What's wrong with our Swiss students' English? An analysis of advanced learners' written productions

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Englischsprachige Texte von Studierenden deutscher, italienischer und englischer Muttersprache im Abschluss-Semester eines Übersetzerstudiengangs in der Schweiz wurden von drei verschiedenen Kategorien von Ratern einer Fehleranalyse unterzogen. Die automatische Software (MS Word®) stellte bezüglich der Anzahl erkannter Fehler zwischen den drei Muttersprachen keine Unterschiede fest. Eine Fachperson als Rater wie auch nicht-muttersprachliche Rater identifizierten in den Texten von italienisch- und deutsch-muttersprachlichen Studierenden mehr Fehler als in denjenigen von englisch-muttersprachlichen. Die nicht-muttersprachlichen Rater fanden zahlreiche Unstimmigkeiten, insbesondere in Texten von Verfassern anderer Muttersprache als ihrer eigenen. Die Beurteilung durch die Fachperson zeigte Unterschiede in der Distribution der Fehler in den drei Sprachgruppen. Eine qualitative Analyse der Fehler führt zu nützlichen Erkenntnissen für Perspektiven der Unterrichtspraxis in Aufsatz und Textoptimierung für weit fortgeschrittene Lernende. Zudem werden Unterschiede zwischen den Sprachgruppen aufgezeigt sowie Schlussfolgerungen für den Unterricht in Englisch als Fremdsprache (EFL) in der Schweiz gezogen.

Introduction

Students accepted to the translation program at our university already possess a high level of English language proficiency. The test they take prior to definite admission includes receptive and productive competence components. In the receptive competence sections of the test that assess awareness of prescriptive grammar and stylistic conventions at the sentence level, scores are often excellent. Results for spontaneous writing or even guided writing tasks have been less convincing, however. Assessors have been heard to comment something to the effect of, "If only they could string two sentences together and make sense!". Writing instructors in the program confirm that the initial assessments are a realistic indication of students' later performance in producing English texts. Despite meeting the translation program's objective of perfect or near-perfect English, even final-semester students' written productions frequently evince characteristics that do not conform to essential text conventions in the language. The question of interest here is whether

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there is a typical 'accent' in our non-native students' writing and, if so, what that can be attributed to. The ultimate goal of such research is to optimize the teaching of English composition in Switzerland, particularly to native German and Italian speakers.

Sentence-level errors (such as lack of subject-verb agreement), word-level errors (such as inappropriate morphological endings or incorrect spellings), and punctuation errors (such as commas before *that* noun clauses) are familiar to teachers of English in Switzerland and around the world. There are many readily available reference works (e.g. Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990; Swan, 1995) that describe the generally accepted rules and usage for modern written English, and a focus on the sentence may well result in grammatically correct productions. Such well-formedness is not necessarily a guarantee of natural English (see McCarthy, 1988; Owen, 1988; and Sinclair, 1988 for a discussion of naturalness). For example, grammatical structures common in another language may be grammatically possible but very unusual in English (and correspondingly marked, see Schmid, 1999). James (1998, 71) outlines eight ways that grammatical utterances might be unacceptable. At the level of translation, it is crucial for translated texts which should read fluently to be written in natural English with structures, lexis, and collocations appropriate to the register and intended audience. In fact, a lack of naturalness in our students' language (perhaps resulting from a choice of excessively formal lexis and structures) has even prompted praise from native speakers who consider the non-native speakers' English 'better' than their own. To meet the demand for so-called 'real English' input, corpus-based grammars offer information on which structures actually occur with what frequency in which types of texts and discourse (e.g. Collins Cobuild, 1990; Biber et al., 1999). Nevertheless, it is not clear to what extent these corpus-based approaches to the description of English have yet made an impact in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Switzerland.

For the level beyond the sentence, developments in text linguistics and discourse analysis (cf. Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Werlich, 1982; Hatim & Mason, 1990; McCarthy, 1991, McCarthy & Carter, 1994) supply explanations and tools for understanding language use and functions that could be extremely helpful to learners. In years of teaching in a translation program, we have found that these approaches give our students the tools they require to help them cope with understanding and translating the wide variety of English texts common in Switzerland today. Applying the same sorts of tools to evaluate productions of highly proficient Swiss students should provide us with

pedagogically useful insights into why relatively error-free English might still seem unnatural.

