



# *ELF Users' Perceptions of Their 'non-nativeness' in Digital Communication Through English: Falling Short of the Target?*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: ELF IN DIGITAL CONTEXTS

English is nowadays largely used as a shared code of communication among users of different first languages in a broad range of international contexts. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) studies have become a flourishing field of research, particularly over the last couple of decades, investigating how English is employed in its lingua franca role across several domains, from academia to international mobility, business and other areas. More recently, interest in how ELF is used in written and, particularly, digital settings has been growing, given the significant surge in computer and Web-mediated communication, and the participatory characteristics of Web 2.0 environments. Despite the internet being a multilingual environment (e.g. Danet and Herring 2007; Crystal 2006), English continues to represent one of the major languages of communication, above all in its lingua franca function, allowing people of different linguacultures to connect and communicate across linguistic, cultural and spatial boundaries. Although research into ELF as employed in digital media is still a



developing field (cf. the WrELFA<sup>1</sup> corpus, Carey 2013; Mauranen 2013; Franceschi 2014; Vettorel 2014; Vettorel and Franceschi 2016) it can be foreseen that, with more than 3.5 billion users of the Internet (Internet World Stats<sup>2</sup>) as of today, academic interest in how ELF is employed in digital environments will further expand.

Recently, some ELF-related studies have explored metalinguistic comments pertaining to ELF users' self-perceptions of their competence in English, both in face-to-face (Jenkins 2007<sup>3</sup>; Motschenbacher 2013; Hynninen 2013; Cogo and Jenkins 2010; Kalocsai 2009, 2014) and in online digital environments (Franceschi 2014; Jenks 2013; Vettorel 2014).

The main aim of this paper is to explore ELF users' perceptions of their 'non-native' use of the language in web-related environments, either as a pre-emptive move, or when producing non-normative forms, in the EnTenTen corpus. Such perceptions will be investigated through a mainly qualitative approach, aiming at shedding light on how they are expressed and the purpose they fulfill in digital environments, mainly in connection to the conceptualization of the non-native speaker as a permanent learner, always falling short of the unattainable target of native-like proficiency.

## 2. ELF, THE NATIVE SPEAKER MODEL AND NEGOTIABILITY OF NORMS

It has been shown by research that communication in ELF settings is generally successful, and characterised by cooperative meaning construction and accommodative attitudes. In spite of this, ELF users often feel the need to apologise for what they perceive as a 'linguistic inadequacy' with English, frequently highlighting their non-native status (Hynninen 2013; Cogo 2010; Carey 2013; Jenks 2013; Vettorel 2014). These feelings of imperfect language competence, as well as 'alterity' and 'foreignness' to a language that is used but not 'owned', can be largely found in ELF settings, inherently characterised by different linguacultures; they are especially evident in online environments, where ELF most often constitutes the lingua franca of communication in transnational contexts. Indeed, it is not uncommon for users of the Internet to alternate use of their L1s with English, or favour English altogether, as it provides access to a larger amount of information and, potentially, people to interact and share content with.

Speakers for whom English is an additional language – whether foreign or second – are traditionally conceptualized in their non-nativeness, and thus by default as (permanent) learners and 'deficient' language users, for whom nativeness is on the one hand an unattainable goal, and on the other the main objective of language learning. These ideological constructs are set within what Cook (1999) has defined as a 'comparative fallacy', deriving from long-standing Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

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<sup>1</sup> <[www.helsinki.fi/elfa/wrelfa](http://www.helsinki.fi/elfa/wrelfa)> (10/06/2016).

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm>> (10/06/2016)

<sup>3</sup> As to EFL teachers.



and English Language Teaching (ELT) tenets (e.g. Jenkins 2007; Mauranen 2012; Seidlhofer 2011), that are well-rooted in popular beliefs, too.

In recent times, however, such traditional conceptualisations of the native speaker (NS henceforth) have been questioned on several grounds (e.g. Jenkins 2015; Kramsch 1997). In keeping with Widdowson (2012: 13) the educated native speaker can be defined as an “idealised construct, a convenient abstraction” and may no longer retain a prominent role in our globalised, linguistically superdiverse society, where interactions among non-native speakers (NNSs henceforth) are more likely to occur than between NSs and NNS.

