

The globalization of English: implications for the language classroom

Robin Walker discusses how the growth of the English language and its use by non-native speakers has important impacts on our teaching.

Only twenty years ago, learning English was automatically understood to mean emulating a British or American standard model of the language. This situation, known as the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), situates the learner as the ‘foreigner’, and measures success through proximity to the norms of the chosen native speaker model.

The last two decades, however, have brought about a significant change in the role of English. It is now the primary language of international communication, and is used massively around the world by people for whom it is not their first language. It is the working language of the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China), the European Union, and the eleven member states of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In an ever-increasing number of companies, such as the Toyota-Peugeot factory in the Czech Republic, English is used for both external and internal business communications. In fact, business, education, diplomacy, tourism, leisure, the arts, sport – regardless of where we look, today English is the dominant vehicle for international communication.

As a result of this, there are now more interactions in English between non-native speakers, than between non-native speakers and native speakers. This unusual situation obliges us to re-

examine the term ‘EFL’. In an encounter between two or more non-native speakers, it is, at best, inaccurate to say that English is being used as a ‘foreign’ language. Which of the speakers is the ‘foreigner’, and which the native speaker? Evidently none is the native speaker, but equally, none of the participants can be classed as the ‘foreigner’.

The inadequacy of the term EFL for such encounters requires us to find an alternative. ‘English as an international language’, ‘English as a global language’, ‘Global English’ or ‘World standard English’ – various names have been put forward to describe the role of English for international communication between non-native speakers. However, the term that is now most widely used, and which I will be using here and in the following articles, is ‘English as a lingua franca’ (ELF).

The phenomenon of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has a number of implications for the practice of English language teaching. Firstly, it requires learners to rethink their goals: do they need their English to live and work in an English-speaking culture, or are they going to use it for international communication with other non-native speakers? Teaching institutions also need to redefine their role as providers of competence in this key professional area. This is because it is not correct to assume that what native speakers do when they speak amongst

themselves, is automatically relevant to international communication between non-native speakers.

In fact, surprising at it may seem, what native speakers do when they communicate with each other, may actually be entirely inadequate for what non-native speakers have to do in order to communicate with each other through English. We will come back to why this is so later in this article. For now, it is enough to accept that today English functions not only as a means of non-native speakers communicating with the language’s native speakers, but also as a lingua franca, and as such, as a vital means of communication between its non-native speakers.

ELF pronunciation

The first thing that is immediately apparent to anyone who observes ELF in action is that the speakers use English in ways that differ, sometimes quite markedly, from those of its native speakers. These differences are noticeable in vocabulary and other areas, not least of which is pronunciation. In fact, it is usually pronunciation that first draws an innocent observer’s attention because it is quickly apparent that the participants in ELF interactions are communicating successfully despite the fact that none of them have Standard English accents.

In the 1990s, motivated by this simple but significant observation, Jennifer Jenkins began to investigate how learners of English could communicate with each other so successfully when their accents were so non-standard. From her analysis of the empirical data gathered from spoken interactions between non-native speakers of many different L1 backgrounds (Jenkins, 2000), Professor Jenkins concluded that people with even very different accents understand each other if they are competent in a relatively small number of areas of pronunciation. Jenkins called these the 'lingua franca core' (LFC). Briefly, they are:

Table 1: The lingua franca core (LFC) (Jenkins, 2000)
1. the consonant sounds (with the noticeable exception of voiced and voiceless 'th' sounds, as in 'then' and 'think')
2. aspiration of initial /p, t, k/ (as in 'pen', 'ten', 'coat')
3. the pronunciation of word-initial and medial consonant groups (as in 'product' or 'breakfast')
4. vowel length (as in 'live' and 'leave', or 'peace' and 'peas')
5. tonic stress placement (as in 'He arrived YESTERDAY', and 'He ARRIVED yesterday').

We will be taking a closer look at the LFC, and at the practicalities of adopting an ELF approach to teaching pronunciation, in future issues. However, what is surprising for many teachers who meet the LFC for the first time, is how few features of English pronunciation are needed for successful ELF communication, and how many of the features that are widely considered to be key to intelligibility in English as a foreign language, actually lie outside the LFC, as we can see from Table 2.