The present study

Of interest in the present article is not only how our Swiss students deviate from accepted English and/or violate text conventions. We are also interested in whether there are general differences attributable to their native languages (in this particular study, Swiss-German/German and Italian). The comparison is to texts produced under similar constraints by native speakers of English in the same university program rather than to an idealized version of the language. It would be unrealistic to expect non-native speakers to produce error-free compositions when native speakers do not. What sorts of mistakes (as opposed to errors; cf. Ellis, 1997; or James, 1998) and deviations (misuse of words, lack of clarity, etc.) do native speakers make in their written texts? Do our non-native speakers make similar types of mistakes, or are their errors somehow different? Do native speakers of Swiss-German/German make the same sorts of errors as native speakers of Italian, suggesting there is something difficult about particular English structures and writing conventions, or are their errors traceable to interference from their native languages? Finally, how good are our very advanced non-native speakers of English at identifying errors produced by native and non-native speakers of English?

Like most of the students at universities in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the majority of our students acquired a dialect of Swiss-German as their first language and learned to read and write in German. In order to qualify for and succeed in the translation program with German as their first language, their active and receptive competence in standard German must be very high. There are quite a number of native speakers of Italian in our program, again with very high levels of competence in standard Italian. Whether ideal or not in linguistic terms, the reality of the Swiss marketplace dictates that our students should have the ability to translate not only into their native language, but into at least one active second language as well. Excellent writing and translation skills are not always enough: some of our graduates are also expected to be copy editors. The ability to isolate and correct errors and violations of text conventions can be crucial to our non-native graduates' success in the marketplace of professional English.

The question that arises is how our students can best achieve such a high level in their English productions. Firstly, they can rely on their own error

identification skills. Previous work has shown that non-native speakers are quite sensitive to both native speaker and non-native speaker sentence-level errors (cf. Derwing et al., 2002). A further source of help might be text editing tools such as those readily available in one of the most commonly used software applications (MS Word®). However, neither of the above might correspond to the high demands made by a native speaker employer or editor.

Method

As part of a larger research project investigating naturalness in non-native written productions of English, an analysis of errors in English texts was carried out by different judges (Expert, MS Word®, and NNS) on 15 English texts written by adult native speakers of German, Italian, and English (5 each). The texts, randomly selected from a larger sample, were all part of the final-semester requirements for the translation diploma and were elicited under identical examination conditions (dictionaries available, time limit of 2 hours, hand-written, no editing aids, desired length about 250 words). They were so-called verbalizations of a cartoon or caricature that had appeared in the popular press: the instructions were to describe the illustration, explain the illustrator's point, and provide an effective conclusion. All of the writers were familiar with the task, having done similar exercises in class.

The native speakers of German and Italian who produced the texts all had English as their so-called B language in the translation program, meaning that they were considered proficient enough to translate both out of English into their native language and into English from their native language. The B language standing is based on the results of an objective entrance examination, academic success for at least one semester at a university in an English-speaking country, and successful completion of English composition and translation courses. The native English speakers had all been raised with English as their home language, had received their primary and secondary education with English as the language of instruction, and had at least one parent who was a native speaker of English.

The original hand-written texts were entered into identically-formatted Microsoft Word® text files with all errors and irregularities intact and were independently checked by research assistants not involved in the present study. The text coding indicated whether American English or British English standards should be used but gave no indication of the identity or native language of the writer.

The native speaker Expert judge, with linguistic training and years of experience marking English compositions produced by students at this level (CR, one of the co-authors), identified and classified the errors and irregularities in the anonymous texts in order to determine whether there were distinctive patterns of irregular use and unnaturalness in the English produced by different language groups. The general classification scheme she used was common to the translation program; specific guidelines to unambiguously categorize even borderline cases such as prepositions and punctuation use were agreed upon by all members of the English department[2]. The scheme classifies errors as orthographic (Ort: spelling and punctuation), grammatical (Gr), lexical (Lex), style (St), and lack of cohesion, coherence, or clarity (a-c-b), taking into account differences between US and UK usage. Subsequently, the expert judge performed a qualitative analysis of the individual errors to gain insight into what was typical of native English speaker productions and what features were definitely unnatural.

Separately, the MS Word® automatic grammar and spelling checkers were applied to the texts to ascertain the number and type of objectively defined irregularities, which were classified using the same scheme of Ort, Gr, Lex, St, and a-c-b errors. The checkers were set for formal writing style (see Appendix A for the Microsoft explanations and examples of its grammar and writing style options) and to the appropriate variant (US or UK English) for each text.

Final-semester native speakers of German from the ZHW translation program who were participating voluntarily in a research seminar acted as NNS judges. Working in pairs, they evaluated each text and reached agreement on their identification and classification of errors using the same Ort, Gr, Lex, St, and a-c-b categories. They were given no feedback or guidance on this except for the explanatory handout on the error scheme provided to all first-year students, nor were they informed as to the native language of the writers. They were all, however, very familiar with the marking scheme, since their own compositions had been annotated this way by English teachers for several semesters. The NNS judges all had English as their B language and had successfully completed at least one semester at a university in an English-speaking country.