The NS model, particularly in more traditional SLA perspectives and in ELT, is closely connected to notions of standardness and conformity to norms, where any deviation from these (native) standard norms – at all language levels – is considered as an error. However, such a conceptualisation of ‘error’ may not be relevant in ELF contexts of use (House 2003; Seidlhofer 2011; Hynninen 2013; Mauranen 2012); it is rather processes of ‘appropriation’ of the language to suit the participants’ communicative needs that are put into practice. In ELF communication, it has been shown, conformity to native standards may be less of a priority than intelligibility and comprehensibility, where effective communication and negotiation of meaning to avoid communication breakdowns seem to be more relevant (Hülmbauer 2007, 2009; Seidlhofer 2011).

It has been hypothesised that in ELF different ‘variants’ respond to several functional strategies and language change mechanisms, from exploitation of redundancy, analogy patterns and increased clarity (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012; Pitzl et al. 2008; Seidlhofer 2011; Mauranen 2012). And indeed, Inner Circle varieties of English are also marked by variation at different language levels, and several of the variations noticed in ELF are commonly found in Outer Circle varieties, that have become characterised in their local lingua-culture by processes of nativisation. In Seidlhofer’s (2011: 117) words,

[t]he novel encodings in ELF that derive from this exploitation of the virtual code are, of course, unconventional forms when measured against the standard norm. But if we accept, in accordance with the Halliday view, that these standard encodings have been functionally motivated, then there is no reason why innovations should be measured with reference to ENL contexts and functions. These innovations have their own functions to serve, in their own contexts.

Conceptions of ‘correctness’ in terms of prescriptive (standard) norms can in this perspective be seen as connected to notions of ‘acceptability’, that may be diverse in different perspectives, contexts of use, and for different gatherings of speakers. Hynninen (2013), for example, in her investigation of language regulation and living norms as discursive practice in interaction, shows how acceptability and correctness are negotiated in ELF contexts. She defines language regulation as “the construction of norms of language, that is, the construction of shared experience of acceptability in language and its use” (Hynninen 2013: 40). In the academic ELF context of her study,



she describes language regulation as the “reproduction of codified norms and the construction of alternative language norms. This includes both language-regulatory practices of managing and monitoring language in interaction, and speakers’ notions of acceptability and correctness in language” (Hynninen 2013: 6). Her findings, similarly to those in Kalocsai (2009, 2014) and Motschenbacher (2013) for face-to-face ELF contexts, as well as Vettorel (2014) and Franceschi (2014) for blogging and fan fiction respectively, show how speakers in different communities of practice may not regard adherence to native forms – from pronunciation to lexicogrammar – as the most relevant factor in effective communication (see also Hülmbauer 2010).

Nevertheless, ELF users’ overt expressions of linguistic “insecurities” (Jenkins 2007) appear to be mostly set against an idealised native speaker model: English as a Native Language (ENL) still works as a benchmark, and errors are seen as evidence of failure within a deficit model of required conformity to Standard norms, thus casting the shadow of the native speaker myth (Jenkins 2009) – and the consequent ‘unfillable gap’ between the NS and NNS condition – over (ELF) contexts of language usage. On the other hand, these negative self-perceptions contrast with a communicatively effective use of the code, along with a growing recognition that ENL normative standards may not be the appropriate benchmark in ELF settings (e.g. Motschenbacher 2013; Kalocsai 2014).

