

The implications of ELF for the design of authentic listening materials

Sheila Thorn looks at ways to better understand different accents.

What do we mean by 'ELF'?

Research into the phenomenon termed 'English as a Lingua Franca' began in the late 1990s and is growing exponentially, yet ELF has had very little impact on ELT materials. In a world where it is now accepted that the vast majority of interactions in English take place between non-native English speakers (NNES), it seems counter-intuitive that most teaching materials are still focused on the minority Native Speaker Model. Of course there are exceptions, particularly in the field of Business English, and publishers nowadays are tending to include more NNES in General English coursebooks. However, to date there has only been one ELT book with an explicit ELF focus (Walker 2010), and this is a pronunciation reference book for teachers and teacher trainers.

Why is this? First I think we need to be clear what ELF is (and what it isn't), as it seems misunderstandings in this area have had a negative effect on how ELF is perceived, resulting in a huge amount of controversy.

It helps if we think of English in two different ways. First there is English in the tradition of all modern languages such as French, Mandarin and Japanese, where native-speaker-like fluency is the ultimate goal. This is the target that teachers teach towards and examination boards

“From an ELF perspective ‘errors’ in the traditional ELT sense are seen in a more positive light as ‘differences’ or ‘variations’. The view is that these differences are only important if they affect intelligibility.”

measure the performance of students against. The traditional view, based on Second Language Acquisition theory (SLA), is that between beginner level and advanced level accuracy and fluency there is something called ‘interlanguage’. This is where students make grammatical or phonological errors on their journey towards native-speaker-like fluency. These errors occur for two reasons. The first is due to ‘L1 transfer’, that is the influence of their mother tongue(s). The second is the difficulties of the language itself. These grammatical and phonological errors are viewed as a perfectly natural process which all learners go through. However, if students stop learning a language at any point then these errors become fossilised. Traditionally this is how ELT professionals have viewed, and continue to view, the English they teach.

The second way of thinking about English is from an ELF perspective. Here the focus is on NNES’ use of English as a communicative tool.

The emphasis is on successful communication between people from different language backgrounds rather than on the English language itself. In effect the language function is more important than language forms. From an ELF perspective ‘errors’ in the traditional ELT sense are seen in a more positive light as ‘differences’ or ‘variations’. The view is that these differences are only important if they affect intelligibility. Proponents of ELF argue that grammatical differences are far less likely to affect intelligibility than phonological differences, in particular pronunciation (Jenkins 2000: p.20). It is therefore not surprising that the only ELF-specific ELT publication to date has been Robin Walker’s *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* (2010) based on Professor Jennifer Jenkins’ landmark book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000), with its proposal of a core phonological code.

These two different views of English have split the English teaching community into two camps, with strong feelings on both sides. On the one hand you have the traditional ELT camp where the native speaker (NES) model is at the heart of everything the teacher does. Students are taught the English they need to pass 'international' ELT exams and to interact with native speakers. Therefore grammatical and phonological accuracy are vital, despite corpora research showing that NES themselves often make grammatical and phonological errors. People in this camp tend to view the English of ELF users, most of whom are no longer actively studying English, as an inferior error-ridden model, or as Barbara Seidlhofer puts it 'a deviant or erroneous version of native speaker English' (2011).

On the other hand you have the ELF camp saying that learners will need English to communicate effectively in a global context where, quite probably, none of their interlocutors is a native speaker of English. Therefore intelligibility is far more important than accuracy and the main goal of teachers should be to provide students with a level of capability in English which they can build on in the future, as suggested by Widdowson (2003).

ELF research has generated some very useful descriptive data about how NNES use English in situations where no NES are present. It has shown, for example, how creative they are in terms of using the English language, but also what steps they take, often subconsciously, to ensure they get their message across. For example, competent ELF users will vary their accent depending on their interlocutors, moving towards a more standard English pronunciation if necessary. It has also shown certain non-standard grammatical and phonological features across a wide range of users from different L1 backgrounds. For example, we now know that although many ELF users drop the 3rd person marker -s in the

present simple and have difficulty pronouncing the phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ (found in 'think' and 'this' respectively), these 'differences' (traditionally viewed as 'errors') have virtually no impact on international intelligibility.