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2   This scheme may not correspond entirely to the error classifications adopted by other teachers and/or institutions, but it was applied consistently by all judges in this study.

Results

A number of analyses were carried out on the texts to ensure that they were comparable. They had been randomly chosen to reflect a range of grades, and indeed an analysis of variance (anova) showed no significant difference between the average grades of the three language groups. On a scale of 1-6, with 6 the highest possible grade, the average for the German speakers was 4.6, for the Italian speakers 4.5, and for the English speakers 4.4. There were also no significant differences among the language groups' texts in average number of sentences per paragraph, average number of words per sentence, average number of characters per word, or the Flesch reading ease as measured by the readability statistics provided by the MS Word® software.

The actual number of errors in each category for each text was converted into a standardized measure of error by dividing by the number of words in each text and multiplying by 100. All of the statistical analyses reported in the following were carried out on this measure of errors per 100 words. The standardized number of errors identified by the three types of judges (NNS, Expert, Word®) is presented for each of the German, Italian, and English groups of writers in Table 1. A two-factor anova with replication showed that the judges' error counts differed significantly ($p<.01$) and paired sample t-tests showed that the Expert and NNS judges identified significantly more errors overall (6.4 and 5.4, respectively) than MS Word® (3.1, $p<.01$). As well, the total number of errors differed significantly depending on the native language of the writer ($p<.05$), with t-tests indicating significantly more errors overall in the writing of native speakers of Italian (6.0) and German (5.4) than English native speakers (3.5, $p<.05$).

Table 1. Average standardized error counts by language group and judge

Judge	German	English	Italian	Overall
Non-native	5.3	4.1	6.8	**5.4**
Expert	8.2	3.1	7.8	**6.4**
MS Word®	2.8	3.1	3.5	**3.1****
Overall	**5.4**	**3.5***	**6.0**	* p<.05 **p<.01

Individual anovas were carried out on each language to examine the distribution of error types more closely. Because there were no errors identified by MS Word® that could be categorized as a-c-b, the Word® analysis is discussed separately below. In an anova on the texts produced by

the German group (see Figure 1), it was clear that the Expert on average identified more errors of each type than the NNS judges (1.6 and 1.1, respectively; p<.05) and type of error was also significant (p<.01). There were significantly more Ort errors than St and Lex, both of which were higher than a-c-b errors; Gr errors were significantly more frequent than Lex or a-c-b (paired sample t-tests, p<.05). The anovas on the English and Italian groups' texts showed no significant differences between the NNS and Expert judges' rate of identification or among the error categories.

Figure 1. Errors produced by native speakers of German
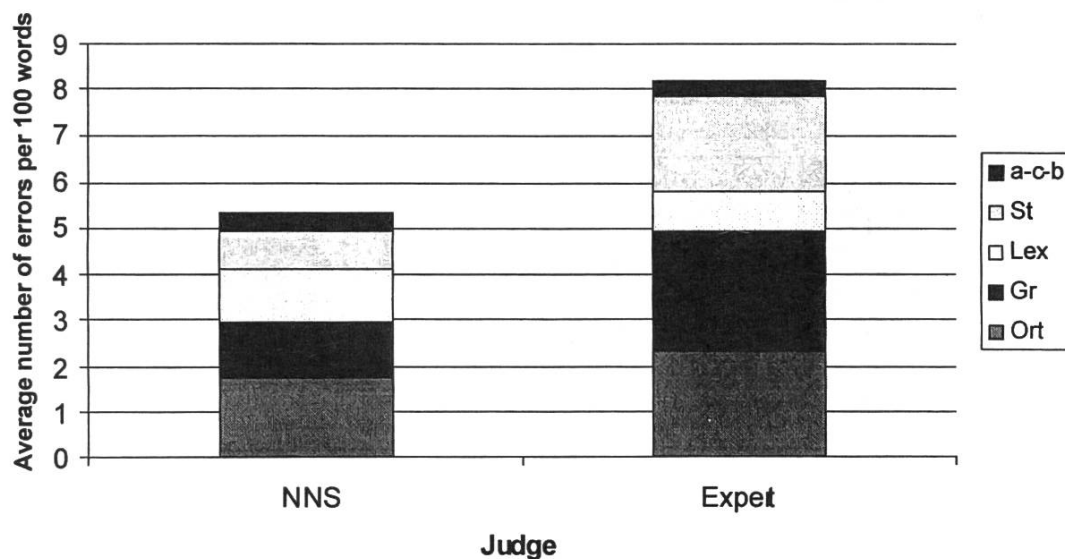
The dramatically lower overall number of errors identified by MS Word® compared to the Expert and NNS judges prompted a closer examination of the four error types it flagged. A single-factor anova on the English group's texts showed no significant effect for type of error, although there were significant differences in the German and Italian groups' texts (p<.05). For the texts produced by German native speakers, Word® identified significantly more Ort (1.1), Lex (0.7), and St (0.9) errors than Gr errors (0.1; paired sample t-tests, p<.05). For the texts produced by Italian native speakers, there were significantly fewer Gr (0.5) and Lex (0.5) errors than Ort (1.5) and St errors (1.0; p<.05).

