

Interlanguage (IL) development and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) proficiency levels in Sardinian high secondary school students.

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The European Conference on Language Learning 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing larger study, whose general goal is to identify, classify and explain features of Italian-Sardinian/English interlanguage (IL) of second-language English learners in samples of written language, against the CEFR levels of language competence. The research questions to which the paper will try to answer are as follows:

- Is there a correlation between these students' IL development and CEFR?
- Is it possible to integrate IL analysis into language learning assessment?

This preliminary descriptive study was carried out in a high secondary school in Sassari, in an Italian-Sardinian bilingual context. Two first-year classes (26 students) and two third-year classes (28 students) were tested for the first time in May 2013. The first-year students had been learning English for at least 7 years through formal instruction, and the third-year students for at least 9 years. All the students had been also learning a second foreign language, French or Spanish, for at least 3 years. The students were asked to produce three pieces of free composition, according to the CEFR “can do statements”.

The manual correction of the written samples took into consideration the number of words used, the lexical, morphological and syntactical mistakes, using a qualitative and quantitative method of analysis. The influence of the Sardinian-Italian bilingual condition and of other languages was observed. The preliminary results show that there is little correspondence between CEFR levels and learners' IL, and that teachers' training in interlanguage development analysis would be of great benefit for teaching and assessment practices.

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Introduction

This work is part of an ongoing larger study, whose general goal is to identify, classify and explain features of Italian/English Interlanguage (IL) of second-language English learners in samples of written texts, against the CEFR levels of language competence, in an unbalanced Italian/Sardinian bilingualism condition, to think on a different didactic attitude towards errors in second language learning. Some relevant questions we have tried to address are the following:

How can we investigate the relationship between the Interlanguage development and the CEFR levels in order to observe if the latter reflects the former? How is it possible to integrate Interlanguage analysis into formative and summative assessment? Which didactic benefits can teachers and learners in ESL classroom obtain?

The concept of interlanguage was first proposed by Larry Selinker¹. Following his path a number of researchers opted to describe the same notion with different labels, such as Approximative System (William Nemser)², Transitional Competence (Pit Corder)³, and Idiosyncratic Dialect (Pit Corder)⁴.

Selinker defines the Interlanguage as “a separate linguistic system resulting from learner’s attempted production of the target language norm”.

Learning, teaching and assessment in Europe are nowadays largely influenced by the CEFR⁵, which is a complete, complex and rich document. It is not prescriptive but the tendency is to consider it as a mandatory tool to assess and evaluate students, forgetting all its other important aspects. CEFR “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” and other parts of the world. Its aim is to provide a “comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language teaching.” “The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning on a life-long basis.”

The most popular part of the document are the level scales, so it is often used only to rate and evaluate learners in a strict counting of errors/mistakes perspective.

What does the CEFR say about interlanguage? In paragraph 6.5, Errors and mistakes, we can read that *Errors are due to an ‘interlanguage’, a simplified or distorted representation of the target competence*. errors are an inevitable, transient product of the learner’s developing interlanguage. Errors should be accepted as ‘transitional interlanguage’... This paragraph of the CEFR contains other important information, which can be used as guidelines in a new didactic approach towards error analysis and explanation, it is subdivided in three parts: the different attitudes that may be taken to learners errors, the action to be taken with regard to learner’s mistakes and errors, what use is made of the observation and analysis of learner errors.

¹ See references

² See references

³ See references

⁴ See references

⁵ Council of Europe. (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

About the two interconnected aspects of the study we can say that more than 40 years of literature on Interlanguage concepts and more than 20 years of studies and research on CEFR have produced a huge bulk of literature. Moreover, during the last decade, research has investigated the relation between CEFR and SLA, but there is still relatively little research on the relation between Interlanguage development and CEFR.

Study setting

This exploratory descriptive study was carried out in an upper secondary school in Sassari, in an Italian-Sardinian bilingual context. Two first-year classes (29 students) and two third-year classes (23 students) were tested in May 2013.