### *2.1. Metacomments and ELF users’ self-perceptions of ‘their’ English*

The spread of English as a global language of communication has led to uses of the code in ways that, despite at times deviating from ENL, have been shown in multiple studies not to hinder communication. In addition, the creation and exploitation of non-ENL forms may be linked to the concept of ‘virtual language’, defined by Widdowson as “that resource for meaning making immanent in the language which simply has not hitherto been encoded and so is not, so to speak, given official recognition” (1997: 138). The introduction of such language forms in ELF interactions does not appear to affect comprehensibility negatively, showing “there is no one-to-one correlation of lexicogrammatical correctness and communicative effectiveness” (Hülmbauer 2007: 5). Due to the prevalent orientation towards native speaker models in traditional SLA/ELT perspectives, NNSs still feel it is necessary to conform to the constructs that see the NS as the ultimate linguistic authority. This leaves them lagging behind, destined to fail in their effort to reach an idealized native-like competence, perceiving themselves mainly in their role of ‘permanent learners’ rather than in that of fully-fledged ELF users.

However, it has been convincingly argued that the two roles – that of learner and of user – cannot any longer be seen as totally distinct, since they overlap in a variety of contexts (e.g. Cook 2009; Mauranen 2011; Seidlhofer 2011); this is particularly true in computer mediated communication, and above all in social media, that are increasingly used for internationally-oriented communication, both at a professional and a personal level (e.g. Barton and Lee 2013; Vettorel 2014).



Nevertheless, ELF users online appear to be strongly influenced by the separation of these roles and by the NS/NNS dichotomy, as their use of metalanguage shows. Motschenbacher refers to metalanguage as those “linguistic practices with which speakers comment on language in an overt and conscious fashion” (2013: 77-78): in our context, metacomments may contribute to revealing the underlying ideologies that influence the way ELF users perceive their proficiency in English and their use of language in cross-cultural digital communicative events, and how these ideologies come into play in the construction of their linguistic identity online.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In this section we will illustrate the criteria adopted for the selection of the corpus used as the source of natural digital language data in virtual ELF environments, as well as clarify the scope, stages and limitations of the analysis carried out and illustrated in this paper.

#### 3.1. Corpus identification

In order to analyse ELF users’ self-perceptions on their use of English online, it was necessary to have access to a large amount of data in digital environments. The choice fell on the Sketch Engine EnTenTen corpus (2013v2), which comprises almost 23 billion tokens of web data including multiple text types. The corpus belongs to the Sketch Engine TenTen Corpus family, compiled by web crawling and then processed to remove non-textual material and de-duplicate text (Jakubíček et al. 2013). The corpus includes data drawn from multiple digital communication modes, and therefore both monologic and interactive texts.

One of the limitations of such a large corpus produced via web crawling is that the amount of metadata available is small (Jakubíček et al. 2013) in relation to both time of production and region. The second element, that may be a limitation to our study, is that in some cases it may be impossible to tell whether the user who produced the text is a NS or a NNS<sup>4</sup>; however, as will be seen, in many cases English being an additional language is stated by participants. Corpus data from the EnTenTen was analyzed from both a quantitative and a qualitative point of view.

In addition to the EnTenTen corpus, two other ELF-specific smaller corpora will be cited when relevant. These two corpora were compiled from digital language texts produced by ELF users, with data collected respectively from blog posts with comments and fanfiction<sup>5</sup>. Data for the fanfiction corpus was drawn from the online

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<sup>4</sup> A classifier was trained “to distinguish British and American English”, resulting in data-derived metadata that does not give definitive information as to the country of origin – and L1(s) – of the writer (Jakubíček et al. 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Fanfiction are stories written by non-professional writers that are based on existing media products and circulated offline and online among fans of such products.



archive fanfiction.net<sup>6</sup>, which counts 248,464 words written by 26 NN authors representing 11 different L1s (Franceschi 2014). The blog corpus is constituted by data from fifteen personal journals produced by Italian young adults communicating internationally on Live Journal, totaling about 312,300 words (Vettorel 2014).

### 3.2 Selection of search strings/keywords

The language strings used as input in Sketch Engine were selected on the basis of previous studies exploring NNSs' perceptions of their own non-nativeness (e.g. Hynninen 2013; Barton and Lee 2013; Vettorel 2014, submitted). These studies suggest that speakers often pre-empt their status through metacomments referring to their non-nativeness, often apologising, and at times making explicit references to their – potential or otherwise – errors. Analysing such strings can therefore reveal how ingrained traditional perspectives are for NNSs, who see themselves as permanently falling short of the near-native target.

