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English as a Lingua Franca and Its Implications for Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract. The analysis of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has received considerable attention over the years. There has been a lot of research done both on the morpho-syntactic properties of ELF interactions and the communication strategies used by ELF speakers in order to facilitate communication and avoid misunderstandings. Given the fairly large number of findings, the question arises whether ELF should be introduced in the curriculum or replace EFL (English as a Foreign Language). I believe that although ELF data are significant and can benefit teaching English as a foreign language, they cannot replace EFL, especially because English as a lingua franca is primarily a communication tool and not a language variant. Also, while there have been other models suggested as alternatives to teaching a standard version of English, none of these models seem practical enough or have proven applicable in the classroom.
After giving an overview of the research done on English as a lingua franca, with a special emphasis on the notion of lingua franca core, the study reflects on the repercussions of ELF findings on teaching English as a foreign language.

Keywords: ELF, Lingua Franca Core, communication strategies, language teaching

1. Introduction

English as a lingua franca has received a lot of attention over the years due to the spread of English among non-native speakers of English. Today, we live in an interconnected globalized world (a "global village") where the number of non-native speakers of English exceeds the native ones. English, often seen as a "practical tool" and also as a "working language" (Crystal 2003: 426), has emerged as a lingua franca used by millions of people to engage in a conversation with each other.

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The aim of the present study is multifold: on the one hand, it gives an insight into the research done on English as a lingua franca (ELF) with a special emphasis on the notion of lingua franca core, while, on the other hand, it reflects on the repercussions of the ELF findings on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).

ELF and its repercussions on foreign language teaching have been studied extensively over the last few decades. Considering the large amount of data, there has been considerable debate about whether ELF should replace EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or be introduced in the curriculum. Although there have already been several attempts to do so, the question as to how ELF could be applied to foreign language classes still remains open. I believe that, until a new practicable model based on ELF data is offered to teachers, ELF cannot substitute EFL. Nevertheless, I find that ELF data are significant as they shed light on the areas that need more focus when teaching English as a foreign language.

2. ELF. A definition

While there is no clear-cut definition of a lingua franca, two main understandings of this term can be distinguished. On the one hand, ELF is often considered a "contact language" between people who do not share a common mother tongue and use English as the chosen foreign language for communication (Firth 1996) (as cited by Seidlhofer 2004: 211). On the other hand, ELF is also regarded as interactions between two or more lingua cultures in English for whom English is not the mother tongue (House 1999) (as cited by Seidlhofer 2004: 211).

The two definitions reflect two different perspectives on ELF, which, although connected, also differ from each other. Thus, while the first one regards ELF as a linguistic concept and sees ELF as a language variety, the second definition defines ELF from a sociolinguistic perspective defining ELF as a working tool rather than a language variety.

In the present approach, ELF is understood in this latter sense; so, ELF is defined here as a means of communication between speakers who do not share the same mother tongue and who use English for ELF purposes. This definition greatly corresponds with Penny Ur's (2010: 85) understanding of ELF, defining ELF "as interactions between people whose mother tongue is not English."

3. The notion of Lingua Franca Core

There has been considerable research done on ELF communication. Analysis of ELF has focused mainly on spoken English data and has been carried out at the level of (a) language, (b) lingua-cultural background of interlocutors, and (c)

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domain (Seidlhofer 2004: 8). Concerning the level of language, ELF descriptions have mainly focused on phonological and pragmatic features (such as long pause, overlapping speech), but there have also been attempts to describe the lexico-grammatical characteristics of ELF interactions. Several corpora have been compiled with the attempt to capture the lexico-grammatical features of ELF talk (e.g. the English Department of the University of Vienna compiled the VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) corpus with the intention to analyse the morpho-syntactic properties of spoken ELF on the basis of non-native speaker communication). Research carried out on linguistic properties of ELF talk has resulted in a series of studies that focus on the repercussions of ELF on language teaching and also language acquisition (Canagarajah 2007, Jenkins 2000, Seidlhofer 2004, etc.). There are also studies on ELF focusing on a specific lingua-cultural background of interlocutors and delimiting the research to specific regions (e.g. ELF in Southern Africa (Meierkord 2006)). Finally, some studies also concentrate on a specific domain, like international business settings, such as ELF in business telephone calls (Haegemann 2002) or analysing the use of English in academic settings (Mauranen (2003), reports about the compilation of the ELFA, the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings). Based on the findings, there have been several attempts to describe a lingua franca core that would contain the main phonological, morpho-syntactical, and also pragmatic characteristics of ELF interactions.