Single-factor anovas on the number of errors that the NNS judges identified in each of the categories revealed no significant differences in any of the languages. By contrast, the Expert judge had a very different pattern for the three languages (see Figure 2). In the texts produced by native speakers of German, the type of error was significant (p<.05), with the Expert identifying significantly more Gr than Lex errors and more Ort, Gr, and St errors than

a-c-b errors (all paired sample t-tests, $p<.05$). In the English group's texts, the effect of error type was also significant ($p<.01$); the Expert identified significantly fewer Lex errors than any other of the four categories, and more Ort errors than Gr or a-c-b errors (all paired sample t-tests, $p<.05$). The distribution of errors noted by the Expert for the texts produced by the Italian group was much more even, with no significant main effect.

Figure 2. Expert-identified errors by language group
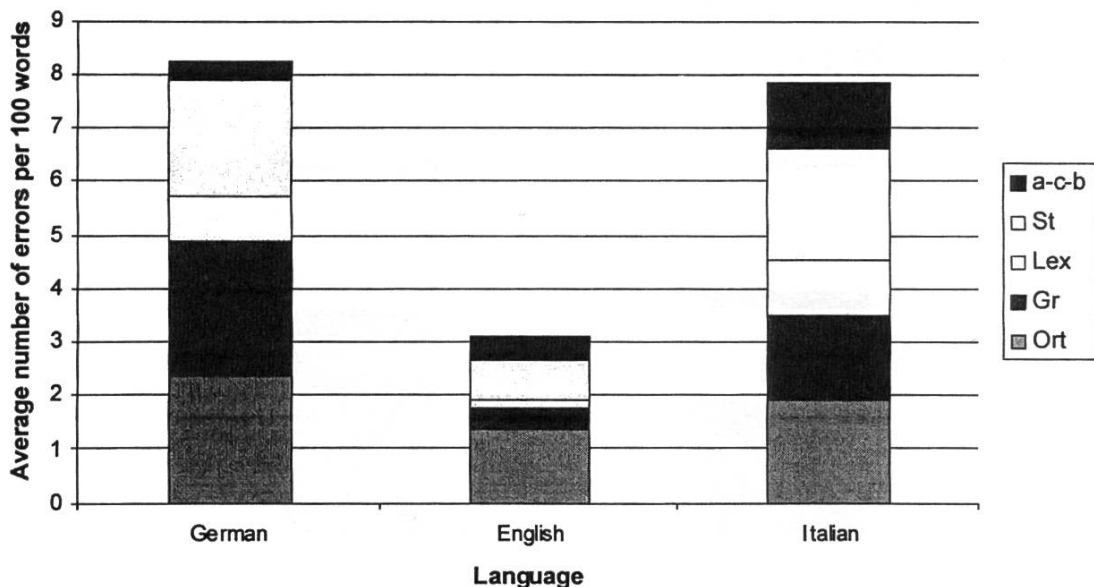
Discussion

Irregularities and errors were detected by the judges in all of the language groups' texts. If the English speakers' texts here are treated as a baseline, then 3 or 4 errors per 100 words can be considered native-like for this type of text. Nevertheless, both the Expert and NNS judges detected a difference between the native and non-native texts. Despite being very advanced users of English, the German and Italian writers produced texts containing significantly more identifiable errors than the native speakers. Only the Word® automatic grammar/spell checker failed to discriminate among the language groups.

The human judges did differ in the pattern of errors they identified in the various languages. The NNS judges clearly recognised fewer errors in the German speaker productions than the Expert did, particularly in the Gr and St categories. In the case of the Gr errors, this may well be because, as native German speakers, they tend to commit the same kinds of mistakes themselves. One apparent implication of this would be to recommend that,

when there are no native English speakers available, students (or anyone else, for that matter) should ask speakers of a language other than their own to edit their work. In fact, the NNS judges' error recognition and identification skills with the German texts proved questionable overall compared to the Expert's judgments. In the grammar category, for example, they missed a large number of the errors involving verb forms, non-finite clauses, determiners and adverbials, falsely identified seven but mislabelled only two. The category of style also proved to be tricky: the NNS judges missed 13, falsely identified three and mislabelled three. And in the lexical category, they missed ten, falsely identified twelve but mislabelled none.

