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A Corpus Investigation of the Third-Person Singular Simple Present Tense Suffix in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Academic Writing

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Abstract

With the spread of English, the conception of *English* is currently changing into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) worldwide. However, the form of English teaching and learning is still identified by an exclusive reference to native-speaker norms. In response to the increasing use of ELF and an emergent need to describe it in various modes and domains, the current study takes a preliminary step in linguistic analysis of the written mode of ELF. Adopting an exploratory case study, the morphological marking of the third-person singular present tense main verbs, i.e., -s/es has been analyzed using the Written ELF in Academic Setting (WrELFA) corpus. The selected corpus included 82369 tokens, 9600 types, and 8259 lemmas. It was tagged by the LancsBox software, and all instances of variation were categorized into two groups: omission and addition of the suffix. The quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of ELF writers conform to the grammatical rules of English simple present tense, yet, there is a negligible amount (0.5%) of variation in the use of this suffix in a way that writers either drop it or overgeneralize it. Dropping the third-person singular suffix accounts for around half of the entire variety (56%), and overusing this feature accounts for the other half (44%). Moreover, through a qualitative analysis, factors contributing to such variations were identified. The overall finding of this study indicates that teachers and journal reviewers should not overemphasize such minor grammatical errors, as long as they do not hinder the reader's understanding of the text. The findings of the present study may contribute to constructing a universal framework for teaching and testing ELF in general and English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) in specific.

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INTRODUCTION

I can remember the time when I was learning English as a foreign language at secondary school for the first time at the age of twelve. One day the teacher called the students to the board and asked them to convert a first-person singular simple present tense sentence to the third-person singular. Almost all the class including me dropped the third-person singular suffix-s/es. She got mad and started shouting "I've explained this rule a hundred times why are you still using it incorrectly?" and then she left the class in tears. We were all shocked and frightened. I could see the students doing the exercises on the board with trembling hands. My unpleasant memory of the teacher's harsh response to such a minor mistake served as one of the reasons for choosing this characteristic for the current study.

The growing function of the English language as the language of international diplomacy, politics, economics, science, business, and education is undeniable in today's world (Al-Ghasab, 2022). Interestingly, there has never been a language where non-native speakers outnumber native speakers by a significant margin (Graddol, 2006). English is currently considered a global lingua franca which is supposed to be shaped by native and non-native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2005). However, due to the lack of descriptive research into ELF, a "conceptual gap" can be observed (Seidlhofer, 2001), and English as a native language (ENL) is still the typical default reference for English. Consequently, any English that does not follow the standard ENL norms is criticized as "broken, deficient forms of English" (Görlach, 2002, p. 12). There is a dire need to conceptualize English by eliminating the negative dichotomy of natives vs. nonnatives and all speakers, learners, researchers, and teachers should be acknowledged as competent and legitimate ELF users in their own right (Seidlhofer, 2001).

It seems that the main prerequisite for such reconceptualization and developing a comprehensive theory or model of ELF is *description* (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). The nature of ELF should be systematically described as people's actually using it in their written and

spoken communications (Seidlhofer, 2005). The iconic figures in this field, such as Seidlhofer (2001), Conrad and Mauranen (2003), and McKay (2002), have called for the necessity to describe and codify ELF. They believe that enough work has been done on the theoretical underpinning of ELF and it is time to move toward the descriptive stage as the basis for the practical application.

To describe a language, it is deemed necessary to work with a corpus that is large enough to provide all possible instances of real language use in various contexts (Chambers, 2005). Fortunately, such corpora have been made available through the great effort of prominent figures. One such attempt is the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE, 2009) compiled by Seidlhofer (2004) and her team at the University of Vienna, Austria; and the other is the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA, 2008) corpus collected by Mauranen and her team at the University of Tampere, Finland. While both corpora are collected from spoken interactions, Mauranen has also collected the Written corpus of English as a lingua franca in Academic settings (WrELFA, 2015).

Corpus studies and descriptions of ELF have so far been mainly confined to the spoken mode of interaction (Jenkins, 2006). Seidelhofer (2004) analyzed her VOICE corpus by focusing on the lexico-grammatical features of ELF in oral interactions, and discovered some typical features which she proposed as the core linguistic features in the spoken mode of ELF. One of these features is omitting the suffix -s/-es, i.e., the morphological marking of third-person singular present tense main verbs, by ELF speakers.