This phase was necessary in order to identify the best research strategy for the massive part of the study, which started in October 2013. The Italian educational system comprises three main levels of formal education, the primary level, the lower secondary and the upper secondary. The upper secondary schools are of three main types, namely classical education (so called *Licei*), technical education and vocational education. The students tested in this first phase of the study here described attend a vocational Hospitality and Catering school. This kind of school faces a number of issues as low socio-economic status of families, behaviour needs, high rates of students with dyslexia, special needs and learning disabilities, the highest rates of grade repeaters and dropouts.

As far as the learning of English in the Italian educational system is concerned, English is compulsory since the primary school. In the lower secondary school, together with a second Community language (generally Spanish or French) is part of the core curriculum and it is tested in the final exam of the third year. In the upper secondary education, English is part of the core curriculum for all types of schools and is part of the subjects tested at the final exam. According to the CEFR, the levels of proficiency in the learning of English are as following:

Level A1 at the end of the primary school, A2 at the end of the lower secondary school, B1 at the end of the compulsory school, namely the second year of upper the secondary and B2 at the end of the secondary school. In real contexts, many problems can be detected, especially in some types of schools and the results are often very different from the expected ones. In spite of the fact that the pupils who attend vocational schools have been exposed to English from the primary school and despite the fact that it is one of the core subjects in lower and upper secondary schools, provided for three hours per week, their competence in English is generally very low.

Data collection and data analysis tools

A questionnaire for the teachers (data not shown), a personal information questionnaire for the students, two written tests for the students, with two tasks each on a given topic: A2 for the first year students; B1 for the third year students. The tests were prepared according to the CEFR “can do statements”⁶.

⁶ The 'can do' statements were developed by The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) of which Cambridge English Language Assessment is a founding member. The “can do” statements

The tasks were performed during English classes and the students were allowed a maximum of 60 minutes to fulfill their tasks. They were not allowed to use dictionaries or other aids.

The analysis of the personal questionnaire of the students took into consideration the gender distribution, the distribution of birth years, the formal education and social status of the parents, if the students attended any English course a part from school and if they had a some kind of certification. Moreover, we asked them about their perception of their English language proficiency level. The manual correction of the written samples took into consideration the number of words used, the lexical, morpho-syntactic mistakes, using a qualitative and quantitative method of analysis.

In particular, for the first year students a selection of tasks from the A2 proficiency level “can do” statements of CEFR was provided, as following:

- I can describe an event in simple sentences and report what happened when and where (for example a party or an accident).
- I can write about aspects of my everyday life in simple phrases and sentences (people, places, job, school, family, hobbies).
- I can briefly introduce myself in a letter with simple phrases and sentences (family, school, job, hobbies).
- I can write simple sentences, connecting them with words such as “and”, “but”, “because”.
- I can use the most important connecting words to indicate the chronological order of events (first, then, after, later).

For the third year students a selection of tasks from the B1 proficiency level “can do” statements of CEFR was provided, as following:

- I can write simple texts about experiences or events, for example about a trip, for a school newspaper or a club newsletter.
- I can describe in a personal letter the plot of a film or a book or give an account of a concert.
- In a letter, I can express feelings such as grief, happiness, interest, regret and sympathy.

Results

First year students

Analyzing the collected data through the personal questionnaire on the first year students, we can observe that the 65.5% of the participants are boys, and more than half of them are grade-repeaters.

62% of mothers and 55% of fathers have a lower secondary level of education. Only one of the parents has a university degree.

have a relevant influence in promoting students awareness, if used as an instructional tool in class activities.

All the students use Italian at home; 19% of them use Italian and Sardinian with parents and only the 13% with siblings. The students are not aware of their level in English proficiency. In fact, the 31% of them replied that they did not know it, and the 27.6% answered “Intermediate level”, nobody said “beginner”, 10% said “advanced”, the rest said “elementary”. Their results in the proposed test clearly show a very low level of English proficiency, much lower than expected according to the CEFR scales. An important information emerged from the questionnaire is that almost all these students have never attended an English course outside school and the 100% of them do not possess any certificate in English. Moreover, they do not know anything about the CEFR.