In the Italian speaker productions, the errors identified by the NNS judges largely corresponded to those identified by the Expert judge in quantitative terms. However, the NNS judges differed from the Expert regarding the spread of errors across the five categories, claiming considerably more lexical errors and fewer style errors. Far greater discrepancies emerged when a detailed study of the specific errors they identified was carried out. In the lexical category, for example, they mislabelled ten errors as a-c-b or Gr, falsely identified twelve and missed twelve. In the style category, they mislabelled only three, but falsely identified seven and missed 20. In the Gr category, they mislabelled seven, falsely identified 13 and missed 14. Overall, their effectiveness as judges appears to be questionable. As a comparison, it would be interesting to see how well Italian native speakers identify errors in texts written by German and Italian native speakers.

As Table 1 indicates, it was only in their assessment of the English speakers' productions that the NNS judges identified a higher number of errors than the Expert, specifically in the categories Gr, Lex and St. Although the interaction was not significant, we found this discrepancy intriguing and worth investigating, since it might well provide an insight into the lack of naturalness in non-native speaker writing. Within the Gr category, the NNS judges tended to adopt a slightly simplistic, rule-bound approach which failed to take into account unusual and/or idiomatic but nevertheless acceptable sentence structures. For example, they inserted *that* at the start of a noun clause; identified as errors such things as the use of a plural pronoun *they* to refer to *the government*; and insisted on changing *as well* to *also* to conform to the *not only....but also* structure they were familiar with. There was also evidence of German interference in the NNS judges' identification of grammatical errors; for example, they added incorrect determiners in two places and the pronoun *it* to produce *as it is illustrated in the cartoon*. Within the Lex and St categories,

they again showed a tendency to reject idiomatic usage; for example, they changed *went to show* to *showed*, *was under the impression* to *had the impression*, *somebody inside the EC* to *a member of the EC*. They also failed to recognise accepted collocations such as *form* in *...democracy, or some form of it* and *great* in *....the differences remain too great to be bridged*. Finally, and this again points to an inappropriate (and sometimes erroneous) insistence on prescriptive rules, they questioned the lack of parallelism in the verb forms (underlined here) in *Battalions of old ladies, marching through parks, engaged in a crusade to save the pigeons*.

The frequent mislabelling of errors by the NNS judges in their assessment of all the productions raises some important questions. How effective is the marking system we have developed in our program? Do we actually help our students by annotating their work in this way if, for example, they are unable to distinguish between a stylistic lapse and a grammatical blunder? How can we focus students' attention on their own areas of weakness? In order to render the system more effective, we probably need to devote more time to error recognition and identification practice, not merely to correction, something also suggested by Muncie (2002). At the same time, we should allow our students greater access to native speaker productions in order to raise their awareness of unusual but acceptable subjective written style and to allow them to develop more sensitivity to natural language usage.

Although MS Word® seemed quite reasonable for texts produced by English native speakers, since it identified the same number of errors as the Expert and NNS judges did, it was very poor at flagging errors for the German and Italian groups, especially the German speakers' grammatical errors. Even for the English speakers, the pattern of errors did not match the Expert's. Word® was much stricter about certain elements of style, unilaterally rejecting the use of the passive. Despite the layman's notion that text editing aids might be useful for EFL purposes, our results support James' (1998) suggestion that much more error analysis of non-native productions of English is required and must be incorporated into these tools before we can recommend that our non-native speaker students rely on them. At present, they may actually provide no more than a false sense of security.

The pattern of errors identified by the Expert for the German texts differed from the other groups. There were more Gr errors than Lex and fewer a-c-b than any other type except Lex. For the Italian productions, the distribution was quite even across the error types, whereas the English writers produced

more Ort errors than most other types and very few Lex errors. In order to ascertain whether these errors were qualitatively similar in type across the three language groups, the categories Gr, Lex, Ort, St, and a-c-b were broken down into sub-categories. This revealed some interesting trends, particularly among the German and Italian writers.

Within the Gr category, four main sub-categories of error were identified, namely the use – or misuse – of determiners (German speakers 20%, Italian speakers 20%), prepositions (German speakers 16%, Italian speakers 24%) verb forms (German speakers 23%, Italian speakers 21%) and a rather wide-ranging sub-category we have chosen to call sentence structure (German speakers 40%, Italian speakers 34%). A further breakdown of the last two sub-categories was performed to discover whether any specific problem areas could be identified. Of the errors concerning verb forms, 64% made by the German speakers and 83% made by the Italian speakers involved the misuse of aspect rather than tense (e.g. *He is looking as if he were about to fall.... She clings to her husband's ankle....*). Within the umbrella term of sentence structure, three main error types could be identified in the German speakers' productions: the use and/or position of adverbials (33%, e.g. *Some are watching in pop-eyed consternation his performance*), the use of non-finite clauses (28%, e.g. *Mad cow disease is the new British weapon to restore its power in Europe*), and the use of transitive/intransitive verbs (17%, e.g. *a poor cow hurls through the air*). The pattern of sentence structure errors in the Italian speakers' productions proved to be less homogeneous, but problems with non-finite clauses (30%) and the use and position of adverbials (20%) accounted for half of the errors committed in this sub-category.