Nowadays, with the increasing role of ELF in written communication, especially in international academic contexts, it is essential to conduct more comprehensive works on the "written" aspects of ELF. Research on written corpus may specifically address the academic genre wherein "publication" dominates the profession of so many scholars who are using "English for Research Publication Purposes" (ERPP) (Flowerdew, 2015). Although the choice of linguistic features in the field of ERPP is designated as one of the

problems academic writers usually encounter (Flowerdew, 2015), there seems to be little research to fill the gap in the ELF literature in this regard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conception of "English" is currently changing into ELF worldwide. House (1999) defines ELF as the interactions between lingua cultures in English for whom English is not the mother tongue. This definition corresponds to Ur's (2010, as cited in Nagy, 2016) understanding of ELF. Seidlhofer (2011), too, defines *lingua franca* as the use of English among speakers of different first languages (L1s) (including English itself), for whom English is the only medium of communication. Recently, House (2022) expanded the meaning of ELF to be considered as a particular type of intercultural communication in which any combination of interactants and any discourse community negotiate their lingua franca using code-switching, code-mixing, discourse strategies, and the negotiation of forms and meanings.

Following the change in the role of English, the notions of mistakes, correctness, norms, and authority are gradually changing. Native speakers' norms are no longer the only legitimate criteria. As there is no pre-fixed norm or predefined standard, ELF speakers in various communities of practice are always engaged in developing a joint linguistic, intercultural, and behavioral basis for their communication (House,2022). Yet, when it comes to academic English, the model is still Standard British or American English (Jenkins, 2011). We currently lack a comprehensive model for teaching and testing based on ELF norms, and we need to describe ELF as a relatively recent linguistic phenomenon in various regions (e.g., European ELF), domains (e.g., political, business, or academic), levels (e.g., lexis, linguistics, or pragmatic), and modes (written or spoken). The gradual accumulation of these descriptive works would result in a comprehensive ELF model (Mauranen, 2003).

Scholars have taken preliminary steps to describe ELF in various regions of the world, such as James' (2000) study on ELF in the Alpine-Adriatic region, Kirkpatrick's (2004) study in Asia, and Deterding and Kirkpatrick's (2006) analysis of East Asian ELF. Besides geographical regions, research into ELF has covered various political and business domains (Haegeman, 2002; Poncini, 2007).

Academia, being inherently international, is a natural choice for looking into ELF (Hynninen, 2013). Within the academic context, the use of ERPP is inevitable. ERPP addresses the challenge of researchers, whose L1 is not English, but need to publish in peer-reviewed international journals, mainly in English (Cargill & Burgess, 2008).

In the context of academic institutions nowadays, there is considerable pressure to publish in prestigious journals (Becker & Lukka, 2022). In this context, Flowerdew (2015) warns against the danger of regarding examples of ELF as 'non-standard' English and believes that ELF academics follow their writing style and try to be intelligible to their wide ELF community. In the ELF world, the distinction between Outer and Expanding Circles is so blurred; there are so many Expanding Circle learners studying in Outer Circle countries (Lowenberg, 2002). Therefore, journal editors and reviewers should focus on ELF norms for international intelligibility by redefining their gatekeeping criteria (Ammon, 2001); submitted papers to international journals should not be checked by native speakers.

A comprehensive linguistic description is a prerequisite of uncovering the properties of researchers' writing at various developmental stages (Ebrahimi & Imandar, 2021). Linguistic descriptions of ELF are categorized into analyses on the level of phonology, lexico-grammar, and pragmatics. Such descriptions emerged from Jenkin's (2000) work on phonology. She discovered that pronunciation is the most frequent cause of misunderstanding in ELF interactions. In her analysis of ELF, Jenkins came up with what she called "Phonological Lingua Franca Core" and argued that these phonological features are necessary for intelligibility in the ELF communications.

