

English as a Lingua Franca: A Teacher's Perspective

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Introduction

It is my contention that most, if not all, of the students learning English in schools in non-English-speaking countries will need that language not in order to interact within a specific English speech community, but rather to communicate with other English speakers (some native but probably most non-native), both intra- and internationally. In other words, they need to learn English as a lingua franca (ELF): and the main goal of their teachers is to prepare them to function effectively in such contexts. The considerations affecting those teachers' professional decisions are substantially different not only from those of applied linguistics researchers, but also from those of teachers working, say, with immigrant students in an American university, or teachers of ESL in Australian schools.

The topic of ELF has been extensively researched and written about in recent years. The present article attempts to provide some interpretations and discussion of the research literature from the point of view of the teacher.

English as a lingua franca

The literature on this subject is far from presenting clear-cut definitions of a lingua franca. Two main definitions are offered: ELF can be either

- a language, an actual variety of English, distinct from native varieties; or
- a context or purpose of use.

Seidlhofer (2004, p. 211) presents those understandings:

[ELF is] a "*contact language*" between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication (FIRTH, 1996, p.240).

ELF interactions are defined as *interactions between members of two or more different linguacultures in English*, for none of whom English is the mother tongue (HOUSE, 1999, p.74)

(SEIDLHOFER, 2004 p. 211: my italics)

In this article the term is understood in the second sense: that is, as a sociolinguistic, not a linguistic, concept. The *ELF user* can thus be defined as any person using English for lingua franca purposes, regardless of which actual English variety he/she employs to do so.

ELF interactions have been defined, as above, as interactions between two people whose mother tongue is not English: between Japanese and German business correspondents, for example. For the purposes of this article, the definition is

broadened to include native English speakers: thus, ELF communication may also take place between native speakers of one of the varieties of English and speakers of other languages: for instance, between an American boy and his Venezuelan girlfriend, or between an English tour guide and an international group of tourists.

The appropriate speaker model

Who is the ideal speaker-model for the teacher and learner of ELF? The speaker of English as a mother tongue? Or a non-native ELF user? Or some kind of combination?

If the students themselves are asked such a question, many will still opt for a native speaker ideal (KUO, 2006, CULLEN and CHO, 2007). Increasingly, teachers themselves are opting for a different model (TIMMIS, 2002).

A generation ago, the situation was clearer. The main conceptualization of the relative positions of native and non-native speakers within English-speaking communities was captured by Kachru's (1985) three-circle model: native-speaker countries in the 'inner circle' as distinct from the 'outer' and 'expanding' circles of countries where English is learned as a second or foreign language. According to this model, the native speakers are firmly in the centre, defined as 'norm-providing', whereas the outermost 'expanding' circle is 'norm-dependent'.

Today, however, many are rejecting the native-speaker as the ideal for their learners. This is not only – or even mainly – based on socio-political motives derived from the opposition to 'linguistic imperialism' (PHILLIPSON, 1992) or 'native speakerism' (HOLLIDAY, 2005). It is, rather, for more pragmatic reasons, associated with teachers' need to provide learners with a practicable and appropriate model for a future using English as a lingua franca. Some of these reasons are the following.

1. Native speakers are today, as is generally acknowledged, the minority of English speakers world-wide. It follows that they are only a very small minority of speakers of ELF, which excludes by definition those who use English normally only within their local native-speaking community.
2. Native speakers do not all speak the same variety of English; some varieties, indeed, are mutually incomprehensible. And any one native is unlikely to be appropriate as a model for ELF because of specific usages that may not be acceptable outside the local community.
3. The vast majority of teachers teaching English in non-English speaking countries to students who will need to employ English primarily as a lingua franca are themselves non-native speakers, and are often the only role-models their students have readily available.
4. The status of the native speaker as the model condemns all learners to ultimate failure (COOK, 1999); since nobody can become a native speaker of an additional language.
5. An increasing number of ELF users who were not originally native speakers of one of the varieties of English are today fully competent speakers of English, speaking and writing a correct, fluent and easily comprehensible variety of the language which is a totally acceptable model for learners.