The problem is that these descriptions of what ELF users do have been wrongly interpreted as prescriptions for teaching English. This has led to teachers assuming that ELF means an 'anything goes' approach to English teaching, which is not the case (Jenkins 2012: p.491). This misinterpretation, along with ELF proponents saying that NES no longer 'own' their language because they are now in the minority of users, has unfortunately resulted in rather a lot of animosity which has clouded the main issue. This is that the vast majority of interactions in English in the world today are between NNES and this fact should be taken into account in the ELT classroom. What is still lacking, however, is specific guidance on how to do this. This is because ELF researchers understandably do not wish to be prescriptive – they are, after all, researchers, not classroom teachers. Their view is that it is up to ELT practitioners, whether materials writers or teachers, to incorporate their research findings in ways they think best.

So how can we, as English teachers in the second decade of the 21st century, do our best to prepare our students for their lives beyond the classroom in light of these two seemingly conflicting perspectives? My view is that listening holds the key. Regardless of whether teachers view native-speaker-like fluency, or a level of competence, as their teaching goal, it cannot be denied that their students will encounter users of English, even in countries where English is the native language, from a variety of L1 linguistic backgrounds, not to mention NES with marked regional accents. One of the most useful things we can do as teachers is give our students targeted exposure to these accents.

Exposure to L1 and regional NS accents

We all know how difficult it can be to understand someone with an unfamiliar accent, even in our native languages. We also know how, as we get used to the speaker's accent, our initial decoding problems fade away. Two anecdotes will serve to illustrate this point from a NES and NNES perspective:

In 1995 my partner and I moved house and started going to a new pub in east London where the clientele was mainly Irish. Two of the most fiercely patriotic Irish customers were Peadar from Cork and Bernie from Offaly. There has been a great deal of research on the connection between L1 identity and accent, and both these men had very strong regional Irish accents, despite them both having lived in the UK for over 30 years. In fact their accents were so strong that we could hardly understand them at first – to the extent that we would walk the entire length of the bar to avoid having to stand next to them and try to have a conversation where all we could say was 'yes' and 'no' and 'really?' at what we hoped were appropriate points. However, over the space of a couple of months both men became good friends and soon we could understand them easily, although we often had to interpret for our other English friends. Our regular exposure to their accents had resulted in a greatly improved decoding ability for both of us.

Meanwhile the worst teaching experience I have ever had happened some years ago when I was invited to run an intensive ELT listening course at a prestigious music academy in London for students from overseas. These students were very gifted musically, but their English was way below the level they needed to enrol on a degree programme at the academy. The first session went terribly. The problem was that although I was an experienced teacher, I had never taught students from China, Japan and South Korea. Nor had I ever had any interactions myself with people from those

countries. After their main teacher introduced us, we began with a basic confidence-building listening comprehension exercise. But when I asked individual students to give their answers, I just could not understand what they were saying. In the end I had to ask to look at the answers they had written down. However, the second session a week later went much better and by the third lesson I could understand virtually everything. Since then I have rarely had problems understanding people from those countries.

It seems clear, then, that increased exposure to any unfamiliar accent results in increased ability to recognise the words the speaker is using. (*For more on this see Smith and Bisazza 1982.*) Bearing in mind that our students, even those aspiring to acquire native-speaker like English, will undoubtedly encounter in their future lives a variety of people from different countries, as well as native speakers with regional accents, it seems obvious that we should teach them to cope with a range of unfamiliar accents. This is not to suggest that we, as general English teachers, should expose our students to every accent they are likely to encounter. That would obviously be unrealistic. Instead our task is to build on the listening practice we already give them, or should be giving them, with regard to recordings featuring NES (Thorn 2009, 2012) – that is making them aware that any single word in English can be pronounced in a huge variety of different ways (Cauldwell 2013). In effect we are teaching them to have a band of tolerance when it comes to accents – to realise that they are unlikely to hear the citation form of words in any authentic recording.

“It seems clear, then, that increased exposure to any unfamiliar accent results in increased ability to recognise the words the speaker is using.”