In relation to the EnTenTen, the following strings were searched using Sketch Engine's concordance tool:

- Main search: *My English is* + adj./adv
- Subcorpus: first/second/... language
- Apologi\* + English
- mistake\*/error\*
- \*word

These strings and keywords were selected in order to obtain a corpus output that would yield metacomments written by speakers of English relating to their own self-perceptions regarding their status as non-native speakers, their general competence in English, and specific uses of the language in monologic (e.g. blog posts, personal websites) or interactive (discussion forums, blog comments) digital contexts.

Due to the large size of the EnTenTen corpus, in order to triangulate data and explore in more detail how ELF users perceive their own competence in English, a choice was made to limit the qualitative element of the analysis to the output of the string *my English is*, by running the other strings in this subcorpus. The second stage was carried out by further analyzing the output obtained through the search for the string *my English is* with the corpus analysis tool Wordsmith Tools 5 (Scott 2008) in order to look for specific keywords within the immediate contour of the results provided by the Sketch Engine search.

Because of the large amount of data in EnTenTen and lack of metadata on the geographical location and L1 of the writers, and due to space constraints in this paper,

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<sup>6</sup> <<http://fanfiction.net>> (10/06/2016)



it was not possible to run a specific search for non-English elements in the corpus produced by NN users.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The first string that was run in the corpus was *my English is + adj. / adv.*. EnTenTen being case sensitive, the search settings were adjusted to include both lower case and upper case for the elements *my* and *English*. This choice included the second element because in informal online environments users may forego the capital E in *English*. The possessive first person adjective was included in the string as it refers directly to the speaker himself/herself and can point to the way in which speakers construct their use of English as a 'personal' variety and to how they evaluate their own proficiency in the language when engaging in international communication online.

The search provided a result of 2,271<sup>7</sup> instances of *my English is* followed – in the space of three tokens – by an adjective, an adverb, or both. A simple frequency analysis of the output can already shed some light on the perceptions users have of their own proficiency and of their ability to communicate successfully in English. A frequency chart of 1R shows that users overwhelmingly evaluate their language proficiency in a negative way.

<i>Node</i>	<i>1R</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
My English is	not	923
My English is	n't	204
My English is	very	139
My English is	bad	124
My English is	good	77
My English is	so	69
My English is	poor	53

Table 1. Most common 1R items

In almost half of the instances the string is followed by *not/n't/no* (30 instances), indicating that users' self-perceived competence is mostly expressed in negative terms. When looking at the frequencies for items occurring in 2R and 3R positions, it becomes even clearer that the great majority of users see themselves as inadequate

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<sup>7</sup> An attempt was made to purge irrelevant instances from the output, which brought the final count down to 2,269.



speakers of English, as *not/n't/no* appear to be followed by negative descriptors, as may be seen in Table 2.

Node	2R		Frequency	3R			Frequency
My English is	not	good	197	not	very	good	125
My English is	not	perfect	101	not	so	good	120
My English is	very	poor	39	not	that	good	56
My English is	very	bad	37	not	the	best	51
My English is	good	enough	35	not	good	enough	50
My English is	so	bad	34	n't	very	good	30
My English is	n't	good	31	not	very	well	17
My English is	n't	perfect	26	n't	the	best	16
My English is	very	good	23	n't	that	good	15
My English is	getting	better	20	n't	so	good	14

Table 2. Most common two- and three-word clusters

The clusters shown in Table 2 include the 10 most common syntactically complete expressions used to describe the users' own English. Out of 20 different clusters only 3 convey positive evaluations: *good enough*, *very good*, *getting better*. However, of these 3, only *very good* is a straightforward assertion of competence and proficiency in the language. The other two expressions, while being positive, still convey a perspective of deficiency, as *good enough* and *getting better* indicate that there is room for improvement: while functional, users feel like they are not quite up to the idealized native standard they have been instructed to take as their ultimate goal. Less frequently, the adverb *not* introduces a positive self-perception of the users' English (*pretty good*, *really good*, *quite good*, *good enough*) and positive attributes appear in lower frequencies in the corpus (e.g. *excellent*, *fluent*, *clear*, *understandable*, *ok*, *great*), but the tendency in self-evaluation for users is to consider themselves inadequate users of the language. Other negative attributive adjectives are commonly used (*bad*, *poor*, *awful*, *terrible*, *horrible*, *weak*, *not good enough*), at times accompanied by an intensifier (e.g. *pretty/too/so*).