Another level of language that has been the focus of many ELF studies is pragmatics. Compared to pronunciation, the pragmatic features are less constrained, and their violation rarely leads to misunderstandings in ELF interactions (Seidlhofer, 2004). The data analysis in Firth's (1996) study points to the extraordinary ability of interlocutors to make sense of the talk in a situation by employing some interactional and discursive methods which make their conversation understandable even when there are some misunderstandings and abnormal linguistic structures.

The next level of ELF linguistic description is lexico-grammar. Mauranen (2010) lists some of the main morpho-syntactical features of ELF conversations, including the non-standard uses of articles and prepositions, regularization of verb forms, countable and uncountable forms, and productive or non-standard morphology. Moreover, Seidlhofer (2004) analyzed the spoken interactions in her VOICE corpus and suggested a lingua franca core for ELF morpho-syntactic characteristics, including grammatical items that are deviant from native-speaker norms but are considered unproblematic in ELF communication. The list is as follows (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 220):

- Dropping the third-person singular present tense -s/-es
- The interchangeable use of the relative pronouns *who* and *which*
- Misusing definite and indefinite articles
- Misusing the correct form in tag questions
- Overusing prepositions where they are not needed: *We should study about*
- Overusing certain verbs with a very general meaning (such as *do, have, make, take*)
- Using that-clauses rather than infinitive-constructions (as in *I want that*)
- Overdoing exactness or explicitness: *black color (*instead of *black*)

Owing to the spoken corpora in the field, the spoken mode of ELF is widely described (e.g., Keitsch, 2004; Klimpfinger, 2005; Kordon, 2003;

Roberts, 2005). However, studies on written ELF are scarce, inconclusive, and primarily generic or descriptive based on the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). Such learner corpora were not collected to describe the distinctive features of ELF (Seidlhofer, 2001). Recently, Mauranen and her team have collected the Written Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic contexts (WrELFA, 2015), which is a collection of ELF academic texts covering high-stakes genres such as research articles (RA) and evaluative reports of journal reviewers. The corpus offers many contributions to the field of written ELF by providing the basis for describing distinctive features of written ELF from various aspects.

Besides, reviewing the literature on linguistic features of English reveals that one of the complex grammatical categories of English language is the temporal system (Fazilatfar, Jabbari & Harsij, 2017). Moreover, previous literature points to the fact that marking of the third-person -s represents a "typological oddity" (Trudgill, 2002, p. 98). It is also one of the most salient and typical features of both Standard English (Breiteneder, 2005) and the spoken mode of ELF (Seidlhofer 2001, 2004).

Furthermore, according to the previous ERPP studies, selecting the linguistic features is one of the most challenging factors for nonnative researchers (Flowerdew, 2015). Still more, since one of the main reasons for rejecting a submitted paper to a journal is the language problems (Belcher, 2007), such an analysis could be of great help for native and nonnative scholars who seek to publish in the ELF era.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The development of written corpora of ELF, together with the gap in the literature regarding the lexico-grammatical features of written ELF prompted the researcher to analyze the use of the 'third-person -s' feature in the academic writings of nonnative researchers. Accordingly, the present case study addresses the following research questions:

1. Is there any variation in the use of the third-person present tense singular suffix, -s/es, in ELF academic writing?
2. What is the frequency and percentage of dropping the third-person present tense singular suffix, -s/es, in ELF academic writing?
3. What is the frequency and percentage of overusing the third-person present tense singular suffix, -s/es, in ELF academic writing?

METHOD

Corpus

The present study is based on a rich authentic corpus named *Written English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings* (WrELFA, 2015), collected by Mauranen and her team at Helsinki University, Finland. It is perfectly in line with the goals of this research for several reasons. First, the broad area of this study is ELF, therefore; the data should be collected from nonnatives, and in this corpus the data comes from participants with ten different L1 backgrounds, as follows: Finnish, Czech, French, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Swedish, Italian, Portuguese (Brazil), and Romanian. Second, one of the main goals of this study is to provide a basis for the linguistic description of the "written" mode of ELFe Thus, the data needs to be gathered from unedited written texts, and the WrELFA corpus is the first ELF corpora collected from the original "written" academic texts without any correction. Finally, for the study with a focus on the issue of ERPP, this corpus containing English RAs seems to be ideal.

