

English as a Lingua Franca:
Exploring a Communicative Situation and Language Scenario

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Abstract

The discourse on English as a lingua franca (ELF) has impacted the way that English language teaching (ELT) is conceptualised, yet arguably little has changed in how English as an additional or second language (EAL/ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) are taught in practice. This paper outlines the evolution of ELF, observing its transformation from a language variety to a language scenario, and revisits its implications for the field of ELT.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca (ELF), English language teaching (ELT), multilingualism

Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) has undergone various conceptual transformations since its inception. In doing so, a new paradigm has emerged that challenges the very foundations of English language teaching (ELT). On one hand, how the English language is being used globally or glocally¹ is now more accurately identified, and consequently, some of its connections to imperialism and colonialism have lost their weight. However, in the context of education, this has resulted in a field that no longer clearly understands what its learning objectives should be, nor how they can be achieved. In fact, “most classroom language teaching ... has changed remarkably little considering how much the discourse *about* it has” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 9), and a clear path that recognises and integrates the realities of English in its function as a lingua franca into the practice of ELT is often absent.

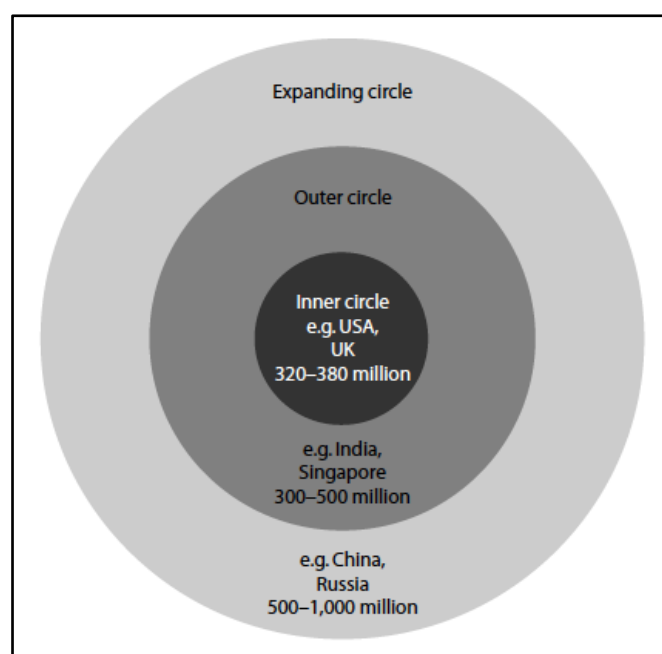
¹ Globalisation refers to “the interpenetration of the global and the local, resulting in unique outcomes in different geographical areas. This view emphasizes global heterogeneity” (Ritzer, 2003, p. 193)

Background

“English is today's lingua franca *par excellence*” (Holmes & Dervin, 2016, p. 2), with at least a quarter of the world's population being considered “fluent or competent” English language users (Crystal, 2012, p. 6). Although the language sits alongside other lingua francas, it is unparalleled in both “global expansion” and its “penetration of social strata and domains” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 3). Using Kachru's (1988) Three Circles of English model as a point of departure, with native speakers² (ENL) occupying the inner circle, nativised³ English language users (ESL) situated in the outer circle, and foreign language learners (EFL) residing in the expanding circle, the concept of World Englishes (WE) emerges.

Figure 1:

Three Circles of English Model



Source: Crystal, 2012, p. 61

² Native speakers being associated with nations such as “Britain and US, along with their settler colonies Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa” (Piller & Bodis, 2022, p. 2)

³ Also referring to English language users that live in contexts where “the language has become part of a country's chief institutions and plays an important ‘second language’ role in a multilingual setting” (Crystal, 2012, p. 60)

As Kachru (1992) observes, WE, which are located within the post-colonial societies of the outer circle, are “non-native models of English [that] are linguistically identifiable [and] geographically definable” (p. 66). In an attempt to isolate communication patterns in a globalised society where “people engage ... across all three ‘concentric circles’”, the concept of English as an International Language (EIL) developed (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 4). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, this area of inquiry eventually took the name that we know it by today, English as a lingua franca (ELF). Rather than a conceptual evolution, this change was above all semantic; EIL and the earlier stages of ELF both followed a WE paradigm.

