian schools that rely mainly on grammar teaching may not be adequate for all the students. The debates with all the participants seem to suggest that while this methodology seems crucial for students with limited EFL preparation, it seems instead to be rather insufficient for learners with a higher level of English. Likewise, the second point that came out, especially from two interviews with the students who had a lower level of English, is that some less advanced Italian learners prefer to have teachers of English who are not native speakers since they can better understand them when they speak and consequently find their accents and pronunciation easier to copy. Contrariwise, the

other two interviewees who had a more advanced knowledge of English stated that they prefer to have teachers who are native speakers with an American accent since they are accustomed to hearing this variety on the internet, on YouTube, and watching online videos and DVDs. Therefore, it is easier for them to understand and adopt this type of English. Hence, further research should be done in order to investigate which activities could be suitable to combine with the standard ELT practices of grammar teaching that might meet the needs of more advanced learners. In addition, the data analyzed for this paper suggests that it should be explored more in depth to determine whether it is a good procedure to bring into the classroom only one type of English that the students can learn and copy without being confused by other varieties or whether it is a better practice to expose learners to other types of English so that they can gain an understanding of other world English(es) from very early stages.

7. Limitations

The interview itself could be considered a sort of limitation for this research, as generally participants could perceive one-to-one debates with personalized questions as an invasion of their privacy and consequently might feel intimidated or uncomfortable sharing personal information about their lives or their previous experiences. The fact that I already knew the students could also have, somehow, compromised the outcomes of this research as they could not always feel free to speak, particularly when they had to give their opinions on ELT methods and materials used in class by the EFL teacher. Having been their teacher in the past might not have given them full freedom to externalize what their real perceptions were on some topics, as instead they would have done with an unknown interviewer. A further limitation was determined by the small sample size of the survey: because of time constraints, only four students and four teachers were interviewed. The involvement of a larger number of similar participants (e.g., only students or only teachers) could have provided more common elements to analyze and identified further interesting patterns and themes, and in addition, it would have also given the opportunity to draw better analogies and comparisons of the findings.

8. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the issues regarding grammar translation practice and the right model to consider in EFL seem to be rather controversial in the teaching context examined for this research. The syllabi at Italian state high schools are commonly based on traditional teaching practices. They tend to focus on the standard methodologies, which have the tendency to employ conventional textbooks that seem to be anachronistic since they mainly focus only on standard British English and do not consider other varieties. Hence, this approach does not seem to prioritize the learners' needs to enhance their speaking abilities and develop their knowledge of other World English(es). Thus, designing a modern and effective syllabus in this specified context would support the idea that it is no longer enough to teach only grammar and translation practice along with British literature and to take into account just one type of English. In reality, students today need new teaching and learning methods and, above all, up-to-date text books and course material. Moreover, as far as

Italian teachers of English are concerned, they should have a good level of fluency and a credible pronunciation that students could take as a prototype to aspire to. To conclude, considering that English is nowadays the language of international communication, teachers could experiment with useful activities that might bring into the classroom examples of other World English(es) to help their students become familiar with authentic English spoken worldwide. Finally, this could be a new approach that could lead learners to deepen new aspects of the language rather than being only exposed to the conventional national syllabus described above.

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