Most EFL teachers will find nothing surprising in the frequency of mistakes involving determiners and prepositions, but the breakdown of errors in the last two sub-categories suggests that greater emphasis should, perhaps, be placed on these specific areas of grammar. Clearly, our students need to become more aware of the use and effect of aspect in verb forms and not to focus merely on tense. McCarthy & Carter (1994, 93-102) discuss precisely this issue of the meaning of aspect and provide some suggestions for teaching it contextually. More attention should also be paid to non-finite clauses (their use, the grammatical restrictions they impose and the semantic effect they may have), transitive versus non-transitive verbs, and adverbials.

Interestingly, the pattern of grammatical errors in the native speaker productions was very similar: determiners (16%), prepositions (33%), adverbials

(16%) and non-finite clauses (33%). These areas appear to be intrinsically difficult features of the English grammatical system. Lang (1994) reported that her English native speakers, studying at an institution similar to ours, also needed improvement in their mother tongue competence. In any case, the proportion of grammatical errors in our native speakers' productions was still notably smaller than in the non-native speaker productions.

A similar qualitative breakdown was performed on the lexical errors. Here, two main trends became apparent: errors involving collocation (in a broad sense) and errors involving first language (L1) and/or second language (L2) interference. In the German speaker productions, unnatural or impossible collocations accounted for 53% and L1/L2 interference for 33% of the lexical errors (although there was some overlap between these two sub-categories). Among the Italian speaker productions, the results were reversed, with 38% collocation errors and 72% L1/L2 interference errors (again with some overlap). It was interesting to note a number of occurrences of L2 (German) interference in the Italian speakers' productions (e.g. *ordently* instead of *orderly*, *pattern* instead of *example*), whereas only L1 interference occurred in the German speakers' productions, consistent with Bouvy's (2000) finding that German (and Dutch) significantly influenced lexical access in English. The native speaker texts revealed only one collocation error and 2 errors involving commonly confused words (e.g. *economic* versus *economical*). However, as with the grammatical errors, the proportion of lexical errors in the native speaker productions was very small, and it is therefore difficult to claim any trend. The infrequency of lexical and grammatical errors in the native speaker productions is itself of interest and may be a subject of further research.

In the case of our students, greater emphasis on collocations appears to be required for both groups of non-native speakers. This is, in any case, very much in line with current literature and teaching methodology (e.g. Lewis, 2000; Nesselhauf, 2003), and supported by the growing number of collocation-based dictionaries (e.g. BBI, 1997; LTP, 1997; NTC, 1995; 1997). The question of L1/L2 interference also needs to be addressed, particularly with those Italian speakers who are inclined to access their English through German.

A breakdown of the error category of orthography also revealed some trends. Not surprisingly, the most frequent orthographic error involved the misuse of commas, especially the failure to use one to mark off an adverbial (e.g. after *himself* in *Nearly stumbling himself Bill Clinton is holding up the American*

flag... or on either side of *however* in *It is however rather unfair to judge people on their weak points...*). These errors accounted for 45% and 69% of the comma errors committed by the German speakers and Italian speakers respectively. In the native English speakers' productions, however, the corresponding figure was only 11%. In the case of the first example, the comma serves the useful purpose of marking the beginning of the main clause and directing attention to the main clause subject. This appears to reflect the preference of the English language for an S-P-O/C/A sentence structure (subject – predicator – object or complement and/or adverbial) and the need to mark off (with punctuation in texts or pausing in speech) clausal elements which do not conform to this structure. It would be beneficial to raise students' awareness of this pattern in general, as well as in conjunction with the use of commas.

The misuse of commas with relative clauses, although common to the three language groups, was less frequent (German speakers 10%, Italian speakers 15%, English speakers 5%). The use of an inappropriate comma (e.g. between subject and predicator or before a noun clause) also occurred in the productions of all three language groups but, again, less frequently (German speakers 15%, Italian speakers 8%, English speakers 9%). The rest of the English group's comma errors involved a failure to mark the second main clause of a compound sentence or inconsistency in marking the second last item of a list. The relatively high incidence of orthographic errors in all language groups' texts can probably be attributed to the somewhat vague nature of comma rules and to their sometimes quite arbitrary application in English publications. Our insistence on correctness in this area may appear pedantic; however, in their professional lives, our graduates may be required to produce and/or edit English texts to a very high level of accuracy, and, rightly or wrongly, their work may well be subjected to greater scrutiny than that of the average native speaker!