The Evolution of ELF

There has been much debate about what constitutes ELF and who uses it. Initially, scholars differed most in how they positioned native speakers. For example, some argued that ELF communication needed to take place between two speakers from different languacultural (or linguacultural) backgrounds, both of whom were not native English speakers. Others included communication between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) in their interpretation of ELF, but when conducting research, restricted input from NS participants (Jenkins, 2015). This is a reflection of the fact that:

ELF researchers, influenced by the example of World Englishes, believed it would be possible to eventually describe and possibly even codify ELF varieties. Such varieties, it was believed, would consist of those items commonly used across speakers from many different L1s along with those items related to each specific L1 ... This was seen both within and outside ELF research as a necessary step in the direction of legitimising ELF use. (Jenkins, 2015, p. 54)

Therefore, in the 2000s this resulted in “two large corpora, VOICE (the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) and ELFA (the corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings)”, in addition to the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) (Jenkins, 2015, p. 50). The first, a project led by Seidlhofer, aimed to observe ELF lexicogrammar, the second, ELFA,

was Mauranen's attempt to record academic usages of ELF, and the latter, LFC, focused on the phonological features of ELF as explored by Jenkins.

While Seidlhofer, Mauranen and Jenkins acknowledged that the development of ELF was fluid in its deviation from NS models (models that were, and are, always changing), they wondered if there would be emerging patterns or regularities that could be isolated among different variations of ELF (Mauranen, 2003; Jenkins, 2015). However, attempts to stabilise or standardise ELF, that unlike WE, is geographically ungrounded and characterised by its flow across cultures, have been questioned. ELF was (and is) by nature in opposition to monolithic representations of language (Jenkins, 2015). Pennycook also shares this opinion, stating that "if an ELF approach is concerned only with devising an alternative non-native speaker (NNS) rather than native speaker (NS) standard, even if it is doing this as a pedagogical response to the need for something other than NS and WE models, it is certainly open to criticism for being potentially reductive and prescriptive" (2008, p. 30.3).

In the wake of the aforementioned studies, there was a significant ideological shift. "The quest for ELF varieties was abandoned in light of Seidlhofer's recognition that ELF use transcends boundaries and therefore that the notion of varieties was a contradiction in terms" (Jenkins, 2015, p. 77). ELF came to be seen "not as a new language variety, but as a function of language" (Imig, 2018, p. 104). In other words, scholars began referring to ELF as a communicative situation instead of a language type. Moreover, being disassociated from a location, "it could be argued that English is no one's native language in ELF communication since all participants will need to adapt and adjust their language and other communicative practices to ensure successful communication" (Baker, 2015, p. 11). Thus, considering that the majority of English speakers around the world are using English in its capacity as a lingua

franca, there are many implications for the field of ELT, which has traditionally been modelled on NS norms.

ELF Today

Perhaps as a consequence of historical disagreements, ELF is now defined in a manner that is inclusive of a multitude of viewpoints. Jenkins classifies ELF in her 2015 publication as:

- English as it is used as a contact language among speakers from different first languages (Jenkins 2009).
- any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option (Seidlhofer 2011).
- The use of English in a lingua franca language scenario (Mortensen 2013). (p. 56)

Combined, these descriptions offer a broader understanding of who can utilise ELF, which includes NS and NNS, while also acknowledging the situational or contextual aspects of ELF interactions. However, there have been some notable challenges to this vision and attempts to reformulate the way in which we refer to ELF phenomena. For example, Canagarajah (2007) proposed substituting ELF, which he associated with fixed language forms, in favour of Lingua Franca English (LFE), arguing that:

LFE does not exist as a system out there. It is constantly brought into being in each context of communication ... there is no meaning for form, grammar, or [sic] language ability outside the realm of practice. LFE is not a product located in the mind of the speaker; it is a social process constantly reconstructed in sensitivity to environmental factors. (p. 91-94)

While many acknowledge and share his emphasis on the social, interactional functions of ELF, LFE was never widely adopted. Instead, Mortensen's description of ELF as a language scenario conveys the sense of Canagarajah's argument and has proven adequate for scholars, preventing further fragmentation in the field.

The final phase in ELF's evolution has been one that de-emphasises the role of English itself. Sometimes referred to as "English as a Multilingua Franca", this conceptualisation highlights the multiple languages that are present in any given ELF encounter (Jenkins, 2015, p. 77). Therefore, "instead of talking about ELF users, or more specifically NNES/NES⁴ ELF users, we can talk about ... 'Multilingual ELF users' and 'Monolingual ELF users'" (Jenkins, 2015, p. 74). In this approach, multilingualism becomes the framework within which ELF sits, and the designation of NNES (or NNS) and NES (or NS) is rendered obsolete. It also alleviates the need to identify who is and who is not considered a "native speaker", which is problematic given the complex and possibly contradictory biodevelopmental (ie., when a language is acquired) and proficiency-related facets of the NES (or NS) designation (Cook, 1999).