This tendency to downplay their proficiency in English has been shown in multiple studies (e.g. Jenkins 2007; Hülmbauer 2007, 2010; Hynninen 2013; Kalocsai 2014) and is also observable in the VOICE and ELFA spoken corpora (Vettorel submitted): NNSs appear to lack confidence in their own capabilities in English, showing "insecurity of 'correctness of form'" (Hülmbauer 2010: 103) as they feel their English is not up to par with the native-like target they are often exposed to in formal





learning environments (e.g. Groom 2012): for this reason, they pre-emptively inform their interlocutors of their non-native status.

The subcorpus resulting from the above strings was then searched in order to identify the possible reasons associated to these negative self-perceptions. First of all, we aimed at looking for pre-emptive apologies, to see whether overt metacomments related to the status of non-nativeness in English were expressed.

The string *sorry* produced 462 outputs, *apologi\** 24, and *excuse* 28; all outputs were associated to the participants' use of English, with a pre-emptive function about the comprehensibility and/or 'quality' of their writing, as in the following examples

I apologize if anything I said sound strange

Can you understand me? i'm sorry my english is so poor

When looking at how nativeness, or non-nativeness, is expressed in conjunction with the data in the subcorpus, the fact that English is not the native (5 + 6)/first (9)/main (1) language/tongue, or that it is a second (14) third (4) or foreign (1) language is declared; furthermore, when looking at outputs from the whole EnTenTen corpus, the reference to non-nativeness and to English being an additional (and not first) language appears as a predominant element. The 'incorrectness' of the participants' English is overtly associated to non-nativeness in 6 cases (e.g. *my English is not correct/far from perfect as I am non native\_I am no native speaker*), by specifying the native language (12) or the nationality (2). Similar findings can be found in several datasets related to online communication (e.g. Barton and Lee 2013, Vettorel 2014).

Pre-emptive metacomments such as those emerging from the EnTenTen subcorpus may also have the aim of informing readers of the possibility of non-normative uses of English in their contributions and therefore of minimizing the chance of being criticized or attacked. We will deal with mistakes and their relevance in terms of their function as metacomments in the next section.

#### 4.1 Mistakes and errors

Most of the issues discussed so far seem to be related to a self-perceived incompetence in English, expressed in relation to the non-nativeness of the participants and to the fact that English is not their mother tongue. A search for the keywords *mistake\** and *error\** in the EnTenTen subcorpus was run in order to clarify the self-perceptions and attitudes of ELF speakers in connection to their – real or perceived – use of non-normative language. The search yielded 45 occurrences of *mistake(s)/mistaken* and 8 of *error(s)*. 15 of these instances were explicitly linked to apologies, as NNSs warned their readers that there may be instances of deviant English in their blog posts, blog comments, or contributions to discussion boards. *Sorry* occurred 12 times, while *excuse*, *forgive*, and *apologise* all appeared once in the subcorpus, as exemplified in the following:



my english is also poor forgive me if i had mistaken

I'm sorry for any mistakes, my English is not perfect, but I try!

And I apologise for mistakes. My English is very weak

The idea of 'trying', as shown in the example above, also plays into the deficit model, where NNSs can only attempt at reproducing the language of the native speaker, a task they are doomed to fail from the start. Making their effort explicit also acts as a mitigation device, where NNSs ask for leniency from their readers. At times, overt comparisons with native speakers are present, with a distinction drawn between NSs as perfect users and NNSs as deficient users (cf. Hynninen 2013): notions of correctness are thus linked to a NS status, which is taken as a point of reference in the NNSs' negative self-evaluation of their English.

