Teaching English as a Lingua Franca

The journey from EFL to ELF

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Marek Kiczkowiak and Robert J. Lowe

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Acknowlegments

Dedication

Marek: I would like to dedicate this work to my aunt
Ewa Przybylska, who has always encouraged me to write.

Rob: I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, Steven and Catherine Lowe, who sparked my love of language.

From the authors

I still vividly remember when I first came across the term 'English as a Lingua Franca' a few years ago: a blog post entitled 'ELF – and other fairy tales' (*https://wp.me/p2kILc-L*).

I was intrigued. I wanted to learn more.

The idea that English is now used primarily as a global means of communication, often with no 'native speakers' actually present, resonated with me. I could see it as a possible way forward beyond 'native-speakerism' – namely, the widespread view in ELT that sees 'native speakers' as the ideal language models and the preferred teachers:

- From the vantage point of a 'non-native speaker' *user* of English, ELF felt empowering. I could appropriate English, too. Make it my own. Use it without constantly worrying at the back of my mind about conforming (or more frequently *not* conforming) with 'native-like' rules.
- From the vantage point of a 'non-native speaker' *teacher* of English, ELF had some very important classroom implications. The goal of teaching would need to shift from 'native-like' proficiency to the ability to communicate successfully in international contexts.

The way I taught pronunciation, for example, would have to move away from focusing on British or American English to focusing on *intelligibility*. The materials I used would have to reflect the *diversity* of English users.

It seemed exciting, but also daunting. And my immediate thought was: how on earth do I go about it? None of the teaching degrees and courses I had done prepared me for this situation.

And the more I read about ELF, the more I realised that what was lacking was a more practically oriented approach:

- One that would appeal to teachers, teacher trainers and materials writers.
- One that would give ELT practitioners the tools they need to teach ELF.

When Rob and I met, we very quickly realised that a classroom-based approach to these issues is something we are both passionate about.

This book is a result of this passion: an attempt to provide ELT practitioners with a step-by-step approach to teaching ELF which, we both believe, is the way forward.

Marek

My interest in native-speakerism and English as a Lingua Franca began about ten years ago. I was working in Japan and was in the midst of my postgraduate studies, where I had started to encounter critical discussion around issues in English as a Foreign Language.

I was working with a colleague to design an intensive English course for a university department, and the professors heading the programme wanted us, as 'native speakers', to design a course focusing on British culture and teaching British English.

However, my colleague and I decided to go in a different direction, partly as an act of defiance against what we saw as a stereotypical attitude to what foreign teachers were 'supposed' to teach:

- The course was called 'Comparing Cultures'. The students were put into groups and assigned a country in which English was not generally spoken as a first language: a country which they would research, keeping a journal for two semesters while engaging in language learning tasks such as discussions and presentations.
- The course became very popular, and several groups even went on holiday together to the country of their research. British English and British culture played no role in their enthusiasm, and they seemed to gain a keener awareness of the function of English for international communication.

This early experiment led me to further study of critical issues in ELT, which became the focus of my MA and PhD studies, and of my subsequent research and writing.

Marek and I first met online in 2016 during a discussion about native-speakerism on the IATEFL Facebook page, and we quickly found a shared set of interests surrounding critical issues in language education.

One thing we shared was a frustration with the fact that, despite the amount of scholarly ink spilled on these challenging issues, very little change had happened at the *classroom* level. As a result, our collaborative work has focused on making them directly relevant for teachers.

This book is our attempt to provide a practical and accessible guide for ELT professionals wishing to make English as a Lingua Franca a reality in their classrooms.

Rob

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Contents

Throughout this book, we place the terms 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' in inverted commas.

These terms are highly contested in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Research shows that these labels are not value-free, and are applied to language users on the basis of factors such as race, nationality, accent and name, as well as other non-linguistic characteristics, with only those speakers of English who are white and Western-looking being regarded as true 'native speakers' by many.

In the context of a book about English as a Lingua Franca, which seeks to question some of these assumptions, we feel it is important to use the labels in this way as our reminder that they are *not* neutral, and that they play an important role in what we describe as the 'English as a Foreign Language' view of English language teaching.

Ideally, we would prefer not to use the terms at all – preferring more inclusive labels that have been proposed. So, whenever possible, we use the term 'multilingual English user' to denote someone who is a proficient user of English and of at least one more language – in an attempt to move away from the problematic dichotomy.

