

What is ELF? Introductory Questions and Answers for ELT Professionals

ELFとは何か？
英語教員のための入門的問答

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ABSTRACT

ELF has become a popular research field in Applied Linguistics. But what is ELF in the first place? As the field continues growing and attracting an increasing amount of research, it is a good time to review where we are now with a focus on English Language Teaching.

KEYWORDS: ELF, English as a Multilingua Franca, English Language Teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

This volume is published in spring, and we aim to do, as it were, a little ‘spring cleaning’ for ELF and its pedagogy. After all, ELF is often subject to uninformed criticism (see e.g., various references in Ishikawa, 2015), sometimes regarded as promoting a new international variety, and other times as allowing anything to go (e.g., Jenkins, 2018). Neither is, of course, far from the truth. At the same time, it may be hard to say that ELF researchers are free of all responsibility for unjustified criticism. We admit that ELF enquiry has been exploratory in nature, developing rather fast, and never intended to constitute a monolithic, rigid paradigm. Unfortunately (or fortunately from our point of view!), it is highly likely that our field continues to grow further, seeing that any attempt to understand communication in this complex, globalised world would always be partial and incomplete.

In order to carry out the proposed ‘spring cleaning’, the present paper answers fourteen questions which we come across recurrently. Certainly, this short piece of

writing can never be a comprehensive review. ELF is a major, transdisciplinary field in the first place, and our foregrounding of pedagogy towards the end of this paper inevitably backgrounds discussion of other domains. Even so, it is our hope that the answers below somehow help English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals, especially those who are new to ELF, when they reflect on the subject they teach.

2. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q1. How did ELF research start?

During the 1980s, a British teacher of English (called Jennifer Jenkins) noticed that her students tended not to use the rules they learnt in her English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms for the purpose of communicating effectively among themselves (see Jenkins, 2012). It seemed to her that when misunderstanding did occur, the cause often derived from pronunciation. This observation led her to produce the first-ever empirical publication on ELF (Jenkins, 1996a), which was swiftly followed by another publication in which the phenomenon was named ‘ELF’ for the first time (Jenkins, 1996b). Prior to this, she had conducted a five-year project which was then turned into Jenkins (2000), the first monograph on ELF.

Q2. What was the embryo stage of ELF enquiry like?

Thanks to the related field called world Englishes,¹ which is concerned with national varieties of English along with their dialects and sociolects, people have come to recognise, for instance, Singaporean, Indian, Kenyan, and Nigerian Englishes as established varieties in addition to traditional ‘vernaculars’ like British English (Ishikawa, 2016; Jenkins, 2017). At the earliest stage, ELF researchers wondered whether Japanese people’s English, for example, might also be conceptualised to be an international variety without official or second language status. In addition, it was hypostatized that there might be shared features across diverse English use in the world which would facilitate meaning making in a full range of domains (e.g., zero marking of 3rd person present singular –s, and countable use of nouns that are uncountable in ‘native’ Englishes), and thus of pedagogic importance (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2001). In fact, Jenkins (2000) provides such features in phonology, termed phonological Lingua Franca Core (LFC). At the same time, she detects the use of this LFC highly depending on interlocutors. More precisely, her empirical evidence demonstrates that what is crucial for mutual understanding is the pragmatic strategy of accommodation, i.e., adapting and adjusting language to specific interactants in a given situation.²

1 As an umbrella term, Global Englishes refers to both research fields of world Englishes and ELF (Jenkins, 2015a).

2 Other and more specific pragmatic strategies identified thus far (e.g. Pietikäinen, 2018) include clarification questions (e.g. “who?”); incomprehension tokens (e.g. “hmm?”); repeating (e.g. “this is our second try” – “second try?”) and self-repeating; paraphrasing (e.g. “you mean ...?”) and self-paraphrasing; code-switching; discourse organisation (e.g. “what I want to say now is ...”); and confirmation checks (e.g. “sure?”).

Q3. Is ELF concerned with international varieties of English?

This proposition is inaccurate. In reference to large-scale corpora, such as VOICE (Seidlhofer, 2004) and ELFA (Mauranen, 2003),³ ELF researchers have found ELF communication to be so dynamic and fluid that the concept of ‘variety’ is not applicable. Meanwhile, despite misconceptions, the LFC refers exclusively to pronunciation, not to any other linguistic levels, and in any case, is not a variety. Accordingly, the field of ELF quickly moved from variety-oriented enquiry and form-centred studies. Indeed, neither is part of contemporary ELF discourse (Baker & Jenkins, 2015). This is not to say that ELF is competing with world Englishes (see Q2 above). While we recognise the importance of regional communication and thus regard world Englishes as a complementary paradigm, our focus is essentially on global communication which transcends cartographical boundaries.

Q4. If not ‘variety’, then what?