A rejection of the native speaker as the model for learners has led some writers to suggest that the non-native speaker teacher should take his/her place. It is claimed, for example, by Cook (1999: 200) that learners 'may prefer the fallible [*sic*] non-

native speaker teacher who presents a more achievable model'. However, the implication that the non-native speaker is, *qua* non-native, 'fallible' is insulting to the large and increasing number of fully competent non-native-speaking teachers; and in my experience neither learners nor teachers would wish to compromise on a model that is less than optimal as regards both accuracy and fluency (a point which will be taken up again below).

It is, in any case, an over-simplification to see the choice as between 'native' and 'non-native' models. It makes sense to look beyond this distinction. What, after all, do teachers want their students to achieve in terms of proficiency? Surely the best level of English they can, with a thorough mastery of the forms and meanings of English that are currently used and seen as correct worldwide. There is no reason to believe that only native speakers possess this level of competence: on the contrary, there is a very large, and growing, population of non-native speakers who also do so.

I would suggest therefore, that the model for ELF teachers should be the *fully-competent ELF user*, without defining whether such a speaker was or was not originally a 'native speaker'. It is not the 'native-speakerness' of the model speaker which interests teachers: it is simply the level of proficiency. If the ideal ELF user is thoroughly competent in the use of the language, and can serve as a model to which our students should aspire, then where they come from (in terms of language community) is irrelevant.

Kachru's circles might thus be replaced today, for the purposes of ELF teachers and learners, with a model that places the fully competent speaker of English as a lingua franca in the center, with graduating rather than clearly delineated outer rings of proficient, less proficient and limited speakers (after RAJADURAI, 2005).

The appropriate variety of English

Different varieties of English have been proposed as a model for teaching and learning English as a lingua franca:

1. One of the mainstream native varieties;
2. A 'common core' syllabus based on common non-native usages;
3. A combination of different models, exposing learners to diverse varieties of English;
4. A standard international variety.

1. One of the mainstream native varieties

The first option is probably still the most widely used, based on either British or mainstream American English. This is largely a matter of convention: when English was learnt mainly as a foreign language (i.e. in order to communicate with native speakers in the traditional 'Inner Circle' countries) it was naturally assumed that the native speakers should be the model, and this assumption has persisted to today. It is also a matter of commercial interest: the major British and American publishing companies have a lot to gain by selling their materials to other countries, and usually base their texts on their own native variety of English. Third, there is the prestige which still accompanies the 'native' label, and the implication that 'native' means 'real' or 'authentic'. Fourth, authoritative codification is easily available: dictionaries, grammars, handbooks of pronunciation, spelling, punctuation. And

finally, there is the professed preference of many teachers and learners (TIMMIS, 2002, KUO, 2006, CULLEN, 2007).

But the same major objection to native English as a language model applies as to the native speaker as an ELF user model described above. No one native variety is appropriate as a model for ELF: each has its own local peculiarities which are unacceptable worldwide: words like *fortnight* in British English and *prepone* in Indian English, or the spelling of *aluminum* in American English. And in many countries there is an increasing tendency among locally-based materials writers to search for internationally acceptable linguistic models of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling rather than specific native ones as a basis for textbooks.