Going beyond the above ELF definitions and Seidlhofer's (2011) assumption that English is often the only option, there is a lesser explored scenario of particular relevance: "situations in which English is not used but is potentially available to all in the interaction, or for situations in which participants choose to speak primarily in another of their mutual languages, but 'slip into' English from time to time" (Jenkins, 2015, p. 66). Alternatively, one could investigate the inverse, looking at why English is chosen when other languages are readily available for the interlocutors to draw upon. Multilingualism enables the observer to ask when and why English is (and isn't) selected as a lingua franca by multilingual ELF users who may have various linguistic resources available to them. Furthermore, looking to sociolinguistics, researchers can explore issues related to power and language as they surface in multilingua franca communication.

⁴ NNES (non-native English speaker); NES (native English speaker)

Challenges (or Opportunities) for ELF

Globally, most outer and expanding circle users do not employ English to communicate exclusively with inner circle, native speakers. It is far more likely that those who have learnt English as an additional language utilise it to communicate with other outer and expanding circle users within intercultural, transcultural and/or multilingual contexts. Likewise, many inner circle English speakers, including both monolingual and multilingual users, increasingly communicate with individuals across the outer and expanding circles. Therefore, by viewing the use of English through an ELF lens (rather than an EAL/ ESL or EFL lens), there may be an opportunity to re-evaluate some of the lingering issues that the field of ELT has yet to resolve.

In terms of challenges, the “unrivalled position of English” as “the first truly global language in history” has resulted in “massive criticism” (House, 2018, p. 97). For example, initiatives that support the dissemination of English have long come under scrutiny as imperialistic and hegemonic endeavours (Phillipson, 1992). In this line of thinking, ELT is viewed as a vehicle to diffuse content about the inner circle’s culture, subtly transmitting their values and beliefs. ELT also reproduces “positive ideologies about the language” which enable “centre nations”⁵ to “exercise power over those in the ‘periphery’” (Hewings & Tagg, 2012, p. 23). One of these ideologies is the notion that English is a necessity for participation in a globalised world. In the context of cultural hegemony, especially the interplay between consent and coercion, this brings into question the extent to which learning English is a “free choice” or an imposition (Ives, 2009, p. 673). Another concern is ELT’s tendency to champion a prescriptive language model based on the inner circle’s norms. The language has become a commodity that is marketed to (and unequally accessed by) the outer and expanding circles for consumption: learners are assessed and inevitably deemed deficient, on

⁵ Referring to inner circle nations, such as the USA and UK (Hewings & Tagg, 2012, pp. 22-23)

their ability to replicate the inner circle's language patterns (Cook, 1999). This is exemplified in native speakerism, an ideology that positions NNS, including non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), as inferior to NS (Holliday, 2017). Moreover, as the figure of the native speaker is often racialised (Rosa & Flores, 2017) and associated with White normativity (Jenks, 2017), racial discrimination is potentially re-enforced in the “practices and ideologies of English language teaching” (Pennycook, 2022, p.8). In addition to all this, there are myriad concerns about English language spread and its effect on linguistic diversity, particularly regarding the perpetuation of social injustice (Piller, 2016) and its threat to endangered languages (Phillipson, 1992).

English in its function as a lingua franca (ELF) is not exempt from these issues. For instance, historically ELF shares ELT's colonial past. As Canagarajah (2006) describes, “when English spread to the colonies from England beginning from the 16th century, it served as a contact language between the colonizers and the colonized. It also served as a contact language *between* the colonized” (p. 197). However, this connection does not mean that colonial discourses, including but not limited to the NS/NNS dichotomy, are inevitably reinforced through the use of ELF (Pennycook, 1998). In fact, “after the decolonization of the 1950s”, ELF evolved and has taken on a “new role ... as a global contact language” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 197). Seidlhofer explains how the characteristic fluidity of ELF makes it an empowering, creative tool for the user:

The argument that English is intrinsically hegemonic can only hold if one accepts the implicit (counterfactual) assumption that the intrinsic qualities of the language remain unchanged in different communities and contexts of use rather than get adapted to suit the needs of different kinds of speakers in different contexts ... This assumption of stable homogeneity denies the positive realization that the adaptation may be evidence of users actually resisting the hegemony of the language by appropriating it for their own purposes. (2011, p. 33)

In an ELT scenario, English can be presented as fixed and homogeneous, taught in accordance with (and occasionally by) the native speaker who has ownership over the

language and controls all aspects of pedagogy. Yet, in an ELF paradigm, users focus less on normative standards or forms, and move towards “alternate models” based on the (g)local context, fostering “relationship[s] between communities in more fluid and egalitarian terms” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 199). As opposed to replicating the status quo, individuals “exert their agency to negotiate with English and preserve their interests” (p. 202). This viewpoint acknowledges the autonomy of all English language users, and their innate ability to resist hegemonic influence.