Finding suitable NNES recordings

As mentioned earlier, nowadays, ELT publishers are including more NNES recordings in their books. This is particularly the case, as you would expect, in Business English books, most of which are explicitly designed to prepare students for international business contexts. For example in Ian Badger’s book *Collins English for Business: Listening* (2011) almost half the recordings feature NNES. There is also a move to include more NNES in General English coursebooks, something which is to be welcomed.

However, there is a marked bias in these published materials to include only the minority of NNES with a high degree of grammatical accuracy with reference to NES, and just a slight L1 accent. This means that students rarely listen to recordings of more typical ELF users who, in my experience, I would describe as efficient communicators with often a lower degree of grammatical accuracy than NES and a more marked L1 accent. Again, this is not to suggest that their English is ‘inferior’ in some way, but ‘different’ as measured against the Native Speaker Model.

One possible reason for this lack of listening materials featuring less-than-expert NNES is that many publishers are still locked into the Native Speaker Model as a learning goal and are therefore unwilling to include recordings which feature what are traditionally viewed as ‘errors’ (called ‘differences’ or ‘variations’ from an ELF perspective). They simply do not want to present students with less-than-perfect examples of spoken English and many teachers and students share their views. I know from my

own experience of piloting my books that teachers and students have been aghast when I have included native English speakers making typical ‘slips of the tongue’ grammatical or phonological errors – as mentioned earlier, a feature of NES interactions which has shown up clearly in corpora research. In fact some teachers and students have even suggested I should re-record these sections!

All this means that teachers who are keen to supplement their coursebooks with authentic recordings featuring less-than-expert NNES have to find their own examples. Thanks to the Internet, this is easily done. The BBC World Service has a huge number of programmes available, generally featuring expert NNES, which are suitable for those teachers unwilling to go 100% down the whole ELF route. For teachers who are more convinced by the ELF approach, a programme I particularly recommend is BBC Radio 4’s *Crossing Continents*. These programmes feature a BBC reporter living in a particular country interviewing a variety of NNES in reports on various issues in that country. The programme has a substantial archive available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qt55/episodes/player>. Here you can find programmes about issues in, for example, Pakistan, Belarus, Mexico, Ukraine, Nepal, and Romania, all featuring L1 speakers from those countries speaking in English.

Another way of accessing interesting recordings is to Google a famous NNES’s name followed by the words ‘speaking English’. These recordings work particularly well if, say, you are teaching in France and write ‘Francois Hollande speaking English’, or if you are teaching in Germany and write ‘Günther Oettinger speaking English’, or if you are teaching in Japan and write ‘Shinzo Abe speaking English’. Recordings like these, where a famous person from the students’ own country is speaking non-standard English, can form the basis of wonderful lessons where students can critique the pronunciation and grammar of someone else, rather

“I would recommend that teachers at the very minimum compile a collection of recordings with one speaker from each of the world’s main countries or language groups ...”

than this being done to them, as is usually the case. This leads me to the final part of my article.

But first just a word of caution when it comes to selecting recordings: As mentioned earlier, as general English teachers cannot provide our students with samples of every accent they will be exposed to in their future lives outside the classroom, although in some Business English classes where, for example, an executive from Spain is expected to interact with a colleague in India, it is possible to target specific recordings. Instead I would recommend that teachers at the very minimum compile a collection of recordings with one speaker from each of the world’s main countries or language groups, e.g. a Spanish speaker, an Arabic speaker, a Mandarin speaker, a German speaker, a Russian speaker, a Nigerian speaker and so on. This will provide them with a good foundation and reference point for the future.

How to use recordings of less-than-expert NNES

To recap: The vast majority of our students, even those who explicitly state that they want to learn English to communicate with native speakers, will find themselves in situations where they need to interact with other NNES. The main barrier to intelligibility is pronunciation rather than grammar and the more exposure students have to a range of NS and NNES accents, the easier they will find it to understand various NNES, many of whom have marked L1 accents.

So you have found a suitable recording. Now what do you do with

it? The following section is based on an approach which I developed for my *Real Lives*, *Real Listening* books (Thorn 2011).