Jenkins (2000) uses the term lingua franca core for pronunciation elements that are crucial for intelligibility in face-to-face lingua franca communication. The elements included in lingua franca core are all the consonant sounds (except for /θ/ and /ð/), consonant clusters (addition (consonant insertion) is preferred to deletion), vowel length distinctions, and nuclear stress. On the other hand, some of the elements that are focused on in a traditional syllabus of EFL but are not so important for intelligibility are not included in lingua franca core. Pronunciation features that in Jenkins' view do not impact ELF intelligibility are the sounds θ/ and /ð/ (for which most substitutions are possible, such as /f/ and /v/), dark [l] at the end of the word, as in *little*, word stress, stress-timing, exact vowel quantity and pitch movement.[1]

A lingua franca core has been suggested for morpho-syntactic characteristics as well. Seidlhofer (2004) gives a preliminary list of grammatical items which are 'deviant' from native-speaker norms, but which are considered unproblematic in ELF communication. These are:

1 Jenkins's list of Lingua Franca Core has also received criticism. Dauer (2005) calls Jenkins's list problematic in several respects, such as not giving enough reasons as to why it is only θ/ and /ð/ (which in her opinion could be rather substituted by /t/ and /d/, not /f/ and /v/) left out from the consonants, also the lack of suprasegmental features in Lingua Franca Core, such as word stress, intonation, features of connected speech, etc.

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– the omission of -s in third person singular: he *look* very sad;
– the omission of articles: our countries have signed agreement;
– treating *who* and *which* interchangeable;
– substituting bare infinitive for -*ing*: I look forward *to see you;*
– using *isn't it*? as a universal tag.

Mauranen (2010) also lists some of the main morpho-syntactical features of ELF conversations. Among the characteristics, she names the non-standard uses of articles (of *the* Wilson's disease) and of prepositions (discuss *about*, obsession *in*), regularization of verb forms (*teached*, *stucked*), regularization of countable and uncountable forms (*furnitures*, *researches*), also productive or non-standard morphology (*irrelatively*, *commentated*), and creative solutions (*far away* uncle).

Research on ELF has shed light on the pragmatic aspect of ELF interactions as well. Several researchers (Seidlhofer 2004, Mauranen 2010, Hülmbauer et al. 2008, etc.) draw attention to the fact that in ELF communication partners do not orientate themselves to native-speaker norms but negotiate meaning as conversation unfolds by adapting their skills to those of their partner and to the purpose of communication (Hülmbauer et al. 2008: 25). Grammatical accuracy does not play a significant role in ELF communication: more important than formal correctness is functional effectiveness as ELF speakers are primarily users and not learners of the language. Negotiation and adaptation are often defined as key features of ELF interactions: speakers negotiate meaning as they engage in a conversation adapting their skills and needs to those of their partners. Mauranen (2006) offers an interesting analysis of the strategies used in ELF interactions by non-native speakers (NNS) of English in order to facilitate communication and avoid confusion. Misunderstandings in ELF interactions are rare and often resolved either by topic change or by other strategies such as repetition or rephrasing (Seidlhofer 2004: 11).

In what follows, a brief description of an analysis that focuses both on the morpho-syntactic properties and the pragmatic elements of ELF interactions in online communities will be given. Besides reflecting the everyday language use of ELF speakers, these data can also help teachers tailor their teaching methodology to fit their students' needs.