In the first task, the students were asked to describe their everyday life, using a number of words between 20 and 40. Only three students were not able to write the minimum number of words, whereas more than 50% used more than 40 words. Analyzing the number of errors, we can observe that 16 out of 29 students made between 5 and 10 errors.

In the second task, the students were asked to describe an important event of their life using a number of words between 20 and 40. The most striking aspect here is that 44.8% of students did not write anything. Only 6 students out of 16 made between 0 and 3 errors.

Types of errors in the first year students texts

Ten out of 29 students made global errors, so that the sentences were very difficult to understand. For example: 1) I go to the four with my friends (at four I go out with my friends). 2) August 14 there very nice for a party. (August 14th was a very nice day for a party). 3) Happy of I was from they (I was happy to be with them).

All students made local errors.

All of them made morpho-syntactic errors, whereas 65.5% of them made lexical errors. 27.6% of the group used Italian words. Here is a table providing a not exhaustive list of the most common errors found in the texts analyzed.

Omission	...take the bus /I take the bus; I lunch/I have lunch; I take bus/ I take the bus; I listen music/ I listen to music.
Substitution	After I go to bed / Then I go to bed ; towards half past ten/ around; on-in bus/ by bus
Addition	I go to home/ I go home; have a lunch/have lunch I go to my home; a good friends/ good friends;
Word order	event important; girl beautiful
Spelling	bad /bed; breackfast/ breakfast; meat/ meet
Verbs/tenses	Present/past; I have go/I went; I going to school/ I go to school;

Third year students.

More than 90% of the participants are girls⁷, and more than half of them are grade-repeaters. 78% of mothers and 34.8% of fathers have a lower secondary education level. 26.1% of fathers have an upper secondary education level. 91.3% of the students use only Italian with their families. 8.7% of them speak both Italian and Sardinian. The students are little aware of their level in English proficiency, even if more aware than the first year students. In fact, the 34.8% of them replied that they did not know it, the 30% answered “Intermediate level”, nobody answered “advanced”, and the 13% said “beginner”, while the rest answered “elementary”. Their results in the proposed test clearly show a proficiency level much lower than expected according to the CEFR scales. An important information emerged from the questionnaire is that almost all these students have never attended an English course outside school and the 100% of them do not possess any certificate in English. Moreover, they do not know anything about the CEFR.

In the first task the students were asked to write a letter describing a past experience or event, expressing also some feelings about it, using a number of words between 50 and 80. Five students out of 23 (21.7%) did not write anything and only one wrote more than 80 words. Moreover, six of them wrote a number of words below the minimum required, and eleven students wrote between 59 and 80 words.

As far as the number of errors is concerned, only one student did not make any mistakes and five of them made between three and 4 errors/mistakes. Four students made between 14 and 18 errors, which was the maximum.

In the second task, the students were asked to write something about the plot of a film they saw or a book they read, giving their overall impression, using between 50 and 80 words. In this task the number of students who did not write anything rose to 11 out of 23, that is a percentage of 47.8%; moreover, five students wrote less than the minimum required. Only six students wrote more than 50 words. In relation to the number of errors, the minimum was three and only one student had this result while 5 made between six and nine errors; other 5 students made between 11 and 18 errors and one made 33 errors.

Types of errors in the third year students' texts

Five out of 23 students made global errors, so that the sentences were very difficult to understand. For example: 1) He became friends of a children ebreo; 2) I want speak the film I see to the cinema; 3) the film speak of a man the name Edward che had a bad life.

All the students made local errors. Half of the others used Italian words. 47.8 % of them made lexical errors. Here is a table providing a not exhaustive list of the most common errors found in the texts analyzed.