When situated within a framework of multilingualism, ELF may also help dismantle monolingual assumptions that have held considerable weight over ELT and second language acquisition (SLA) in general. For example, the so-called “monolingual bias” led to a dynamic in SLA where “each language was seen as a separate entity not to be ‘tainted’ by the other(s) in a person’s linguistic repertoire” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 59). However, considering “that for ELF users, English is only one language among others present or latent in any interaction” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 61), it is increasingly possible to valorise “multilingual repertoires” that are “motivated by the communicative purpose and the interpersonal dynamics of the interaction” (Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 242). Cook (1999) also argued for a related approach, putting forth the notion of “multicompetence”, which encompasses “the total language knowledge of a person who knows more than one language” (p. 190). This shifts the point of reference for the learner: instead of being compared to a “hypothetical native speaker” of English, they are envisioned as a multilingual L2 (or multilingual ELF) user, building on their already “interlingual and intercultural” skill set (House, 2018, p. 99-100). In doing so, language learning at all levels is seen as a benefit, easing the pressure to reach the unattainable levels of proficiency traditionally promoted by ELT (which can cause learners to “give up” and self-identify as “failures”) (Cook, 1999, p. 204; Cook, 2016, p. 188).

One of the more divisive topics with ELF is the relationship between language, culture and identity. The predominant assumption in ELT is that there is an “‘inexorable’ link between a language and a culture”, and this is reflected in the large quantity of inner circle content found in many English language textbooks and educational materials (Baker, 2015, p. 3). However, this link contradicts the function of English on a global scale, especially as it is “predominately used for intercultural communication as a lingua franca ... in ways which are frequently not related to predefined national cultures” (Baker, 2016, p. 72). Accordingly, the potential for neutrality in ELF communication has been debated: some scholars believe that ELF may be capable of moving along “a continuum between neutrality and being used to construct identity,” while others argue that EFL communication “involves participants, contexts, histories, purposes and linguistic choices, none of which are neutral” (Baker, 2016, p. 74). Regardless of one’s stance, the ELF paradigm questions the simplistic ways that culture has been used to essentialise populations in not only language education, but in the closely related, if not intertwined field of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Baker, 2022). Moreover, it has drawn attention to the frequently unexamined issue of methodological nationalism⁶, which over-emphasises the relevance of national culture during interactions (Baker, 2022). While language education and intercultural studies have made cultural difference (and misunderstanding) central to their curricula, it is important to remember that this discourse ultimately “arose in the historical context of the nineteenth and twentieth century as part of the processes of colonialism” (Piller, 2017, p. 14). The complexity of ELF, including its movement across cultures and its status as a situation rather than a language variety, presents an opportunity for “new ways of talking about culture at a time when transnational relations are dominant” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 201).

⁶ Methodological nationalism “can be defined as the all-pervasive assumption that the nation-state is the natural and necessary form of society in modernity; the nation-state is taken as the organizing principle of modernity” (Chernilo, 2006, pp. 5-6)

Reconciling ELF and ELT

A significant challenge for ELF is its reconciliation with EAL/ESL or EFL and consequently, ELT. For example, (1) ELF and (2) EAL/ESL or EFL are approaches to language that are underpinned by two different paradigms: the first refers to a communicative situation, the second is grounded in the personal characteristics of the user and their local context (Risager, 2016). Risager (2016) illustrates this by pointing out how English can be a first or native language, or one of two or three learnt in early childhood, in addition to an early second language, a late second language or a foreign language (p. 36):

These concepts relate to the individual ... whereas the concept of lingua franca use relates to communication in real-time in specific settings ... The distinction between English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as a foreign language (EFL) ... is problematic because it mixes these two perspectives: the social and the individual ... The social perspective is about the communicative situation or event, whereas the individual perspective is about the role of the language in the individual's life and learning. (pp. 36-37)

Thus, although ELF presents opportunities for rethinking the field of ELT, it largely refers to a language scenario rather than a form of the language that can be taught and learnt. This creates obstacles for ELT educators who would like to integrate insights from ELF research in their classrooms, but find it difficult to disentangle and/or bridge the social function of ELF from/with the users' individual language profiles. Moreover, it does not resolve the long-standing debate about "whether the ELF construct should be defined in terms of Standard English⁷... or whether ... we need to define our target differently" (Elder & Davies, 2006, p. 287). If indeed the "target" in ELT needs to be different in order to reflect English in its global function as a lingua franca (as many scholars believe), then how can this realistically be addressed given the disconnect between the two perspectives?