A useful notion for ELF enquiry is English ‘similect’ (Mauranen, 2012), which refers to the contact language between an L1 and English as an additional language at the cognitive level. Unlike any variety, the Japanese English similect (i.e., L1-Japanese people’s English), for example, has no stable, geographically definable speech community since L1-Japanese people normally communicate in Japanese among each other. Therefore, their English will not develop into an established variety through interaction over generations. The same is true for other English similects (e.g., L1-Korean people’s English, L1-Thai people’s English, and L1-Hungarian people’s English). For this reason, and although similar, the same English similect is idiolectally different to a remarkable extent, depending on individual experience of encountering other English similects. This experience, in turn, is regarded as second-order contact since two or more English similects contact each other, this time, at the interactional level. From a macro perspective, synchronous interactions across the globe potentially trigger gradual language change.

Q5. Is ‘similect’ a simplified view?

The notion of ‘similect’ does represent a conceptual simplification (Mauranen, 2018a). Obviously, the users of L1 English may participate in global encounters, whether it is ‘native’ Englishes (e.g., British and North American) or ‘nativised’ Englishes (e.g., Singaporean, Indian, Kenyan, and Nigerian). While they may be monolingual(ish), especially in the case of the former, the reality is largely multilingual at all three levels (i.e., cognitive, interactional, and macro; see Q4 above). At the same time, individual repertoires of the same L1s (including English) or L1 varieties can be very different. On a personal note and due to this age of mobility, a number of the first author’s students at an English-medium faculty have told him that they are not sure what their L1s are. It should be added that the aforementioned three levels are intertwined and not clear-cut (Mauranen, 2012). They provide angles with different time and space scales, and need to be integrated to understand ELF communication.

3 These acronyms respectively stand for the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and the corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA), which now has an additional written corpus (WrELFA 2015). Another large-scale project is the Asian Corpus of English (ACE), which emulates VOICE as an Asian counterpart (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Q6. How has ELF communication been defined?

Over the last few years, ELF communication, in other words, the target phenomenon of the research field of ELF, has most often been defined as ‘*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, p. 7). Notably, this definition is confined to the use of English even though the majority of English users are multilinguals who interact with each other in a diverse linguistic environment. In addition, the difference in L1s is assumed to be decisive in defining ELF communication. In contrast to this assumption, however, an instructor and students often share the same mother tongue in numerous ELT and English-medium classrooms, which demonstrates that Seidlhofer’s (2011) definition does not go far enough.

Q7. Does ELF focus on English and L1 status?

This proposition is inaccurate. The focus of ELF enquiry has shifted from English and L1 status, albeit that neither would be ignorable in ELF studies. Instead, Jenkins’ (2015b) notion of English as a Multilingua Franca (EMF) foregrounds multilingualism, or rather emergent multilingual practice, as the theoretical *raison d’être* of the target phenomenon. The working definition of ELF communication as such, or more precisely, an EMF scenario, is: “Multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (Jenkins, 2015b, p. 73). An increasing number of ELF researchers, particularly at the Centre for Global Englishes (e.g., Will Baker, Sonia Morán Panero, and Ying Wang), are working on fleshing out this updated notion.

Q8. How do we understand EMF?

As the current notion in the field of ELF, EMF (see Q7 above) addresses the empirical evidence that “the best solutions need not be the most standardised-like or native-like ... [or] even English” (Mauranen, 2018b, p. 114), and that global communication never fails to bring out multilingualism with varying degrees of overtness (Cogo, 2018; see e.g., Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015, pp. 78-79). In this regard, even when transcribed or text communication appears to be English on the surface, covert multilingual influence would be detectable across different linguistic levels (e.g., phonology, lexicogrammar, pragmatics, and discourse structure; see e.g., Hülmbauer, 2013, p. 64). Accordingly, multilingualism here should be considered to be far less about either multiple named languages or individual multilingual repertoires. It is about how malleable and permeable both languages and repertoires are through interaction across agents, time, and space, with English “*always potentially ‘in the mix’*” (Jenkins, 2015b, p. 74).

Q9. Does an ‘EMF scenario’ include monolingual and bilingual English users?

In an EMF scenario, individuals may not be multilingual themselves, or bilingual in the case of L1 English users. Even so, they should be capable of ‘multilanguaging’ i.e., learning and exploiting previously unfamiliar multilingual resources as communicatively effective by virtue of their accumulating experience (Ishikawa, 2017a; Jenkins, 2015b). As a corollary, unlike the most quoted definition by Seidlhofer (2011, p. 7; see Q6 above), the notion of EMF would embrace communication among English-knowing multilingual

and multilingual speakers of the same L1s or L1 varieties (Ishikawa, 2017a).

Q10. How is EMF different from translanguaging?

EMF may be seen as broadly conceptualised translanguaging (e.g., García & Li, 2014; Li & Ho, 2018). Many translanguaging studies have targeted how bilinguals and multilinguals use multilingual resources strategically. However, an EMF scenario would never exclude monolingual(ish) L1 English users so long as they are capable of multilingualing (see Q9 above). Also, the potential availability of English is different from multilingualism and translanguaging, both of which can exist without the English language. EMF is concerned with English as being the currently most prominent global lingua franca. Without it, global communication would be more difficult. However, this English is not equal to monolingual ‘standard’ English in EFL, but rather ‘English’ appropriated by multilinguals in this multilingual world.

Q11. What about culture in ELF communication?