The explanation for this huge difference between what is key for pronunciation for ELF and what is key for EFL, is quite simple. Though it is seldom stated explicitly, English as foreign language takes an accent approach to teaching pronunciation. Success in such an approach is measured by the learner's proximity to one or other NS accent. This in turn comes from full competence

in all of the features in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 2. Non-LFC pronunciation features
1. the TH sounds /θ/ and /ð/
2. dark-L (as in 'milk')
3. final consonant clusters (as in 'asked')
4. vowel quality (except for the vowel in 'her')
5. weak forms
6. word stress
7. stress-timed rhythm
8. tones (rise, fall, etc.)

In contrast, ELF takes an intelligibility approach to pronunciation, with intelligibility being determined and negotiated by the non-native interlocutors involved in an interaction, as opposed to by proximity to any idealized, native speaker accent. Jenkins' empirical data, which has been broadly confirmed by more recent research (e.g. Deterding, 2013), shows that in most situations competence in the features in Table 1 is sufficient for international intelligibility.

Empirical data, then, alongside our own real-life observations, reveals that intelligibility in ELF contexts is possible despite the very wide range of accents involved. This shouldn't really surprise us. As Canadian researchers Tracy Derwing and Murray Munro have repeatedly demonstrated through their extensive work on intelligibility in English, 'accent and intelligibility are not the same thing. A speaker can have a very strong accent, yet be perfectly understood' (Derwing & Munro, 2008).

The lexico-grammar of ELF

In order to determine which elements of pronunciation were essential to international intelligibility, Jennifer Jenkins recorded multiple instances of when communication between non-native speakers had broken down. The speakers in question were all students of English at approximately CEFR B2–C1 level. They were studying in London and, over a period of several years, Jenkins kept detailed notes of

communication breakdowns, both in class activities and in social settings.

Perhaps the most surprising result of this work was just how few breakdowns could be traced back to a problem in a speaker's grammar. In contrast, both vocabulary and pronunciation, but particularly pronunciation, were regularly at the heart of a problem. Jenkins' results are summarized in Figure 1. They make for sober reading if we think about how much time is spent on grammar in English classes around the world today.

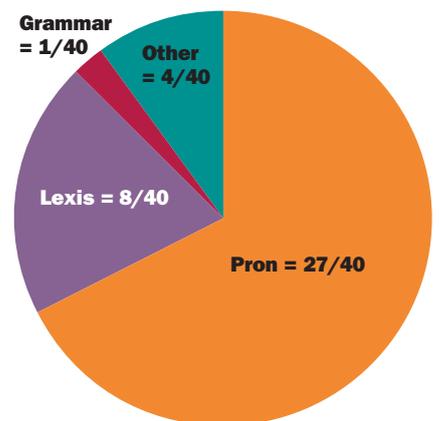


Figure 1: The causes of communication breakdown in English as a lingua franca (based on Jenkins, 2000: 85–87).

Whilst the importance of pronunciation for international intelligibility led Jenkins to the lingua franca core, it was still not clear to what extent the lexico-grammar of ELF was identical (or not) to Standard native speaker grammar. By the start of the 21st-century, of course, advances in technology had allowed researchers to create large corpora of native speaker English, and thus to describe in fine detail what 'real English' was like. The assumption being made here was that if we knew exactly how native speakers used the language, we would know exactly what to teach learners in class.

ELF researchers, however, argued that perhaps a separate grammar of English was developing among speakers of English as a lingua franca, just as grammars of Indian, Singaporean or Nigerian English had already developed in these and other areas of the world where English is used as a second language (ESL). The only way to find out if this was true was to compile a corpus of ELF data,

and to analyze this for recurrent patterns and systematic differences from Standard native speaker English.

The first and the best-known example of research into the lexico-grammar of ELF is the VOICE project. The data for Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English was collected over a period of eight years starting in 2005, although the analysis of this data continues even today. Even as it stands, however, VOICE offers ELT professionals a free, computer-readable repository of over one million words of spoken ELF from a range of different business, education and leisure contexts (www.univie.ac.at/voice/).