The a-c-b category of errors, which corresponds to the category that James (1998) calls discourse errors, is more difficult to define and tends to be more open to subjective judgment than the previous three (Gr, Lex and Ort). Nevertheless, certain trends were evident here, too. The most frequent problem was inappropriate or lack of cohesion or coherence (German 33%, Italian 59%, English 29%). This resulted primarily from the misuse of sentential (linking and attitude) adverbials (71% overall). Examples include *...he (John Major) was determined to block EU agreements. In this sense, he started catapulting British cows...* and *...English soccer fans, a fitting euphemism for*

'hooligans', indeed! The remaining errors related to the erratic use of pronouns and determiners, and to changes in point of view (e.g. *Switzerland has opted for the 'wait-and-see' strategy: if it works for the other countries, then we shall join it, too.*). Although the Italian speakers seemed to have the most difficulty with cohesion and coherence, it seems that all language groups need to acquire more expertise and sensitivity in these areas. The second most frequent a-c-b error resulted from the use of ambiguous or contextually inappropriate lexis or idiomatic expressions (German 66%, Italian 18%, English 43%). Examples include the following: the idiom *play into the hands of* to mean *appeal to* (German speaker), the word *behaviour* to refer to the war in Kosovo (Italian speaker), and *all the talks* instead of *all the talk* to mean *all one hears* (English speaker). The relatively high incidence rate of this error in the English productions is interesting: it might be due, on the one hand, to a somewhat casual attitude ("you know what I mean anyway so it doesn't matter much which word I use"), or, on the other, to an over-ambitious approach in which the writer's determination to use a clever expression or lexical item takes precedence over the need to convey the message clearly!

Like the a-c-b category, style is an area in which truly objective assessment is tricky; indeed, each error is open to discussion not only as to what kind of error it is (St, Lex or even a-c-b) but also as to whether it is an error at all. However, it is interesting to note that stylistic lapses accounted for almost exactly the same proportion of errors in each of the three language groups. The most frequent error type was register-inappropriate choice of lexis or idiomatic expression (German and Italian 29%, English 33%). Examples include *...(football hooligans) engaging in <u>fisticuffs</u>, ...<u>big</u> problems, ...it would be a <u>piece of cake</u> for the British to take control of Europe* (in an otherwise seriously-worded text), and the unnecessary use of gender-specific nouns and pronouns. Another error type which occurred fairly consistently in the non-native speaker productions was inappropriate balance or weighting in a sentence (e.g. *The cartoon shows a figure-skating contest in which Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, are starring*). This sometimes involved a violation of theme-rheme conventions (e.g. *The affinities between sports and politics have always been used by cartoonists. One of their common traits is competition...*; see McCarthy, 1991, for a good explanation of English theme-rheme). Finally, it was interesting to note that the Italian speakers tended to make unnecessary (and un-English) use of or reference to the 1st person singular in their texts (*I* appeared in the first sentence of three out of the five Italian speaker texts, and *in my opinion/view* occurred in a fourth), whereas all of the German and four

out of five of the English speakers maintained a 3rd person point of view throughout their productions. The one exception among the English speakers used the 1st person plural to reinforce his/her point, a convincing and natural tactic in argumentative passages.

Conclusion

A certain pattern of error types emerged from our analysis, and this picture allows us to direct our attention to specific problems which appear to affect all three language groups. Having identified these weaknesses, we are in a better position to help our students improve their written productions by devising tasks and exercises which focus on these problem areas and serve to heighten their awareness. One concrete case is the use of adverbials: it is interesting to note that this particular clause element gave rise to errors in four out of our five categories (namely, Gr, St, Ort, a-c-b), many of which led to unnaturalness. This would appear to be in line with Goldberg and Ackermann's (2001) claim that the use of obligatory adverbials follows from general pragmatic principles, not grammatical factors. If our students could acquire a deeper understanding of the use, meaning and appropriateness of adverbials in a text, they could certainly lower their error rate and achieve greater accuracy, clarity and naturalness in their writing.

Another more general area where there is a need for greater clarity and more practice is error recognition and correction. At the same time, however, we need to pay more attention to tasks designed to develop our students' feeling for natural and appropriate language. Here, greater exposure to well-written native-speaker productions would be beneficial; identifying and analysing the linguistic features that make these texts successful (e.g. cohesive devices, pleasing collocations and effective patterns of repetition) should help them to achieve greater fluency and naturalness in their own written work.