We also generally favour the use of English 'user' over *learner*, since the latter term might suggest that those perceived as 'non-native speakers' are forever trying (and failing) to master the language. In contrast, an English *user* is simply someone who utilises the language.

However, the labels 'native' and 'non-native' are so deeply embedded in our profession, that it is still necessary to use them, to question the beliefs that give rise to the concept of native-speakerism.

The inverted commas, therefore, serve as a reminder to both readers – and authors! – that we are referring to those who are *perceived* as 'native' and 'non-native speakers' by students and ELT professionals.

A

Teaching English as a Lingua Franca is part of a journey
on which we would like you to accompany us; a journey we feel is necessary if our
profession is to resolve a number of challenging issues which it currently faces.

English language teaching stands at a crossroads:

- In one direction lies what we may call the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) approach: an approach to teaching English characterised by a focus on learning Western (British, American, Australian, etc) forms of the language, with the assumption that our students need to master these in order to be able to communicate successfully with monolingual 'native speakers' from these countries, who are seen as the main group our students will interact with in the future.
- In the other direction lies a radically different approach to the teaching of English: one which treats English as a tool for international communication with a wide range of speakers from a variety of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) approach.

It goes without saying that English is now, and has been for many years, an international language. It is used by hundreds of millions of people around the world for tourism and business, and in many countries a local variety of English serves as an official language used for in-country communication. Language teaching researchers have been suggesting with increasingly loud voices that this change in the way English is *used* should have an impact on the way English is *taught*.

Yet, the field of English language teaching has been slow to react to this change, and it is still unclear to many what this actually means in practical terms for our profession. Although there is a growing body of research that suggests that adopting the ELF approach may be important and beneficial both for teachers and students, this inevitably raises many questions:

- What is ELF? Is it a variety of English, or a set of communication strategies?
- Does it mean grammar becomes a free-for-all?
- Are 'native speaker' teachers obsolete in ELF teaching?
- How can a language be detached from its culture, and is that even something we want?

These are challenging issues, which have been discussed at length in the scholarly literature. We hope that this book will help practising teachers find answers to some of these questions, and also to consider how they could introduce ELF into their classrooms.

■ ■ ■

English as a Lingua Franca: Description and definitions

Before we look at the practical implications ELF has for the teaching and learning of English, and before we describe how it might help us to tackle some of the current issues in the way the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession is structured and organised, it is important to discuss the vital, but complex, question of what ELF actually means.

In this section, we will provide some historical background on the development of ELF, some of the ways it is conceived of today, and some of the criticisms and misconceptions it has faced from both teachers and researchers – and their concerns regarding the implications of ELF. Finally, we will summarise what *we* mean when we talk about ELF in the context of this book.

Historical description and development

The idea of developing a specific form of English which could be used for international communication can be traced back as far as the work of C. K. Ogden in the 1920s and 1930s (see Ogden, 1935) on what came to be known as 'BASIC English' (standing for British American Scientific International Commercial).

This was a restricted form of English, featuring a small vocabulary and a limited number of grammar rules, the purpose of which was to create a form of the language that could be learned easily and used for international communication (Howatt and Widdowson, 2004):

- BASIC English has little in common with modern ELF, which is certainly not a simplified form of English, as BASIC was.
- BASIC English represents, however, the first stirrings of the idea that English could function as an international language, and that this language need not obey the rules of its codified varieties (that is, the varieties of English which have been standardised and described in reference books, such as British or American English).

Indeed, one major modern ELF proponent, Barbara Seidlhofer, has written eloquently describing BASIC in just this way (Seidlhofer, 2002).

More closely related to the *current* model of ELF is the idea of 'Neutral English', proposed by the English teacher and researcher L. A. Hill in his 1967 article of the same name (Hill, 1967). In this short article, Hill argues that, while English has traditionally been taught alongside the culture and literature of Britain and America, it may be necessary to divorce the language from its cultural roots and, instead, develop a neutral form of English which can be used by speakers of English around the globe for international communication.

This was a rather radical proposition at the time, as links between language and nation were very strongly felt (Bonfiglio, 2010) and the notion of trying to detach one from the other was something that, to many, would have seemed undesirable, at the very least, if not completely impossible. However:

- Hill argued that the development of a neutral English was important because there was, as he saw it, a need for an English which could be used as a gateway to international understanding and cooperation.
- Hill stated (p95) that English language teachers should 'lend a sympathetic ear to the desires and aspirations of the many … who see in English the answer to their need for an international lingua franca, provided it is taught in a truly international way'.