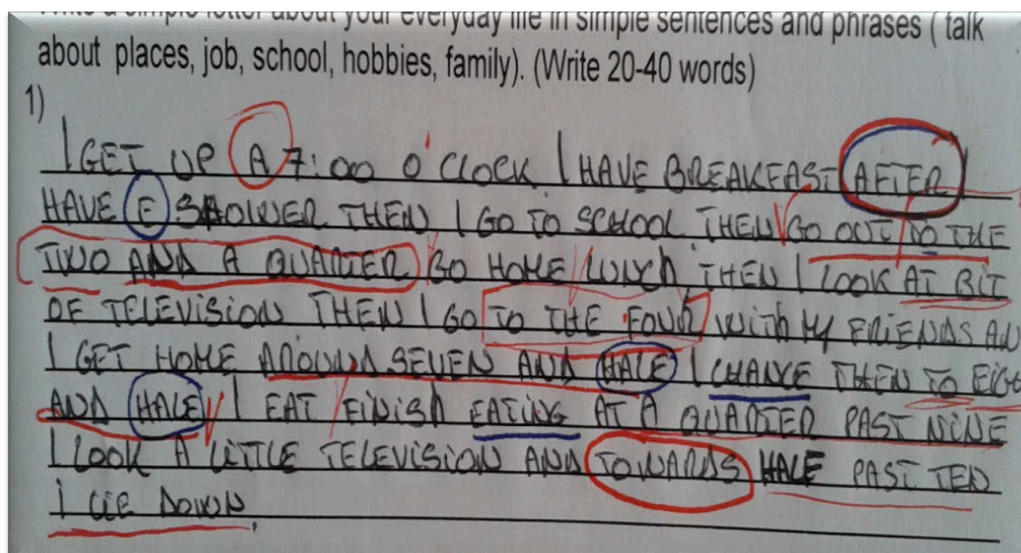
⁷ After the first two year of common core, students of vocational schools have to choose the specific course for the last three years. The students of this group attend a special course in tourism hospitality, which is preferred by girls, whereas boys prefer to attend the Cookery course or the Food and Beverage service course.

Omission	...was a / it was a; I... very glad/ I was very glad; It was rain / it was raining .
Substitution	I had afraid/ I was afraid; For play/ to play
Addition	The Spain; in the April; miss / missed.
Word order	A book very interesting; a film very moving;
Spelling	Custle / castle; spanish / Spanish;
Verbs/tenses	I have know/ I knew; are / were; I've saw /I saw; He was decided/ he decided; he has win/ won; The film not are / the films are not; I'm studied / I studied;

Discussion

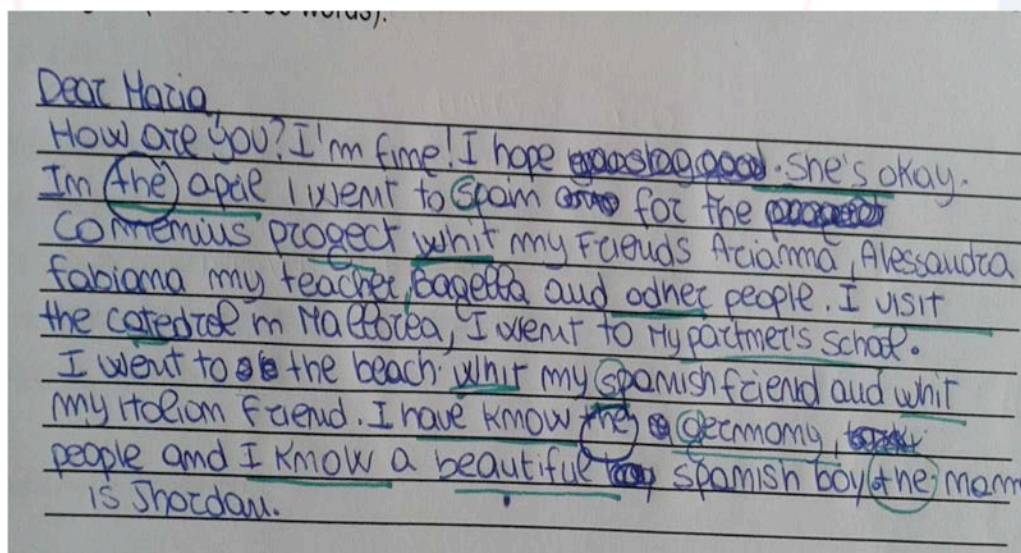
Some features of the interlanguage observed in the outputs of first year students are a great number of omissions, substitutions, additions and wrong word order; problems with the use of pronouns, articles and prepositions; a largely dominant influence of Italian; a very poor vocabulary.