Focus on pronunciation – approach 1

Stage 1

Begin by asking your students what they know about that particular accent and what it sounds like when someone from that country is speaking the students’ L1 (not English at this stage). For example, what does a French person sound like when they are speaking Japanese? At this stage students may be able to identify certain problematic sounds in their L1 which may transfer to English. Teachers may want to prepare for this stage by referring to Swan and Smith’s wonderful book *Learner English* (2001). Here you can find a list of typical phonological and grammatical ‘errors’ or ‘differences’ which occur in the speech of people from a range of countries in Europe, Africa, South Asia and the rest of the world.

Stage 2

Now move on to a freestyle listening comprehension activity. Students listen to a short recording, several times if necessary, and note down what they understand. They then move into pairs or groups and discuss what they understood from the recording and try to recreate it.

Stage 3

Next the teacher and students focus on any communication breakdowns which were due to features of that speaker’s non-standard pronunciation. Did students perhaps hear ‘heart’ instead of ‘hard’ in the case of a German speaker or ‘light’ instead

of ‘right’ in the case of a Japanese speaker? This can be based on just the students’ exposure to the recording, but it works particularly well if students are given a transcript at this stage, allowing them to compare the aural/written forms.

Stage 4

The teacher and students can then come up with a list of non-standard pronunciations which leads to the most interesting part of the lesson. This is using this list of features to predict how a speaker from that country would tend to say other words featuring those sounds. For example, how would a German speaker be likely to say the final -d sound in words such as ‘hand’ or ‘mind’? How would a Japanese speaker be likely to say the initial r- sound in ‘read’ or ‘rubbish’? In this way we are preparing students for future encounters with NNES from various countries.

Focus on pronunciation – approach 2

An alternative approach is to use Jennifer Jenkins’ *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC) as a starting-off point, but in reverse. Professor Jenkins designed this phonological core primarily as a list of segmental pronunciation features of spoken English which learners needed to master in order to make themselves intelligible in any ELF situation. Pronunciation elements of the LFC core include instructions to observe vowel length in English to avoid, for example, the common French pronunciation of ‘sheep’ as ‘ship’. Other instructions are not to simplify or drop consonant clusters at the ends of words and to aspirate before the fortis (i.e. voiceless) plosives /p/, /t/ and /k/. (This is because failure to do so will result in sounds more like the lenis (i.e. voiced) plosives /b/, /d/ and /g/ respectively and could result in different words being heard, for example ‘back’ instead of ‘pack’, ‘din’ instead of ‘tin’ and ‘game’ instead of ‘came’.) The suprasegmental elements of the LFC consist of placing nuclear stress on the key words needed to convey meaning and dividing the stream of speech into word groups. (For more information see Jenkins 2000: p.158-159.)

By saying that teachers can use the Lingua Franca Core ‘in reverse’ I mean that rather than focusing on pronunciation from a productive viewpoint, teachers focus on pronunciation from a listening, or receptive, viewpoint.

In this approach the teacher, who is either a NES or an expert NNES, focuses on words, or groups of words, where the speaker’s pronunciation has moved some distance from standard pronunciation, to such a degree that intelligibility is threatened. Just a note of caution here. The notion of ‘standard’ English can be problematic. Jenkins refers to it as RP and Seidlhofer and other leading linguists question whether such a thing exists (Seidlhofer, Chapter 3.1). Interesting whilst this debate is, from a practical teaching perspective I think the term is useful if it is defined as English without a regional accent – that is neutral English.

With this approach the teacher listens to a short recording featuring a NNES and marks those words which the speaker’s accent has rendered problematic. The teacher then does Stage 1 above before issuing the students with the gapped transcript. This is Stage 2. The students are asked first to guess the missing words, individually, in pairs or groups. The teacher then plays the recording and students try to fill in the missing words. The difficulties the students experience then form the basis of Stages 3 and 4 above.

Both these approaches require the teacher to prepare a written transcript. However, this initial chore is an investment and the recording and transcript can be used over and over again with each new class of students.

Just a note of caution. Non-standard pronunciation and misplaced nuclear stress are not the only things which affect intelligibility. As Scott Thornbury points out in his review of Robin Walker’s book: ‘Successful communication, after all, is contingent on a great many more factors than simply pronunciation – not least the need and willingness of the communicating parties to communicate!’ (Thornbury accessed 2013).