While language has been a central issue of ELF enquiry, the target phenomenon inevitably takes a form of ‘intercultural’ communication. The current notion of EMF coincides with another empirically based notion of transculturality, which recognizes how interactants move through and across, and thereby blur and transcend, the boundaries and scales (i.e., local, national, and global) of named cultures whether consciously or subconsciously (Baker, 2015; see e.g., Baker, 2018, the ‘mooncake’ example). In this regard, interactions serve as the locus of transforming individual cultural understandings and orientations (see e.g., Baker, 2009, pp. 581-582). The possibility is that cultural differences as obstacles to achieving meaning turn out not to be long-lasting (Ishikawa, 2017a). In short, as a highly relevant notion for EMF, transculturality highlights the border-transgressing and transforming nature of culture with cultural ‘barriers’ possibly short-lived.

Q12. How far is ELF communication about language and culture?

How language and culture converge or diverge for meaning making in each instance is an empirical question (e.g., Risager, 2012). This meaning making, in turn, assembles multiple semiotic modes (e.g., emoticon, gesture and posture, image, music, and speech), especially in technology-mediated communication (see e.g., Sangiamchit, 2018, p. 352). It amounts to the condition of what is called transmodalities, which index the bricolage of semiotic resources entangled as well as “continuously shifting and re-shaping in their contexts and mobility” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 64). In other words, linguistic and other modes are transgressively merged, situationally transforming perceived meaning. Any interpretation of meaning can therefore be short-lived as described in Q11.

Q13. Is EFL, as it were, an enemy of EMF?

Arguably, the premise behind this question is inaccurate. EFL may be a ‘frenemy’ of EMF, even if not a friend (Ishikawa, 2018). Of course, there are many ‘native’ Englishes, given that dozens of countries and regions use English as a de jure or de facto official language. It may therefore be odd for EFL to feature a particular ‘standard’ variety in a couple of nations where a large population speaks only English. After all, such ‘standard’

English for monolinguals is, in a way, simplistic and linguistically marked against today's prevalent social contacts beyond geographical boundaries, for which language tends to be enacted amorphously. At the same time, however, it is this idealised, provincial, and monolingual approach to English that affords practicality in a classroom. For this reason, what we really problematise is not the EFL approach per se, but the danger of conflating the convenient fiction of 'standard' English with English in its entirety and thereby ignoring multilingual reality in ELT settings.

Q14. How can ELT bridge the gap between EFL and multilingual reality?

EFL is likely to have a scaffolding effect on becoming a capable English user in global communication so long as the convenient fiction as described in Q13 is not confused with English in its entirety (e.g., Sifakis & Tsantila, 2019). To this effect, it is known that the understanding of global diversity in English through classroom instruction and activities will influence students' language attitudes positively (e.g., Galloway and Rose, 2017). In addition, the most recent empirical data demonstrates that students' first-hand experience in an EMF scenario (see Q7 above) in tandem with such a classroom is likely to promote more active English use both inside and outside the classroom (Ishikawa forthcoming). In other words, their EMF experience, if together with linguistic and cultural awareness in the classroom, may well serve as a powerful pedagogic mediation to nurture interactional ability. Accordingly, what we would like to suggest is EMF awareness (cf. Sifakis, 2017), which embraces conceptual understanding, attitudes, and practical ability to be integrated for effective global communication. For this purpose, EMF-aware courses may be designed according to two principles: (1) facilitating students' experience in an EMF scenario whether online or in person, and (2) encouraging their critical thinking on 'English' and culture in reference to the notion of EMF coupled with that of transculturality (see Q8 & Q11 above). Students will formulate their own attitudes towards this updated representation of 'English' even if ideological monolingualism is still circulated in a social sphere. The same empirical data illustrates that more active language use undergirded by positively developing attitudes further deepens conceptual understanding, and that such a virtuous circle has the power to allow a classroom to embrace increasingly diverse aggregate resources in language and culture (Ishikawa forthcoming).

3. CONCLUSION

The research field of ELF continues presenting an intellectual challenge to ELT professionals, or more broadly, all concerned with language and communication in this age of globalisation. The current notion of EMF invites us to "disinvent" English (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) from monolingual provincialism and see it within prevalent multilingualism. Incorporating EMF awareness into the classroom has the potential for students to open up a new space of using English in their own right as being multilingual and multilingualising English users. After all, it may be 'native' English speakers who are 'abnormal' or highly unusual in today's complex world if they choose to stay monolingual and relatively monocultural. On the other hand, it is multilingual and multilingualising English users capable of seeing culture as "emerging in situ" (Baker, 2015, p. 99) who

are “‘unmarked’ ... to be able to participate fully in ELF [communication]” (Jenkins, 2015b, p. 78).

Among several foreseeable issues for ELF researchers to tackle (see Jenkins, Baker & Dewey, 2018, Section 7), a primary one in ELT is language assessment, especially vis-à-vis the current fit-for-all model of internationally commercialised English tests for additional language users. Many of us are working on this issue (e.g., Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Leung, Lewkowicz & Jenkins, 2016; Murata, Ishikawa & Konakahara, 2018), and will possibly see you again to discuss it in our next attempt for ‘spring cleaning’.

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