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# ENGLISH AS A *LINGUA FRANCA* IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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***Abstract:*** *The integrated, almost 'borderless' Europe triggers mobility to an extent that was unimaginable ten-fifteen years ago. As a result, the European Union, this multilingual geo-political entity, is increasingly characterized by interactions taking place between individuals not speaking the same mother tongue. Effective communication among European citizens of different linguistic backgrounds can only be achieved by using a lingua franca as a medium for communication. This paper investigates how English has taken up the role of lingua franca in intercultural interactions in Europe, and calls attention that making language students achieve native-like proficiency became less important than making them aware of the importance of mutual intelligibility and negotiation of meaning in intercultural interactions.*

***Keywords:*** *intercultural communication, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a lingua franca (ELF).*

## 1. Introduction

In medieval times command of Classical Latin ensured straightforward, trouble-free diplomatic interaction between educated people of the Western world, regardless of which nation they belonged to. In the early modern era French became the language of diplomacy, enabling international cooperation among nations. Times, however, have gradually changed and both Latin and French ceased to fulfill their functions as languages connecting people of different nations, and, more importantly, the nature of communication itself has undergone major changes in the past centuries. Nowadays the spectrum of communication has broadened, new channels have been opened up, and the interchange of information, thoughts and opinions is more frequent than ever.

The need for successful communication is ever growing as it is crucial in effective cooperation among individuals carrying different cultural baggage and speaking diverse languages. It is obvious that mutual understanding between parties can only be achieved by using a common medium, a *lingua franca* for communication.

## 2. English and intercultural communication

Successful communication between individuals not speaking the same mother tongue requires the use of a language spoken and comprehended by both parties. This might be achieved through using one

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of the parties' mother tongues or a language spoken by both parties as a foreign language. Nowadays, English is the language that fulfils the role of this common medium and thus is most widely used in these situations. As Crystal (1997, 67) notes, there is a fundamental value of a common language that presents its speakers with exceptional opportunities for successful communication.

Knapp and Meierkord (2002, 13) define *lingua franca* as a language used for communication by individuals for whom that language is not a first language. Although Seidlhofer cites three definitions of lingua franca echoing this view (Samarin, 1987; Firth, 1996; House, 1999; all cited in Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 211), she also warns that interactions in which English as a lingua franca (ELF) is used oftentimes engage interlocutors whose first language is English. Thus, she considers it important to broaden the definition of ELF conversations to include interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers of the given language.

As Graddol (2006) points out, non-native speakers of English outnumber its native speakers, consequently, in eighty percent of English exchanges the language is used as a lingua franca. Thus, it can be concluded that Meierkord's (1996) term 'English as a medium of intercultural communication' ('Englisch als Medium der interkulturellen Kommunikation') is prevailing and appropriate.

Geographical factors may also be taken into consideration when discussing ELF. Kachru (1992) modeled world Englishes in three concentric circles, introducing the terms *Inner Circle,* referring to countries where English is spoken as a native language, *Outer Circle* comprising countries where English is not the native language, but a language of historical importance, and is used institutionally. Finally, the *Expanding Circle* encompasses countries where English has no historical role, but it is used as a foreign language.

English is increasingly used as a lingua franca in countries belonging to the Expanding Circle; in other words, ELF conversations are taking place in geographical locations outside of native countries which indicates one more aspect of the global dimension of the language.

The emergence of ELF also brought up both normative issues and issues related to ownership of the language. Widdowson (1994) argues that those claiming for custody over the so-called 'standard English' are in fact protecting their own status as norm-providers (pp. 380-382). He takes a contrary position in favor of diverse Englishes claiming that acceptance of English as a language that serves communicative and communal needs of different communities logically implies that it must be diverse (p.385).

However, there may be a number of reasons behind learners' desire to acquire native-like norms, which include striving for professionalism or the wish to be identified as good learners. This, in fact, leads us to the question concerning the extent to which ELF differs from English as a foreign language (EFL), the school subject being taught in most schools in the Expanding Circle. In EFL the prevailing paradigm is that students need to attain native-like language competence and the target language culture is also heavily incorporated in the curricula. It can be concluded that the fundamental difference between ELF and EFL lies in their goals: ELF aims at serving mutual understanding between individuals not sharing a mother tongue, whereas EFL is taught to students with the intention to help them acquiring a common framework of norms, in other words, native like competence.