Although the object of study here is English produced to meet course requirements in a university program, the problems and possible solutions are by no means isolated to such situations. As described by Dingwall and Murray (1999; see also Murray et al., 2001), English is becoming increasingly important in Switzerland and Swiss professionals are expected to be able to produce high-quality English texts without the support of native speakers or professional copy-editors. Approaching English writing in terms of supra-sentential cohesion, organization, and lexical clarity in addition to sentence-

level grammar offers non-native speakers useful insights and tools which may enable them to optimise their own texts in applied settings.

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<u>Appendix A</u>: Microsoft Word® Grammar and Style (formal) explanations and examples

Comma required before last list item: (don't check)
Punctuation required with quotes: (don't check)
Spaces required between sentences: (don't check)

Grammar option	**What it detects**
Capitalization	Capitalization errors, such as proper nouns ("Mr. jones" should be "Mr. Jones") or titles that precede proper nouns ("aunt Helen" should be "Aunt Helen"). Also detects overuse of capitalization.
Commonly confused words	Incorrect usage of homophones or other commonly misused words, such as "it's"/"its" or "there"/"their"/"they're."
Hyphenated and compound words	Hyphenated words that should not be hyphenated, and vice versa. Also detects closed compounds that should be open, and vice versa.
Misused words	Incorrect usage of adjectives and adverbs, comparatives and superlatives, "like" as a conjunction, "nor" versus "or", "what" versus "which", "who" versus "whom", units of measure, conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns.
Negation	Use of multiple negation.
Numbers	Numerals that should be spelled out (use nine instead of 9), and vice versa (use 12 instead of twelve). Also detects incorrect usage of "%" in place of "percentage".
Passive sentences	Sentences written in the passive voice. When possible, the suggestions are rewritten in the active voice.
Possessives and plurals	Use of a possessive in place of a plural, and vice versa. Also detects omitted apostrophes in possessives.
Punctuation	Incorrect punctuation, including commas, colons, end-of-sentence punctuation, punctuation in quotations, multiple spaces between words, or a semicolon used in place of a comma or colon.
Relative clauses	Incorrect use of relative pronouns and punctuation, including "who" used in place of "which" to refer to things, "which" used in place of "who" to refer to people, unnecessary use of "that" with "whatever" and "whichever", or "that's" used in place of "whose".
Sentence structure	Sentence fragments, run-on sentences, overuse of conjunctions (such as "and" or "or"), nonparallel sentence structure (such as shifts between active and passive voice in a sentence), incorrect sentence structure of questions, and misplaced modifiers.
Subject-verb agreement	Disagreement between the subject and its verb, subject-complement agreement, and subject-verb agreement with pronouns and quantifiers (for example, "All of the students has left" instead of "All of the students have left").

Verb and noun phrases	Incorrect noun and verb phrases; a/an misuse; incorrect verb tenses; transitive verbs used as intransitive verbs; number agreement errors in noun phrases ("five machine" instead of "five machines").

Style option	What it detects
Clichés	Words or phrases identified as clichés in the dictionary.
Colloquialisms	Sentences that contain colloquial words and phrases, including "real", "awfully", and "plenty" used as adverbs; two consecutive possessives; "get" used as a passive verb; "kind of" used in place of "somewhat"; "scared of" used in place of "afraid of"; and "how come" used in place of "why".
Contractions	Use of contractions that should be spelled out or that are considered too informal for a specific writing style—for example, "We won't leave 'til tomorrow" instead of "We will not leave until tomorrow".
Jargon	Use of technical, business, or industry jargon.
Sentence length	Sentences that include more than 60 words.
Sentences beginning with "And", "But", and "Hopefully"	Use of conjunctions and adverbs at the beginning of a sentence, or use of "plus" as a conjunction between two independent clauses.
Successive nouns (more than three)	Strings of several nouns that may be unclear, as in "The income tax office business practices remained the same".
Successive prepositional phrases (more than three)	Strings of prepositional phrases, as in "The book on the shelf in the corner at the library on the edge of town was checked out".
Unclear phrasing	Ambiguous phrasing, such as "more" followed by an adjective and a plural or mass noun ("We need more thorough employees", instead of "We need more employees who are thorough"), or sentences in which there is more than one possible referent for a pronoun ("All of the departments did not file a report" instead of "Not all of the departments filed a report").
Wordiness	Wordy relative clauses or vague modifiers (such as "fairly" or "pretty"), redundant adverbs, too many negatives, the unnecessary use of "or not" in the phrase "whether or not", or the use of "possible … may" in place of "possible … will".
Words in split infinitives (more than one)	Two or more words between "to" and an infinitive verb, as in "to very boldly enter the market".