In the aforementioned corpus, academic texts are classified based on their disciplines into Sciences (Sci) and Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). Besides, different stages of an academic career, including research students, post-doctoral researchers, professors, and senior scholars are also provided.

The building blocks of the WrELFA corpus are three main categories of academic texts: first, 'PhD examiner reports' on submitted doctoral theses (26% of the total corpus); second, 'academic research blogging' including

posts and discussions from research blogs written by L2 users of English (24% of the total corpus), and the third part, SciELF corpus (50% of the total corpus) is a stand-alone sub-corpus of unpublished or published RAs written by nonnative speakers of English. Texts are mostly the final drafts of unpublished manuscripts written by academics with ten different L1s (other than English), and they have not undergone professional proofreading or checking by a native speaker of English. This very last category of the corpus is selected for the purpose of this study.

The SciELF corpus consists of 150 RAs totaling 759,300 words, however it was too large to be manually examined as a whole. Therefore, the present study, as a part of a bigger project, set the word limit at 5,500 words, i.e., the average number of words in RAs, and 52 RAs with over 5500 words were omitted from the corpus.

The most crucial factor to be considered in making any ELF sample is the variability in L1s (Mauranen, 2016). The data in the WrELFA corpus were collected from writers with 10 different L1S. In an attempt to observe this variability, two articles were randomly selected from each L1 and eventually 20 RAs written by authors with 10 different L1s were included (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of RAs by ELF writers' L1

ELF Writers' L1	Total Number of Words	% of total
Russian	10,477	13%
Chinese	8,988	11%
Spanish	8,614	11%
Czech	8,486	11%
French	8,234	10%
Romanian	7,624	10%
Italian	7,476	9%
Swedish	7,226	9%
Portuguese	6,223	8%
Finnish	6,174	8%
Total	**79,522**	**100%**

Note. number of RAs for each language is two.

As it is noticeable in the above table (Table1), RAs written by Russian writers make up 13% of the total corpus as the longest ones; however, those written by Portuguese and Finnish writers are the shortest, accounting for 8% of the whole corpus.

In the last step, the sample corpus was balanced concerning the number of RAs in two categories of Sciences (Sci) and Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) and 10 RAs were selected from each category. Thus, the final sample with 20 RAs covers all categories, all domains, and all L1s of the authors and could be considered a fair representation of the main corpora. Overall, the selected corpus includes 82,369 tokens, 9,600 types, and 8,259 lemmas. The following table (Table 2) describes details of the selected corpus concerning categories and domains:

Table 2: Classification of RAs by category and domain

Category/Domain	Number of RAs	Number of tokens	% of total
Sciences (Sci)	**10**	**36,666**	**44%**
Natural Sciences	6	21,714	
Medicine	4	14,952	
Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH)	**10**	**45,703**	**56%**
Humanities	4	17,565	
Behavioral Sciences	2	10,397	
Social Sciences	4	17,741	
Total	**20**	**82,369**	**100%**

As it is shown in Table 2, RAs are equally divided between two categories of Sci and SSH, i.e., 10 RAs from each category is selected. Therefore, the total proportions of two categories are almost equal, i.e., Sci accounts for 44% of the total corpus and SSH constitutes 56% of it.

The 10 RAs in the field of 'Sci' are divided into two domains of Natural Sciences (6 RAs), and Medicine (4 RAs); while, the RAs in the field of 'SSH' comprise three domains of Humanities (4 RAs), Behavioral

Sciences (2 RAs), and Social Sciences (4 RAs). It is worth mentioning that the proportion of categories and domains in this sample is a true reflection of those in the main corpus.

Instrumentation

The computer software employed for the quantitative analysis of data was LancsBox (Brezina, Weill-Tessier & McEnery, 2021, 6th version), a corpus tool of Lancaster University for analyzing language data and corpora. This software was adopted for two main reasons: firstly, it allows for uploading our selected corpora to be analyzed. Secondly, it automatically operates the part-of-speech (POS) tagging and, in this way, lowers the burden of manual tagging by the researcher.