As the success of intercultural encounters heavily depends on mutual intelligibility, it can be assumed that in

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these situations English is used as a lingua franca, with speakers who intend to comprehend each other as precisely as possible. This, however, implies that ELF should be taught to ensure better understanding both in non-native interactions and in interactions between native and non-native speakers. As Graddol (2006) suggests, the rising interest in ELF is most likely to influence mainstream language teaching and assessing practices in the years to come.

The next section presents the role of the English language in Europe, and discusses its debated, but unquestionably primer status.

## 3. English in the EU

Although a considerable number of EU documents on language policy stress the importance of learning more than one FL (e.g. CEFR 2001, Action Plan, 2003), and a great emphasis is devoted to articulate that all languages are equally important, English has an unquestioned primacy in Europe, which reflects a global tendency (Graddol, 2006). A survey on European languages completed in Europe in November-December 2006 shows that the three most widely spoken second or FLs in the EU are English, German and French. English is the most widely known language apart from the respective mother tongues, this being particularly the case in Sweden (89%), Malta (88%) and the Netherlands (87%), taken together 51% of the EU citizens claim ability to hold conversation in English. The survey also points out that the citizens of the EU think they speak English at a better level than any other second or FLs. Seventy-seven percent of EU citizens believe that their children should learn English. English turned out to be the most desired language to learn in all countries where the research conducted except for the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Luxembourg (Eurobarometer 243: Europeans and their languages, 2006, p. 13).

The sweep of the English language, however, is a world-wide social reality. The most conflicting ideas regarding the dominance of English are expressed by Robert Phillipson and David Crystal, two prominent applied linguists. Their treatment of the issue reflects entirely dissimilar worldviews, and this conflict gave rise to far-reaching debates (Crystal, 2000; Phillipson, 1999a, 1999b). Phillipson (1992) coined the term linguistic imperialism, and calls attention to the fact that the dominance of English is threatening to other languages, as it maintains the status of inequality between languages, and thus between countries and cultures (p. 65). Crystal (1997) claims that the rapid growth of the English language has its reasons in history (pp.7-8), and concludes that the more powerful and influential a nation is, the more chances it has to make its language acknowledged.

While discussing whether the increased use of English serves to unite or divide Europe, Philipson (2003) calls attention to the importance of the realization of the need for more FLs: '[a] significant development in Western Europe in the 1990s has been that the member states of the EU have endorsed the desirability of schoolchildren acquiring competence in at least two foreign languages' (Philipson, 2003, p. 63). This is in accordance with Willems' point of view (2002), as he describes language policy in the EU countries as 'keeping with the conviction that plurilingualism in a continent like Europe should be the norm rather than the exception' (Willems, 2002, p.8).

This train of thoughts, however, would imply that plurilingualism and using a lingua franca are conflicting ideas, which is not necessarily the case. As the intercultural speaker has a favorable attitude towards language learning and has

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successfully internalized interculturality, there is a definite hope that achieving plurilingualism will be a desired goal for them. This seems to smooth the mutual exclusiveness originally implied in the dichotomy of either being too proficient in one single language to be able to successfully handle intercultural situations or be proficient in more FLs.

## 3. Conclusion

Effective communication is vital, and the need for it has never been more emphasized than in our globalized world. Intercultural interactions, however, are not new phenomena at all: they have been detectable in human history ever since men realized the necessity of building relations with one another. The interaction of diverse individual, however, is highly facilitated by the use of a common medium for communication.

This paper aimed to present how English is used as a lingua franca in intercultural encounters taking place between individuals from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. The underlying motives of intercultural interactions are mutual understanding and negotiating meaning, rather than projecting native-like command of the language. Thus, it seems appropriate to include teaching ELF in European language classrooms.

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