Before I started to blog I thought that native English speakers do not make mistake. And then I felt relieved that my English is not that bad and everyone make mistakes

In this example, the user seems to have been affected by the perpetuated myth that native speakers are perfect users of the language who never make mistakes, as opposed to non-native speakers who are immediately recognizable as such. Interacting in a 'real' environment has allowed the user to realize that native speakers were not as perfect as she had been led to think, and that her communicative ability in English is not hindered by the fact that she may or may not produce deviant forms of English. However, when she realized she could communicate effectively online, she re-evaluated her English in a positive way. This is in line with Motschenbacher's observation on his data that "low proficiency levels are generally understood in terms of native-likeness and correctness rather than communicative efficiency" (2013: 88).

NNSs may also react to criticism<sup>8</sup>: one blogger who received an un-prompted breakdown of her non-normative uses of English, reacted to the criticism in a subsequent comment:

As to bad English and bad grammar – all I have to say is that English is not our first language. No matter how well one can speak or how much one can practice, there are certain idioms/expressions/subject-verb agreement that as foreigners we are susceptible to make mistakes. When *my English* is harshly criticized or corrected – I take a note, I try to improve but I also usually say: "*My English is never going to be Amazingly Perfect, but at least I am trying to speak another language. It's not as easy as it seems and if you would have ever learned another language then you would know how hard it is.*" (our italics)

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<sup>8</sup> It is not uncommon, especially in online environments, to be the object of harsh criticism by other users who act aggressively under the protection of anonymity.



The blogger here reacts to a negative comment left by a reader. In the first part of her reply she shows awareness of her NNS status and the likelihood that she may produce non-normative forms when writing in English. She appears to reject the deficit model and she does not apologize for her use of non-ENL language, however, and while she uses received criticism and correction as tools for improvement, she is also proud that she speaks more than one language. The blogger's comment is in line with findings from blogs and fanfiction (Vettorel 2014; Franceschi 2014) and Barton and Lee's observation that non-nativeness is part of the users' self-image (2013), as well as with a possible change in attitude observed in face-to-face contexts (Motschenbacher 2013; Kalocsai 2014).

To sum up, in ELF contexts, both in face-to-face and in online communication, many participants feel the need to pre-emptively point out that they are NNSs and apologize for potential mistakes in their stories. Some ask their readers for leniency, or to point out non-normative uses of the language so that they may fix them and learn from them - besides Vettorel (2014) and Franceschi (2014), similar findings were identified by Carey in the WrELFA corpus (2013), and Jenks for chats (2013).

#### *4.2 Using the right word(s)*

A clear divide between the participant's English and their L1, the latter perceived as their 'own' language as opposed to the 'foreignness' of their English, and as such allowing a greater ease of expression, is particularly evident in Hynninen's SELF<sup>9</sup> data, where the ability to fully express one's intended meaning seem to be granted to the mother tongue only (Hynninen 2013: 183-184). Similarly, bloggers in Vettorel's data (2014) foreground their doubts about the appropriateness of their lexical choices, that are at times then negotiated with other participants.

A search for the keyword *word\** in our subcorpus yielded 11 instances of users being unsure of their word choice in English, either apologising for their vocabulary, doubting the correctness of the term they have chosen, or stating their inability of expressing themselves in English. When ELF users appear to feel unable to find the right words in English to express themselves, they may resort to using their L1, or show insecurity in relation to their language choices.

We all are very very – hmm – my english is not so good – whats the right word – lets say in german – gespannt und neugierig! Sehr neugierig!<sup>10</sup>

In the example above, it can also be noticed that the writer resorts to German to express her feelings regarding the topic of conversation – the release of a new music album –, as she could not find the words she wanted in her English repertoire. In ELF interactions, it is not entirely uncommon for participants to exploit the other languages they know, be they their L1 or LN, to negotiate meaning or to fulfill social purposes (e.g. Cogo 2010; Hülmbauer 2013). For instance, the use of the L1 has been

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://helsinki.fi/elfa/self>> (10/06/2016)

<sup>10</sup> In English "anxious and curious! Very curious".