Corpus Analysis Procedure

In the first phase of the analysis, the tags related to the third-person present tense main verbs were identified in the Part of Speech (POS) tagger box of the LancsBox software. There were three related tags, namely VVP (Verb, non-third person singular present), VVZ (Verb, third person singular present), and VV (Verb, base form). To find the cases of omission or addition of the suffix-s/es, all the main verbs in the present tense, either third person or not, had to be analyzed. Thus, the corpus was annotated for each tag at a time. The overall outcomes of the three tagging processes were 3,162 instances of present tense main verbs recognized in the corpus.

In the next step, the cases of deviation were specified and quantitatively analyzed. In doing so, the 3,162 concordance lines were manually examined for the variation in use, and both cases of dropping the third-person singular-s/es where it was necessary (underusing) and cases of adding where it was not needed (overusing) were highlighted. Being a non-native writer, the researcher double-checked the identified cases of variation in the use of the suffix with the Grammarly software to increase the accuracy of

identification of variation in subject-verb agreements in simple present tense main verbs.

Finally, all instances of variation were listed and categorized into two groups of omission and addition, addressing the research questions of the study. The qualitative and quantitative analysis were conducted, the results of which are presented in the following section.

RESULTS

In line with the first research question regarding the variation in the use of the suffix-s/es in the third-person singular of the present tense in ELF writings, the POS tagger of the LancsBox software (Brezina, Weill-Tessier, & McEnery, 2021) was applied. To spot all the cases of present tense main verbs, the corpus was tagged three times based on the three related tags. As in the RAs, the use of simple present tense is not as frequent as other tenses, the overall outcome was 3162 instances. All of the instances were analyzed manually to see if there was variation in the use of the third-person singular morphemes-s/es. Sixteen verb tokens were recognized which deviated from the standard present tense construction, representing 0.5% of all present tense verbs.

These 16 instances of deviations in the use of the suffix-s/es were found in eight out of the twenty RAs. These RAs were written by authors with seven different L1s of Swedish, Romanian, Czech, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Russian. While writers with Spanish, French, and Finnish L1s had no instances of variation in the use of the suffix.

Drawing upon Table 3, one can figure out that five out of sixteen cases of variations were done by two Swedish writers. One Romanian writer took the second place with three instances of misusing the suffix. Three writers with Czech, Italian, and Portuguese L1s were in the third place with two cases of variation made by each one. The Chinese and Russian writers who misused the suffix only once came next.

Table 3: Classification of variation in use of the suffix by ELF writers' L1

ELF writers' L1	Number of Variations	% of total
Swedish	5	31%
Romanian	3	21%
Czech	2	12%
Italian	2	12%
Portuguese	2	12%
Chinese	1	6%
Russian	1	6%
Total	**16**	100%

Concerning the categories and academic domains of RAs, it is revealed that 12 variations in the use of the suffix were found in RAs in the category of SSH and 4 in the category of Sci (see Table 4). It means that most of the variations were made in RAs written by SSH writers. To be more precise, by referring to the domain of RAs, it is evident that the domains of Humanities, Behavioral Sciences, and Social Sciences had an equal number of variations, and there were four cases of misusing the suffix in each domain. There were, however, three instances in the Natural Sciences and only one in the domain of Medicine.

Table 4: Classification of variations in RAs by category and domain

Category	Academic Domain	Number of Variations
Sciences (Sci)		**4**
	Natural Sciences	3
	Medicine	1
Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH)		**12**
	Humanities	4
	Behavioral Sciences	4
	Social Sciences	4
Total		**16**

To address the second and third research questions of the study, the deviated forms were categorized into two groups, namely, dropping and adding the third-person singular suffix -s/es. It was found that there were nine cases (i.e., 56%) out of sixteen deviations in which ELF writers dropped the

marked feature of the third-person singular -s/es, whereas there were seven cases (i.e., 44%) of adding this feature where it was not needed based on the English grammar.

Considering the second research question, nine cases of dropping the suffix were analyzed, and it was found that seven of these verb tokens had singular noun subjects, and two cases had a singular pronoun subject, i.e., he, she, or it. It means that dropping the suffix mostly occurred when the subject of the sentence is a singular noun, not a pronoun. The following extracts illustrate such omissions:

Extract 1: The authors also found that <u>concern</u> about the environment ***vary*** according to students' socioeconomic characteristics.