In the outputs of the third year students we observed a limited number of omissions, additions and substitutions regarding pronouns, articles and prepositions; great difficulties in using the verb forms and tenses; a poor vocabulary even if not so limited as in the first year group. In particular, the influence of Italian results in the word order, in the use of subject and of tenses, in the borrowings, that is a complete language shift, as in the phrase “senza you”, or “book preferito”; in the coniations, that is the adaptation of Italian words so that they sound or look like English, e.g. “locato” becomes “locade”; or “ti saluto” becomes “I salute you”. Sardinian seems to have no influential effects, probably because it is a language from Latin origin, as Italian is and it has nearly the same grammar structure. But further research might be needed to investigate this aspect. No influence from other languages was observed, but in the texts of the few foreign students (three) attending the first year class, some influences from Italian were also observed; e.g. the Russian student wrote “Me like” instead of “I like”, from the Italian “Mi piace”. As far as the CEFR levels correspondence to IL, we observed that there is little correspondence between the CEFR levels and these learners' IL. Only 4 students of the first year group seem to reach the A2 level according the CEFR. None of the third year group reaches the level B1 and only few of them are aligned with the A2 level requirements.



An extract from the first year texts.

In this text, we can observe many different errors/mistakes, both global and local. Many expressions are clearly strongly influenced by Italian, for example ...go out to the two and a quarter (*esco alle due e un quarto*); I go to the four with my friends (*esco alle quattro con gli amici*); but at a quarter past nine. So we understand he knows how to express the time in English, but he shifts from the right to the wrong form, revealing difficulties to control his knowledge of English. He uses *after* instead of *then* (because the corresponding Italian words *poi* and *allora* have the same meaning), but he uses *then* correctly twice; he uses *around* correctly, but also *towards* (in Italian *around* and *towards* are translated with the same word *verso*).



An extract from the third year texts.

The errors/mistakes in this extract are fewer and there are no global errors. Some spelling errors can be observed, as *whit* instead of *with*, *odher* instead of *other*, or *catedral* instead of *cathedral*, *proget* instead of *project*. The adjectives of nationality are without the capital letter and the name of nation is used instead of the adjective. Moreover, we can see a wrong use of tenses, such as *visit* instead of *visited*, or *have know* (that should be *known*) instead of *knew*, and *know* instead of *knew*.

Conclusion

It is clear that a situation as above described needs a series of actions from Institutions and teachers in order to be faced and overcome. According to the CEFR, attitudes and actions toward learners' mistakes and errors must take into consideration that they are "evidence of the learner's willingness to communicate despite the risks" communication implies; that "errors are an inevitable, transient product of the learner's developing interlanguage"; that "mistakes are inevitable in all language use, including that of native speakers". The teachers of English, but also of other languages, must adopt different strategies in correcting errors. This will be beneficial in order to avoid the error-counting attitude and to help students in their learning improvement and in the acquisition of self-awareness. As we can read in the CEFR "peer-correction should be encouraged to eradicate errors; all errors should be noted and corrected at a time when doing so does not interfere; errors should not be simply corrected, but also analyzed and explained at an appropriate time; errors should be corrected only when they interfere with communication". The use of the CEFR "can do" statements should become a great learning tool to improve self-awareness and self-correction practices. Finally, integrating the Interlanguage analysis into the Language classes practices would lead to a better learning environment. Obviously, the first step should be the teachers' training in the assessment practices integrated with the Interlanguage development analysis. In fact, the analysis of the students' interlanguage is a powerful tool to identify the learning weak points both of an individual and of the class group. In this way, it is possible to adapt scaffolding activities to help students to overcome their errors and to improve their proficiency in English according to the CEFR scales.

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