4. ELF data as a source of inspiration for teachers

During the months of April and May 2012, a corpus-based research was carried out on ELF communication in the Couchsurfing Online Community, a hospitality and social networking website, aimed at providing free accommodation for people all over the world. Members of this community commit themselves to hosting travellers and might also 'surf' on other people's couches for free. As

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such, Couchsurfing offers a cheap way of discovering the world, allowing for the encounter of people from different social and cultural backgrounds. Thereby, English is most often used as a language of communication. The analysis of ELF communication has been undertaken within the Vienna Couchsurfing Group, a subgroup of the Couchsurfing community, counting more than 10,000 members coming from Vienna but also people from all over the world including native speakers of English. The members have a great variety of communication forms at their disposal. They can choose to write on the bulletin message board, where they can see what other members have written, and also comment on them, discuss online in various subgroups, initiate new threads, or send private messages to one another.

The analysis of the morpho-syntactic and pragmatic aspects of the ELF has yielded similar results to the ones mentioned by Seidlhofer (2004) and Mauranen (2010). Regarding the morpho-syntactic properties, the most common mistakes detected are the non-standard use of prepositions (sentences 1–2), the omission of 's' in third person singular or, on the contrary, its overuse (sentences 3–4), the regularization of uncountable forms (sentences 5–6) and also verb forms (e.g. 'what I mended' (instead of 'meant')), or the different incorrect variants of the *look forward to vb + ing* construction (sentences 7–8).

1) I was looking *on* the wrong month
2) (…) if you are interested *to* join me/us send me a message
3) if someone *whant* to join me
4) (….) but cool a lot people *wants* to joining!
5) *Advices* for Vienna (title of a thread)
6) Hope you could share with me yours *experiences* and some *informations* :)
7) I'm looking *forward having* a fun holiday with CS spirit ;)
8) Looking forward *to see you*

Overall, it can be said that ELF speakers do not seem to worry much about grammatical correctness as long as they mutually understand each other. Since they negotiate meaning during the conversations, adapting their skills to those of their partner's, the lack of grammatical correctness rarely causes misunderstandings. While some confusion can be noted during the interactions, this results from the specificities of online communication (e.g. the lack of non-verbal cues) rather than the language skills of the interlocutors.

There are several communication strategies adopted by ELF speakers in order to facilitate understanding in the Vienna Couchsurfing Group. Placing a question into the subject line is one of them; so, there is a great number of threads where the subject contains a question or a request (like: *Fare Dodging Vienna's transport?* (asking for information), *How to make friends in Wien?* (seeking help as well

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as advice), *In town this week… looking for some friends or jogging partners* (request*), How to get from Vienna to Adlitzgraben?* (asking for information), *Someone up to meet today??* (initiating an activity), etc. By using this strategy, the users immediately signal whether they need help, information, or advice or if they wish to organize something or are looking for friends. Another important strategy is self-regulation (altering or adapting one's behaviour to the situation at hand), characteristic of postings that contain larger discussions (posting a) is an example of seeking approval). Such postings are usually much longer with more elaborate sentences reflecting vivid talk with repetitions and the tendency for overemphasis (postings b–c).

a) *oh i am sorry* if you or anybody else got the impression that i was talking to a special person from the thread with "never say all" and criticise them... [..] maybe i wasnt very clear in my words... maybe you got now what i wanted to say before ;) at least i hope so :P

b) i am austrian, *with austrian roots* and i *really, really* have to say that it isnt that bad... (and i am glad to have wonderful friends also from abroad) [...]

c) As a conclusion I *must say* Austrians are very kind and respectful people, but for a foreigner, it may seem hard to form friendships with them at the beginning, due to misunderstandings [...]