Extract 2: This <u>opinion</u> ***confirm*** the results found by De Young (2000).

The above extracts were taken from a RA written by a Romanian researcher in the academic domain of Social Sciences whose discipline was economics. This writer had dropped the third-person suffix twice throughout the paper and in both cases, the subject of the sentence was a singular noun ('opinion' and 'concern').

The next extract (*Extract 3)* is one of the two cases in which dropping the suffix occurred following a singular pronoun. The writer was an Italian from the academic domain of Humanities whose field of study was 'history' and this sentence was used in the context of describing a historical event. As revealed from this extract, the writer has applied the third-person singular suffix -s/es correctly in the beginning of the compound sentence (i.e., He properly gives) but he has dropped it after the singular pronoun subject, *he*, in the second part of the sentence. This writer has dropped the suffix in a similar context (following the pronoun *he*) just twice throughout the whole paper, and in all other cases, he has implemented it properly.

Extract 3: He properly gives them a definition and <u>he</u> ***call*** the bishop "ministers of God".

As for the dropping of the third-person marker by ELF writers, we found that these nine cases of omission were done by five out of twenty writers. More specifically, four writers dropped this linguistic feature twice,

and one writer dropped it once. Moreover, these five writers had five different L1s: Czech, Italian, Romanian, Swedish, and Portuguese. Besides, the results show that none of the writers omitted the suffix consistently throughout their RA. All of them dropped the suffix at some points but implemented it correctly in other parts of their RAs.

With regard to the third research question of the study, the analysis revealed that out of 16 cases of variation in the use of the third-person singular suffix-s/es, there were 7 cases (i.e., 44%) of adding this feature where it was ungrammatical in Standard English. It appears that ELF academic writers morphologically mark verbs with the suffix-s/es when they follow plural subjects. More specifically, in six of the cases, overusing the suffix occurred when the subject of the sentence was a plural noun. The only case in which the subject of the sentence was a plural pronoun is presented in the following extract *(Extract 4)*:

Extract 4: We *thanks* Dr. <NAME> for reading the manuscript.

The above sentence is taken from the "Acknowledgments" section of a RA written by a Chinese researcher from the Academic domain of Medicine whose field of study was Pharmacology. This was the only case of this writer's misusing the suffix -s/es.

Analyzing different cases of overuse of the suffix with a focus on the L1 of the authors indicated that three out of seven cases of overuse were done by Swedish writers. The following extracts illustrate examples of such additions by a Swedish researcher whose discipline was Education in the field of Behavioral Science:

Extract 5: C-group and E-group *does* not differ with each other.

Extract 6: Level 1 and 2 have been the same for class-wide occupations that usually *requires* no more than upper secondary education.

Another example of overuse of the suffix was provided by a Portuguese writer from Brazil studying Natural Sciences. This writer misused the suffix twice through his RA, once dropping and once overusing the suffix. The following excerpt, from the Result Section of the RA, presents the case of overusing the suffix:

Extract 7: It is simply a first step and the <u>results</u> **reports** that the SEW410 Nr. 14517 can present clinical importance in new applications.

Overall, the findings in answering the third question revealed that no single writer constantly overused this linguistic feature throughout his/her RA. Moreover, these seven instances of overusing the suffix were done by six ELF writers with five different L1s, including Chinese, Swedish, Romanian, Portuguese, and Russian. More specifically, one Swedish writer overgeneralized this feature twice, and others overused it only once in their paper.

DISCUSSION

The present tense of a verb in English language is formed with the simple form of a verb for the first person, second person, and third-person plural subjects. However, for the third-person singular subject, the main verbs receive morphological marking and end in -s/es, (Masruddin, 2019).