⁷ Standard English (ST), also referred to as native-speaker (NS) Standard English, is used in "existing approaches to assessing English as a foreign language offered by such tests as TOEFL ... and IELTS" (Elder & Davies, 2006, p. 282)

Despite the large quantity of scholarly work that critically explores ELT, many approaches to English language education continue to be informed by “old ideas about the primacy of the native speaker”, and they reserve “privileged status for Standard English as defined by Britain and the US” (Piller & Bodis, 2022, p. 2). Accordingly, the impact of ELF, which de-emphasises both the role of the NS and the centrality of the English language in multilingual encounters, remains minimal:

If the whole ELT industry - textbooks, teacher education, examinations, and the like - is based on NS standard norms, and success or failure depends on conformity to these norms, it is hardly surprising that dissent is rare. So while there needs to be a change in attitude, this is understandably difficult to bring about. (Jenkins, 2007, p. 59)

A shift in paradigm would require the entire field to be rethought, including how (and even why and for whom) English language proficiency (ELP) is achieved and measured (Piller & Bodis, 2022). In a more recent publication, Jenkins (2015) reaffirms her position, highlighting “how far we are from any such approach to language assessment (or teaching)” that valorises English in its function as a multilingual franca (p. 79). Although the lengthy discourse on NS norms and perceptions of Standard English in ELT has arguably come to a stalemate, scholars are encouraging situational competencies that contribute to the collaborative nature of ELF and align with the conceptualisation of ELF as a language scenario.

Predictably, some of the aforementioned competencies for successful communication emphasise the transcultural nature of many ELF exchanges and ELT classrooms. For example, Jenkins advises that “co-construction and negotiation (regardless of any resulting difference from native English norms) should be prioritized and rewarded, [and] that translanguaging (‘multilingualism-with-English’) should be regarded as normal language behaviour” (2015, p. 79). In the context of ELT, this empowers students to mobilise their full “linguistic repertoires” (and potentially multimodal resources (Matsumoto, 2019), such as

gesture and non-verbal vocalisations) while also cultivating “social and ethical dispositions” that enable them to effectively express themselves and to understand others (Mendoza, 2019, p. 1055). In terms of ELT content, Risager contends that it is possible to foster “a more transcultural approach ... by drawing attention to the fact that the target language may be used in many kinds of situations all over the world” (2016, p. 37). This could be done by exposing students to materials (ie., listening exercises and texts) that feature English as it is used across all of the Kachruvian circles, not just in the inner circle. While Mackenzie (2013) also calls for increased language awareness (Seidlhofer, 2011) among teachers and learners, he cautions against the excessive or misguided use of ELF-specific concepts and theories in ELT:

You cannot turn all English classes into lectures on variational sociolinguistics and communication strategies: standard (and non-standard) English forms will still have to be presented and practised ... There is indeed a difference between spending less time on forms and pretending that they don't exist. (p. 166-168)

This observation demonstrates how a productive tension between normative and non-standard English forms may be possible in ELT; although a language target continues to exist, educators can problematise it in nuanced ways. And finally, by maintaining Baker's (2015) argument that no one's native language is ELF, the responsibility for successful communication is more equally distributed amongst all interlocutors. As McNamara (2012 in Chopin, 2015) suggests, “the native speaker would no longer be given a free pass ... [and] being a non-native speaker would not automatically mean being the one at fault for any communicative missteps” (p.201) .

Conclusion

By tracing the origins and evolution of ELF, the field of ELT can better understand where it stands: hegemonic notions of native speaker norms and Standard English are widespread, and the challenges of addressing them through pedagogical action remain. Not only do educators

struggle with deeply held ideologies that are ingrained in their training and methods, but English language students also find it difficult to change their expectations for themselves, their peers and their classrooms. Considering that universities in Ireland and in the rest of continental Europe (ie., the expanding circle) are being increasingly internationalised and/or are offering English medium instruction (EMI), there will be a substantial number of faculty and students “who do not share a common language apart from English” in the coming years, which will invariably result in the more frequent “use of English as a lingua franca” (Chopin, 2015, p. 193). While there may not yet be a clear path forward as to how we can better draw on English in its function as a global lingua franca for the purposes of ELT, revisiting the concept and identifying opportunities for structured reflection on the topic with students may be a step in the right direction.

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