In terms of grammar, certain features, such as the use of the 's' of the 3rd person singular, have been found to differ at times from native speaker English norms without impacting negatively on ELF communication. This is not to say that we should not teach the 3rd person 's'; as ELF researchers have pointed out on numerous occasions, there is no simple relationship between corpus data and what teachers should do in ELT classrooms. But it is a timely reminder, perhaps, of the need to separate formal accuracy in terms of grammar from success in terms of communicative effectiveness.

The use of non-standard forms is even more extensive in the vocabulary of ELF. In fact, data from corpora such as the VOICE project shows that non-native speakers do not just communicate successfully despite their non-standard lexis. What is now clear is that non-native speakers are communicating successfully in ELF as a direct result of their ability to use established lexis in completely original ways, or even to create entirely new lexical items, such as 'an improvement'.

In many cases, these lexical innovations are highly effective. One example of this is the 'Please do not plug out' notice that I saw by a telephone connection in a Prague hotel some years ago. On other occasions they are totally ineffective. 'May I forguest. Please refrain no check good' (seen on the door of a public toilet in an international airport) is bad English (native speaker or lingua franca) because it fails to convey any meaningful

message. We will be taking a close look at (un)successful innovations in ELF lexico-grammar in future issues.

A 21st century Tower of Babel?

In our Czech car factory, staff from different mother-tongue backgrounds are speaking English with different accents and using vocabulary in different, sometimes unique ways. But with so many different Englishes colliding in ELF communication, there would appear to a very real danger of creating a 21st century Tower of Babel.



Figure 2: Image of Tower of Babel

Research into the danger of ELF speakers becoming mutually unintelligible began in the late nineties, when Larry Smith carried out a study comparing Standard UK English, and Standard US English, and seven non-native varieties of English. Recorded samples of these varieties were used to administer tests of intelligibility to educated native and non-native speaker listeners. Smith concluded that there was no evidence of a breakdown in the functioning of English for international communication, but that, interestingly:

'[n]ative speakers (from Britain and the US) were not found to be the most easily understood, nor were they, as subjects, found to be the best able to understand the different varieties of English.' (Smith, 1992: 88)

There is abundant anecdotal evidence from our students of non-native speakers communicating well until a native speaker joins them, and this is the same idea that David Graddol expresses in his British Council report on the future of English when he states that '[i]n organisations where English has become the corporate language, meetings sometimes go smoothly when no native speakers are present' (Graddol, 2006: 115). In other words, the not unnatural fear that the rich and extensive language

variety that characterises ELF interactions might create a 21st century Tower of Babel, hasn't, in practice, materialised.

That English is the primary lingua franca in the world today is a reality that nobody contests. In contrast, the idea that when English takes on this lingua franca role, effective communication is not bound by native speaker standards of correctness, is less easy to deal with. Harder still for many of us to take on board is the idea that there are occasions in ELF when it is precisely the 'violations' of native speaker rules that allow non-native speakers to be intelligible to each other.

What does this all mean for us as English language teachers, working in real classrooms, with real students, often under quite limiting circumstances? This is a vital question, and in the next issue I will begin to answer it by looking at the business and the benefits of taking an ELF approach to teaching pronunciation. Then, in a third article I'll return to the question for a second time, but with a focus on ELF grammar, vocabulary and communication strategies.

References and further reading

- Derwing, T. and M. Munro. 2008. 'Putting accent in its place: rethinking obstacles to communication.'
- Deterding, D. 2013. *Misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca*. De Gruyter.
- Graddol, D. 2006. *English Next*. British Council.
- Jenkins, J. 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seidlhofer, B. 2011. *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Robin Walker is a freelance teacher, teacher educator and materials writer. He is the author of *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*, an OUP teachers' handbook, as well as of numerous articles on ELT. Many of these can be downloaded from www.englishglobal.com.com, and Robin can be contacted by email at robin@englishglobal.com.com.