The analysis of the current case study of the morphological marking in third-person simple present tense main verbs revealed the vast majority of ELF writers in the corpus follow the grammatical rules of English simple present tense correctly in their RAs and used this suffix with 99.5% accuracy. Contradictory results are found when the findings of the current study are compared to those of Seidlhofer's (2004) study about the analysis of the same feature in spoken corpus of ELF. She reported that dropping-s/es in the third-person singular present tense is a common linguistic feature of spoken interactions in ELF. The apparent inconsistency between the results of this study and the ones by Seidlhofer (2004) may be justified in terms of the mode of communication. In general, the written mode of English is more deliberate than the spoken mode, and writers attempt to stick to the norms of writing as much as possible. Sticking to the norms of writing gets still more severe in the case of academic genres and writing RAs. Moreover, by going through the formal instruction and learning

English for many years, ELF academic writers have mastered the basics of English grammar and they can use them in their writing accurately.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of ELF writers follow the rules of standard English in using simple present tense in their RAs, yet the variety in the use of this linguistic feature is found in 16 instances (0.5%) out of 3,162 cases of present tense main verbs. The reason behind such variations in the use of this feature by ELF writers could be due to the fact that -s/es as a morphological feature of the third-person simple present tense is linguistically marked by its nature. Learning such marked features requires higher level of writing proficiency (McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy (2010) which some ELF writers in the present sample may lack. In the same vein, Breiteneder (2005) analyzed this feature in her study and concluded that the problem in using the third-person present singular-s/es lied in the irregularity and markedness of this feature. Therefore, it is very probable that ELF writers whose L1 is not English have problems using this marked feature in their writings. She also mentioned that such deviations from the norm are natural processes that occur in different varieties and dialects of English. Such omissions or additions are due to processes of simplification, regularization, and minimal differentiation (Breiteneder, 2005).

Another reason behind such a variation in the use of the suffix could be a random mistake or typo. This reason is specifically confirmed by cases in which the writer had applied the morpheme correctly at the beginning of the compound sentence, but he dropped it in the second part of the sentence (referring to extract 3 as an example). This is additionally supported by the fact that most of the writers dropped this feature only once or twice throughout the whole paper, and in all other cases, they implemented it properly.

Comparing the two academic categories of SSH and Sci, it was revealed that the least number of variations is found in the category of Sci. This may be attributed to the fact that authors who specialize in the sciences may have greater levels of writing proficiency or that they are more meticulous and sensitive to grammatical subtleties.

The results for the second research question indicated that omitting the suffix-s/es accounts for 56% of the overall variation in ELF academic papers. A different justification could be the fact that this grammatical feature as one of the "afunctional grammatical categories" of English (Trudgill, 2002, p. 92) has no special communicative function. Similarly, Breiteneder's (2005) analysis of spoken ELF in Europe proved that omitting the third-person -s/es in interactions did not hinder mutual communication and understanding.

In addition, Seidlhofer (2000) contended that the third-person suffix assumes significance as one of the "markers of in-group membership" (Seidlhofer, 2000, p. 53) in the English as a Native Language community. Similarly, Widdowson (1994) pointed out that the communicative redundancy of specific grammatical features explains why they serve additional functions, such as markers of social identity and prestige. Furthermore, the loss of *-s* is part of the large-scale processes such as language shift, pidginization, and creolization. It is a well-known feature of the traditional dialects and it happens in language contact situations as well as vernacular black varieties (Trudgill, 2010).

The analysis of results also indicated that out of the five ELF writers who dropped the suffix in their RAs, four writers omitted the suffix twice. As this distinctive linguistic feature necessitates a greater degree of linguistic skill, these ELF writers may not possess a sufficient level of writing proficiency or carefulness. Similarly, in a study focusing on the errors in the writings of students in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) conducted by Wee, Sim, & Jusoff, (2010), it was revealed that the students made the greatest number of errors in omitting the third-person singular verb suffix. Gulö & Rahmawelly (2019) also found that verb markers are the most common omissions in Indonesian students' writings in the beginning stages of English learning.

For the third research question, the findings suggested that overgeneralizing the simple present tense suffix -s/es accounts for 44% of the overall variations. These overgeneralizations being done by ELF writers

with five different L1s cannot be attributed to the influence of ELF writers' mother tongue.

Taking into account the cases of both the absence and overuse of the suffix, it seems that most of these variations occurred when the subject of the sentence is a noun. This means that ELF writers have implemented the suffix correctly if the subject of the sentence is a pronoun. One possible reason may be that the mental process of converting a noun to a third-person pronoun and changing the verb form accordingly requires a higher level of linguistic competence and language proficiency which these ELF writers lack.