This marks, perhaps, the first time that the phrase *English as a lingua franca* was used in print to describe the concept of a neutral form of English for international communication.

Hill's article was brief, but echoes of his proposal can be found in Randolph Quirk's proposal for Nuclear English (1981), and in the work of the present ELF movement.

This brings us to the modern era, where ELF has become a key concern in ELT research. Since the 1990s, writing on the subject has increased dramatically, producing books, journals and a growing number of university courses on how to teach and research ELF. One of the most influential works in early ELF studies was *The Phonology of English as an International Language* by the applied linguist Jennifer Jenkins (Jenkins, 2000). What she set out to do was to identify the features of pronunciation which were crucial for intelligibility in international, lingua franca settings:

- To do this, she decided to abandon the traditionally held belief that English users should aim to imitate standard British or American pronunciation as closely as possible in order to be the most intelligible.
- In addition, she recorded, transcribed and analysed the interactions between English users in the UK from a variety of L1 backgrounds, to identify the instances when misunderstandings caused by mispronunciation occurred.

What she found was quite surprising:

- Many of the pronunciation features that we, as teachers, might typically think of as important – possibly because they bring our students' pronunciation closer to that of a 'native speaker' – and which we tend to focus on heavily in class – such as vowel quality, stress timing, features of connected speech (eg vowel reduction) or word stress – have little to no impact on intelligibility in international contexts.
- Other pronunciation features, on the contrary, which are often not given enough prominence in the classroom – such as consonant sounds (with the exception of <th>), consonant clusters (or groups of two or more consonants with no vowels in between), nuclear stress (the most prominent stress in a given phrase) and vowel length – are all crucial for intelligibility in international contexts.

These pronunciation features became known as the Lingua Franca Core (LFC).

Since then, these initial findings, and the LFC, have been largely confirmed by numerous other researchers working in a variety of contexts (see, for example, Deterding, 2012; Deterding and Mohamad, 2016; Zoghbor, 2011a).

This was a radical departure from the both then and now prevailing view that, in order to be successful users of English, learners must strive to imitate a 'native speaker' model as closely as possible:

- It flew in the face of what teachers were told in teacher education programmes.
- It contradicted how mainstream ELT coursebooks presented the English language.
- It went against some deeply rooted assumptions in ELT research and practice about the primacy of 'native speakers' as the only valid models of the language.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it challenged the 'gut feeling' most of us English teachers have – that the more 'native-like' the language of our learners, the better.

Perhaps for these reasons, ELT professionals have found it difficult to come to terms with Jenkins' findings, let alone to put them into practice. Despite this, their influence on early ELF research was paramount. Jenkins' results suggested:

- It might be possible to identify a list of linguistic features of English which are stable across speakers of English from a number of different national and linguistic backgrounds, and which contribute most to mutually intelligible language production.
- If this was achieved, learners could be taught these features in order to enhance their ability to successfully communicate in international settings.

Following Holliday (2005), we use inverted commas around the terms 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' to indicate that they are 'so-called'. Within ELT, we believe these terms are used to describe ideological constructions, not objective psycholinguistic realities.

As a result, by gathering corpus data, researchers such as Barbara Seidlhofer (see Seidlhofer, 2011) started to focus not only on pronunciation, but also lexicogrammar, identifying a number of features used by 'non-native speakers' which, even though deviating from the standard 'native speaker' model, seemed to have little negative impact on successful communication in English. For example, the data showed that dropping the third person 's' – or using 'who' and 'which' interchangeably – were not only common, but also did not lead to misunderstandings in ELF contexts.

It is clear, then, that early ELF research was very much interested in identifying core linguistic features of English as used mainly by 'non-native speakers', possibly with a view to describing it as a 'new variety' of the language:

- However, it is crucial to emphasise here that this focus has long been abandoned by researchers, and that ELF should no longer be understood as a distinct *variety* of English, in the same way as, for example, British, American or Indian English may be.
- Indeed, as more and more corpus data was gathered, it started to become obvious to ELF scholars that an attempt to describe ELF as a 'variety' was not only futile, but also misplaced.

What the data began to show was that ELF use was far too varied, fluid, changeable and context-dependent for it to be ever encapsulated in one codified and standardised form.