2. A 'common core' syllabus based on common non-native usages

The 'common core' syllabus, counting as acceptable common learner usages such as *she go*, or *the people which*, has received a lot of publicity (see, for example, articles and correspondence in issues 199 and 201 of *IATEFL Voices*, 2007-8), but has not been formally proposed anywhere, as far as I know, as a basis for an English syllabus. The public debate is based on an interpretation of statements like the following, which appear to support the learner's right to express him/herself using his or her own variant forms, and by implication the teacher's duty to accept such expression and not to prescribe standard 'native-speaker' forms:

Despite the accumulating evidence against [interlanguage] theory, the literature on teaching English still regularly contains advice for teachers in both outer and expanding circles on how to reduce [interlanguage] errors and how to reverse fossilization ... there is still little if any awareness among TESOL practitioners and SLA researchers that learners may be producing forms characteristic of their own variety of English, which reflect the sociolinguistic reality of their English use, whatever their circle, far better than either British or American norms are able to do. (JENKINS, 2006: 168)

However, most teachers do not accept *she go* as legitimate learner variants: not because, as implied in the quotation above, *she goes* is a native-speaker usage unnaturally and unjustifiably imposed by a powerful native-speaker minority, but simply because they perceive *she goes* as the most universally accepted correct form, and use it themselves. Teachers, as a matter of professional ethics, are committed to teaching their students correct and acceptable English forms as used by speakers whom I have defined above as 'fully competent'; similarly, the learners expect to be taught such forms, and to be corrected if they get them wrong.

3. A combination of different models, providing diverse variants.

The third option is widely supported in the literature. Seidlhofer (2007), for example, argues that ELF cannot be based on a 'monolithic' form of the language. Similarly Prodromou:

Rather than set up a code which all users of ELF have to follow, it is surely time that we recognised the diversity among users and the multiplicity of uses to which English is put worldwide and think in terms of varied processes of interaction rather than a single pre-scriptive model (2007: 40)

This view is popular today, very largely, it seems to me, for ideological reasons: people prefer, in these post-modernist times, to reject single standards or any kind of unified model, in favour of pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity.

But it is simply not a practical model for classroom teaching purposes. English teachers cannot teach a variety of usages: they simply do not have the time. And they certainly cannot replace the main focus on teaching of the target language by a focus on awareness of language or language variety (JENKINS, 2006: 173; CANAJARAH, 2007: 210). Most teachers worldwide are teaching not more than four 45-minute periods a week, many fewer. That time needs to be used to maximum advantage to help their students master the forms and meanings of the language that will be most useful to them in future ELF interactions. If a teacher teaches his or her class that *ain't*, for example, is an alternative to *isn't*, used in Cockney and African-American English, this might be interesting, but it is not of much practical use to them: they need to know that *isn't* is the prevalent and most useful form, and the one which they should use for international communication. If the teacher has to teach such variants every time a new item is introduced, then his or her students will never have time to acquire a minimal useful syllabus of the language they need.

This is not, however, to claim that one monolithic form of the language needs to be taught, or that there is no place for raising awareness of variety. A world standard variety here necessarily includes some variation within itself. Synonyms like *movie / film*, alternative grammatical forms like *have / have got* are encountered and understood all over the world, and need, therefore, to be taught. Local native usages, however, such as *fortnight*, *prepone*, *aluminum*, *ain't*, have no essential place in an ELF syllabus. As regards awareness: a good syllabus should provide at least intermediate and advanced students with opportunities to encounter some local variants in texts, to respect them as such, and to be aware that they may need to cope with them receptively in future interactions.

What is unacceptable to most practitioners is the idea that the basic language taught in English classrooms round the world should be an amalgam of different varieties, or that language awareness-raising should replace language itself as the main focus of learning.

4. A standard international variety

This has been called by various names: World Spoken Standard English (CRYSTAL, 2003), World Standard English (LEECH and SVARTVIK, 2006), and so on. Whatever it is named, this would seem, *prima facie*, to be the best option for teachers worldwide. It is arguably that which is used by most fully competent speakers; it comprises usages (including a range of options, as suggested above) that are accepted in most international contexts; it is, unlike a native dialect, achievable for learners.