Focus on non-standard grammar – turning ‘errors’ or ‘differences’ into learning opportunities

As mentioned earlier, although some expert ELF users may have native-speaker-like fluency, at least in regard to grammatical accuracy, the vast majority will have stopped their English studies. Indeed some may never have formally studied English, but may have ‘picked it up’ along the way, realising that it is a useful communicative tool. So how do we as teachers handle recordings containing ‘grammatical errors’ in the traditional ELT sense, but ‘differences’ or ‘variations’ in the ELF sense?

My view is that we should seize on these perceived negatives as huge positives in terms of learning opportunities. With this approach the teacher focuses specifically on the non-standard grammatical forms used by the NNES, after first having used Approach 1 or 2 above for listening practice. For example, in one of my recordings when I ask a Romanian friend if she has a big family, she replies ‘Yes, I do. Um, mother, father ... obviously. Therefore if it wasn’t them, I wasn’t here!’ Although her meaning is clear, her grammar would

probably make many traditional ELT practitioners wince!

The teacher focuses on a list of these non-standard items but, crucially, asks the students whether they understood what the speaker meant, despite the unorthodox phrasing. I can guarantee that the answer will be ‘yes’ in virtually all cases. This is an important point to get across to students – that effective communication can still take place even if you make grammatical mistakes. I cannot emphasise the importance of this enough. All too often our students are too scared even to attempt to speak in English unless they are forced to for fear of ‘making a mistake’.

Next the teacher creates a situation where the speaker has asked for advice on her spoken English grammar because she has an English exam in a couple of days. The students are asked to code the grammatical error against a list of grammar areas (comparisons and superlatives, present perfect simple v. continuous, prepositions, articles, etc.) and then correct what the speaker said.

Students tell me they love this approach because it takes the pressure off them and is therefore liberating. All too often they are faced with the teacher correcting their own spoken or written grammatical errors, which inevitably reduces their confidence. The positive point about this approach is that it allows the students to act the role of teachers. They can then use their own grammatical knowledge to correct someone else’s errors objectively. And if they don’t recognise the error then it presents them with a learning opportunity which will increase their own grammatical knowledge.

Conclusion

Even if ELT practitioners are not convinced by the findings of ELF researchers, the fact is that the vast majority of interactions in English are between NNES. I feel strongly that we owe it to our students, whether their learning goal is competence in English or the native speaker model, to prepare them for future encounters with other NNES. Recordings featuring NNES who are effective communicators despite, or often because of, their non-standard grammar and phonology, can form the basis of excellent classroom activities.

REFERENCES

- Badger, I. (2011) *Collins English for Business: Listening* Collins
- Cauldwell, R. (2013) *Phonology for Listening – Teaching the stream of speech* Speech in Action
- Jenkins, J. (2000) *The Phonology of English as an International Language: New Models, New Norms, New Goals* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Jenkins, J. (2012) English as a Lingua Franca from the classroom to the classroom *ELT Journal*, 66:4 pp.486-494
- Seidlhofer, B. (2011) *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Smith, L.E. and Bisazza, J.A. (1982) The comprehensibility of three varieties of English for college students in seven countries. *Language Learning* 32: pp.259-270
- Swan, M. and Smith, B. (Eds.) (2001) *Learner English – A teacher's guide to interference and other problems 2nd edition* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Thorn, S. (2009) Mining Listening Texts *Modern English Teacher*, 18:2 pp.5-13
- Thorn, S. (2011 ongoing) *Real Lives, Real Listening series* Collins
- Thorn, S. (2012) Debunking Authentic Listening *Modern English Teacher*, 21:2 pp.65-69
- Thornbury, S. An A-Z of ELT: E is for ELF (and the Phonological Core) <http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2010/10/31/e-is-for-elf-and-the-phonological-core> Accessed 3rd May 2013
- Walker, R. (2010) *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Widdowson, H.G. (2003) *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sheila Thorn



Sheila Thorn is an experienced teacher, teacher trainer, examinations writer, materials writer and editor, with a specific interest in developing materials to help students cope with the challenges of listening to authentic native and non-native speaker English. She set up The Listening Business in 1998 and she is also the author of the *Real Lives, Real Listening* series.

Email: sthorn@clara.net

Website: www.thelisteningbusiness.com