Modern perspectives and definitions

While early research such as that of Jenkins focused on identifying the core phonological (LFC) and lexicogrammatical features of ELF, the emphasis of ELF research has since shifted to other areas, such as describing the pragmatics of successful communication in ELF contexts (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011).

- In other words, ELF researchers are now no longer trying to describe ELF as a variety with a set of linguistic features that make it distinct from other varieties of English.

Instead, researchers have focused their efforts on identifying the communicative strategies employed by ELF users to communicate successfully:

- To give a *practical* example, ELF researchers might look at conversations between speakers of different nationalities available in ELF corpora – The Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and Asian Corpus of English (ACE) are the two largest corpora of ELF interactions – and analyse them to see how the participants use English to achieve their communicative goals.
- To give a *specific* example, they might look at how the speakers' first language (L1) is used in the interaction to facilitate understanding.

That is to say, ELF researchers aim to describe how English is currently used in situations and contexts where it is the means of international communication. While this might include describing how ELF users utilise grammar or lexis, the goal is purely descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

This means that, although corpora may show that many ELF users drop the third person 's', this does not mean that this feature would be prescribed as a fixed characteristic of ELF use, nor that ELF researchers would recommend teaching it.

As a result, one aim of this book, and in particular of the activities in Part B, is not to provide teachers with a list of teachable ELF grammar and lexis 'McNuggets' – as was famously expressed by Scott Thornbury (2000) – but, rather, to use the existing descriptions of successful ELF use to help teachers better prepare their students to use English in diverse, multilingual and multicultural encounters.

So, as we have said, the aim of ELF research is no longer to identify a set of fixed features that would position ELF as a variety of English. In fact, Alan Firth (2009) points out that ELF does not exist 'out there' as a system, a thing or a codified language form. Instead, it emerges out of interaction and, as such, it is varied, fluid and changeable.

This could potentially be seen as a form of unstable learner language (that is, a product of a lack of proficiency or linguistic skill), but corpus data of ELF interactions suggests that this constant fluidity is a result of the need of language users to accommodate and adapt their speech to their interlocutors, as well as to the unfolding interaction (Cogo and Dewey, 2012; Firth, 1996, 2009).

- In other words, for various pragmatic reasons (eg maintaining rapport, showing solidarity, facilitating understanding), a speaker might start using a non-standard grammatical or lexical item which has been introduced by another speaker, even though they seem to know the standard form and have used it previously. For example, if one participant in a conversation uses a gendered pronoun such as 'she' rather than 'it', to describe an object, their interlocutor may start to do the same thing.

This fluidity, however, has not precluded researchers from defining what ELF means. One of the earliest of such definitions was given by Alan Firth (1996, p240) who describes it as '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'.

This early definition suggested that ELF only included 'non-native speakers', or those for whom English was a foreign language. This, indeed, was the initial trend in studying ELF.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the focus of research has become more all-encompassing and, according to Jennifer Jenkins (2009), most ELF researchers include *all* English users – 'native' and 'non-native' alike – in their definitions of ELF.

New terms, such as 'expert user' (Rampton,1990) or 'multilingual English user' (Jenkins, 2015), have been suggested to replace 'native' and 'non-native speaker'. Where appropriate, we have chosen to use Jenkins' term, as it is more reflective of the complex linguistic realities of most users of English.

The website of the VOICE corpus, for example, defines ELF as 'an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages'. This is reflected in the corpus data collected there. Rather than focus exclusively on interactions between 'non-native speakers', VOICE includes English users from the Expanding Circle (eg Poland, China), Outer Circle and Inner Circle.

We will be looking further into the Circles in our next section on 'critical issues'. For the moment, it is sufficient to point out:
- Inner Circle countries: where English has a traditional historical base and in which it is still spoken as a primary language. Examples of Inner Circle countries include Britain, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- Outer Circle countries: where English is used as an official first or second language (such as Kenya, Nigeria, India and Singapore).
- Expanding Circle countries: where English has no official status (such as Japan, Poland, China and Russia).

Data taken from the Inner Circle is capped at 10% (Jenkins, 2009), perhaps in order to reflect the fact that about 80% of all English users worldwide are not 'native speakers'. This means that ELF includes the language use of all users of English, from both first and second language backgrounds.

Similarly, Henry Widdowson (2013, p190) sees ELF as 'the communicative use of linguistic resources, by native as well as non-native speakers of English, when no other shared means of communication are available or appropriate'.