It is, however, as noted above, not yet the most popular or accepted, and it has various disadvantages. It is ideologically unacceptable to supporters of pluralism and diversity; many claim that it does not in fact exist; it certainly has not been systematically codified;

To take the ideological argument first: surely the teaching of a standard international language in the ELF classroom does not deny diversity. Teaching one standard set of forms and meanings does not preclude exposure to and respect for others. In a sense, you need a basic standard in order to appreciate variety: you cannot have diversity if you have nothing to divert *from*.

Whether a standard version of the language does in fact exist or not is another question, which is very difficult to answer. There is, indeed, no formal codification of it in a grammar or dictionary; but lack of codification in itself does not disprove existence: there are plenty of languages which exist without having been codified. Most practitioners, on the other hand, are able in most cases to make fairly confident intuitive judgements as to items that do not normally belong to ELF discourse but rather to specific dialects, and as to items that are clearly generally acceptable worldwide. This phenomenon makes it appear likely that somewhere underpinning the knowledge of fully competent speakers is an awareness of the existence of a range of standard forms: not one that anybody has imposed on them, just one that their experience of encounters with the language in various contexts has taught them exists (ELLIS, 2002).

The lack of codification of an international variety of English, however, is undeniable. Sooner or later there has to be such a codification in grammars and dictionaries, for the simple reason that it is needed. Both teachers and textbook writers need to know what, all things being equal, are the most common and frequent forms of English worldwide which they can use as a basis for classroom instruction and materials design, as well as which are the forms that are characteristic of the Englishes of particular areas, for example, European English, North American English, Asian English, and so on.

The actual implementation of such codification in the form of dictionaries and grammars is a difficult and some would say it is an impossible project. The enormous scope of language to be covered is complicated by the problem of the swiftness of language change (at least its lexis and informal spoken idiom). Even supposing an international team could be assembled that could manage to put together such a publication, it would be out of date by the time it appeared on the shelves.

The appropriate solution may be a 'wiki': an internet-based reference site written not only by the experts but also by its own consumers, and continuously revised and edited. Such a work would be fed by information from the field and from unlimited international sources rather than being limited to a particular team of lexicographers and grammarians; it would be constantly available for reference and constantly updated.

Closing comments

Descriptive and applied linguist researchers are the predominant source of published material on the subject of English as a lingua franca. But the priorities and commitments of the researchers are substantially different from those of the teacher, who is primarily committed to the promotion of good and useful learning for his or her students. In the ongoing debate about aspects of English as a lingua franca, the voice of the practising teacher has been too little heard, even within conferences and publications of the major English teachers' associations.

There is no doubt that practitioners can, and should, learn from the insights provided by research; but in the process of this learning, these insights need to be examined and interpreted using experienced-based reflection and professional considerations such as classroom practicability, learner aspirations and motivation and pedagogical credibility.

Two major issues which have been examined in this article are the appropriate speaker model for ELF teachers, and the variety of English appropriate for teaching.

Further issues that should be addressed in the future from similar perspectives are, among others, teacher preparation, materials design, and assessment.

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Abstract

This article explores issues connected to English as a lingua franca (ELF) from the point of view of the practising teacher preparing students to function in ELF contexts. It is claimed that the fully competent speaker of ELF is a more appropriate model than the native speaker for teachers and learners. Similarly, it is argued that the English to be taught should, in spite of various problems, be based on a world standard variety, including a limited range of variant usages.

Keywords: ELF, lingua franca, international, global communication.

Resumo

Este artigo discute questões relativas ao Inglês como Língua Franca (ILF), partindo da perspectiva do professor de sala de aula que prepara seus alunos para agir em contextos de ILF. Entende-se que o falante plenamente competente em ILF é um modelo mais adequado para professores e aprendizes do que o falante nativo. Acredita-se, ainda, que, apesar dos vários problemas implícitos a tal abordagem, o inglês a ser ensinado deverá basear-se em uma variedade padrão de cunho mundial que inclua um conjunto limitado de variantes lingüísticas.

Palavras-chave: ILF, língua franca, internacional, comunicação global.