Comparing the results of the second and third research questions reveals that except for three writers, all ELF writers either dropped or overgeneralized the suffix-s/es; they tended not to do both. Moreover, none of the ELF writers consistently dropped or overused it and they sometimes discarded the English language norms but followed them at other times. Such examples of variation demonstrate that these ELF writers do not completely lack the linguistic knowledge or competence, rather, convert their declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge while, following the natural process of interlanguage development.

Although, it was not the main purpose of the current study to check the intelligibility of deviations, the analysis revealed that in none of the cases, does this omission or addition hinder the intelligibility of the content because the subject of the main verb is expressed by both the conjugated verb and the personal pronoun before it. That is why Zikmundová (2016) believes that ELF users do not need to worry much about grammatical correctness as far as mutual understanding is achieved. Seidlhofer (2004) also claimed that:

"In particular, typical "errors" that most English teachers would consider in urgent need of correction and remediation, and that consequently, often get allotted a great deal of time and effort in English lessons, appear to be generally unproblematic and no obstacle to communicative success." (p. 220)

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

ELF as an independent field of study in applied linguistics is still in its infancy. More research needs to be done regarding its description before incorporating it into all facets of English language pedagogy and constructing "a comprehensive theory of teaching and learning English as an international language" (McKay, 2002, p.125). In response to the lack of research on ELF description, the present paper aimed to take a preliminary step in linguistic analysis of written ELF through an exploratory case study of the morphological marking of third-person singular present tense verbs.

Analyzing this morpheme in the RAs of ELF writers revealed that the majority of writers follow the norms of English grammar. There is only a small amount of variation in using this suffix so that writers either drop or overgeneralize it. Various factors have been discussed to contribute to this issue; focusing on the content rather than form, irregularity or markedness of the feature, natural process of simplification and regularization, low competence and proficiency level of the writer, lack of attention, and the communicative redundancy of the feature.

Interestingly, this omission or addition never decreased the intelligibility of the content because none of the writers constantly deviated from Standard English and the subject of the main verb was expressed either by the conjugated verb or the personal pronoun before it.

This study could be considered a small step toward developing a comprehensive model of ELF pedagogy; nevertheless, it has some limitations. Firstly, for the sake of deep analysis and description, only one linguistic feature was selected for the analysis and following studies may focus on other linguistic features. Secondly, in addition to the linguistic features, pragmatic, discursive, social, and all other aspects of ELF needed to be delved into before coming up with a well-founded model of ELF. Thirdly, the WrELFA corpus which was implemented in the current study did not provide information regarding the ELF writers' level of English

language proficiency and this limitation restricts the generalization of the results and the analysis of variation.

The overall descriptive findings of this study may contribute to constructing a universal linguistic model or framework for teaching ELF academic writing. It has also significant implications for teaching and testing ELF in general and teaching academic writing for publication, in particular.

Furthermore, the results of this study carry implications for teacher education programs. Referring to my personal experience recounted at the beginning of the paper, it is evident that over-emphasizing the grammatical rules of standard English creates a psychological barrier to learning. Students usually experience a high level of anxiety in the process of learning a foreign language, and additional pressure from the side of teacher will lead to decreasing students' motivation and self-confidence, as well as, creating a negative attitude toward learning the foreign language. It is therefore recommended that teachers leave out those cases of variation that do not lead to misunderstandings in written or spoken ELF communications.

This study was an attempt to boost the connection between the field of English as an Academic Lingua Franca (EALF) and the emerging field of ERPP. The linguistic analysis of RAs written by ELF researchers would greatly help novice non-native academics. It may also contribute to reforming gatekeeping criteria in the field of ERPP in such a way that native and non-native scholars have an equal chance to publish their academic papers in the ELF era. Nevertheless, it is evident that many lines of research remain to be investigated to incorporate the ELF perspective into teaching and testing (Canagarajah, 2005). This could be done in a way that teachers and journal reviewers would forget about native speakers' norms and consider systematic forms of ELF from the outer and expanding circles as correct, even though, they may be different from those used by the inner circle (Jenkins, 2006).

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