linked to signaling culture (Klimpfinger 2007), while solidarity towards other participants may be displayed through the use of a shared L1 or LN (e.g. Franceschi 2014; Vettorel 2014).

hahaha, giggle, why, because of the Horse thingy, i hope my english is good enough, maybe I used the wrong words

In this example, the user interprets another user's amusement at her comment as a mockery of her English, which is why in her reply she doubts herself and wonders, as a NNS, whether she has failed to make her message comprehensible to others when expressing herself in a foreign language. Other users make their insecurity explicit by adding metacomments to their contributions where they emphasize that the choices they made were not necessarily deliberate, but rather constrained by what they perceived was their limited vocabulary in English:

everything was just, more than, (another word for 'great'). sorry my english is so sick!!

I used the word Team because my English is very poor and I could not find anything better.

In some cases, this emphasis on correctness leads users to doubt themselves on their use of English, often, as seen above, relating this to their nationality/L1:

I'm spanish, that's mostly the reason why my English is all nonsensical [I think this word doesn't even exist...yay, me!]

Here the user employs the word *nonsensical*, which is a Standard English word. However, insecurity in word choice is displayed, which shows how ingrained the native speaker model is for NNSs even when interacting in natural ELF environments. This appears to go hand in hand with the need to apologize for not being able to conform to ENL norms, sometimes by pointing out their L1(s) or their relation to English (*it's my second/third language*).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As was shown in the analysis illustrated above, metacomments referring to the users' self-perception of their competence in English are not uncommon in ELF settings. The presence itself, along with an analysis of these metacomments can reveal underlying individual and ingrained societal beliefs in relation to language regulation, namely what is deemed 'correct' and/or acceptable.

As we have seen, in our data most users refer to their proficiency English in self-deprecatory terms (*not good, not very good, very bad, etc.*) and relate their perceived 'deficiency' and potential production of non-normative forms to non-nativeness. This



stance seems to suggest a conceptualization of their English that relies on the dichotomy between NSs and NNSs, where the former are seen as proper, perfect users of the language, the ultimate language authorities and incapable of making mistakes. ELF users, on the other hand, appear to project an identity of 'permanent learner', that is, a continuous struggle towards the achievement of a native-like level of proficiency (*but I try, I hope my English is good enough, I try to improve, my English is getting better*). However, despite the negative self-evaluation, ELF users appear to interact successfully both in face-to-face and in online environments, and the realization that producing non-normative forms does not necessarily hinder successful communication (*I felt relieved that my English is not that bad and everyone make mistakes*) seems to be starting to emerge, in line with Moutschenbacher's observations: "notions of 'proficiency' and 'nativeness/correctness' in many cases do not go together. Many participants exhibit a relatively high proficiency level in terms of communicative efficiency but do not necessarily approximate or aim at native standard usage" (2013: 99). Similarly, participants in our subcorpus appear to manage communication in English successfully despite their self-doubts and the presence of non-normative forms in their linguistic production; indeed, they achieve their communicative goals using the entire range of the linguistic resources at their disposal, including elements of their L1 (*gespannt und neugierig*) as well as metalinguistic comments illustrating the reasons for linguistic choices that they perceive as incorrect or unsatisfying (e.g. *maybe I used the wrong words, I could not find anything better*).

The perceptions of ELF users of their own lack of competence in English may be related to the pervasiveness of the NS model in more traditional SLA and in ELT, where standard ENL is evaluated as the only legitimate model, and NSs as the ultimate authorities on what is acceptable and correct in English use. Repeated exposure to these constructs may substantially contribute to ELF users doubting their language use (*I think this word doesn't even exist*) even when it remains normative. The negative self-evaluation of 'their English' can indeed be seen as mirroring well-entrenched constructs of 'nativeness-as-correctness' as the only legitimate model. However, ELF users in the data can still conduct successful interactions in English, putting to use "a repertoire of shared ways of speaking" (Kalocsai 2009: 41), where resources of 'language in use' are exploited to allow effective communication to take place in cooperative rather than 'normative' ways, beyond the dichotomy of nativeness vs. non-nativeness.

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