Finally, in the Vienna Couchsurfing Group, it often comes to code-switching when members involved in a conversation are Austrians. Taking into account that this group has many Austrian members, code-switching used by both Austrians and foreigners (which can be the case, too) can be regarded as a convergence strategy, used by members to seek for approval and acceptance. Sentence d) is an example of how the person initiating the conversation switches to German in order to seek for acceptance and at the same time states (maybe unwillingly) her Austrian identity. The postings in this group reflect a colourful language use, ranging from postings only in English or German to mixed responses, containing phrases both in English and German.

d) I think I'll offer a visit to Kahlenberg, including some Geocaching for those interested ... Bettina, *hast du den Kahlenberg schon fertig abgegrast*?

It seems then that ELF communication has a dynamism of its own with specific characteristics and unwritten rules that are respected by natives and non-natives alike. While ELF as a construct seems to have characteristics that are common to most interactions where English is used as a lingua franca, ELF should be regarded primarily as a communication tool rather than a language variety. Nevertheless, as it has been pointed out above, studying ELF communication

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brings along significant advantages for teachers of English, who gain an insight into how English is used for ELF purposes.

By analysing ELF data, teachers can realize the importance of teaching communication strategies to their students. While all components of a communicative competence (grammatical competence (the use of grammatical rules), sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness), and strategic competence (the proper use of communication strategies)) (Canale & Swain 1980)) are important and probably practised in class, the latter seems to be more neglected despite the fact that it largely determines the learner's fluency and conversational skills. This competence, which concerns the ability to express oneself in the face of difficulties or limited language knowledge, involves the use of strategies that are employed when problems arise in the communication process. It incorporates all those techniques that learners adopt when in their attempt to get a message across to their partner they find that they lack the necessary vocabulary item or structure (Fernández Dobao & Palacios Martínez 2007).

According to Corder (1981), strategic competences are of two types: message adjustment strategies, also called avoidance strategies (when speakers lacking the necessary vocabulary to refer to an object, avoid mentioning it or say something different from what was originally intended), and resource expansion strategies, or achievement strategies (when the interlocutors attempt to overcome the communication problems by paraphrasing, approximation (using a similar term to the needed one), non-linguistic means (e.g. gestures or miming), borrowed or invented words (e.g. *auto* for *car*, etc.). These communication strategies can be cooperative when students ask their partner for help (e.g. *How do you call it when…?*) or non-cooperative when they try to reduce the communication gap on their own (by paraphrasing, approximation, etc.). An important way of developing conversational strategies can be done by the use of fillers, which can range from very simple phrases like *well, I mean, actually, you know* to larger structures and even phrases like *to be quite honest, I see what you mean, as a matter of fact*, etc. (Dörnyei & Thurrell 1991). These fillers, meant to keep the conversation going, can be practised from the beginner level onwards and can be incorporated into various communication exercises.

5. The relevance of ELF for teaching English as a foreign language

The data on ELF and also ELF core are significant as they reflect the way English is used among non-native speakers for ELF purposes. The elements of lingua franca core can often be detected not only in face-to-face interactions but in online communication as well. The linguistic (phonetic and morpho-syntactic)

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properties together with the pragmatic aspects of interactions point to a specific dynamism of ELF communication governed by the *Let it pass* principle (which means that everything is possible as long as it does not hinder successful communication).

This being said, the question arises whether these findings should be incorporated in EFL curriculum and, if so, to what extent this should or could be done. The attitudes of researchers to ELF often differ from those of teachers in this regard. From the researcher's perspective, a standard variety is not considered appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language. This is relevant especially for pronunciation, so that learners of English should not be expected to accurately produce BrE or AmE pronunciation but be allowed to preserve their own accent. Generally speaking, researchers require that a re-evaluation and a redefinition of teaching English as a foreign language take place based on ELF results (Seidlhofer 2004).

Several models have been suggested as an alternative to teaching a national variety. One such model would be teaching ELF instead of EFL, based on a "common core" syllabus that includes common non-native usages with features that are considered ungrammatical according to grammatical norms (e.g. she *go*, the people *which*, etc.). While the idea of including such elements in the curriculum would be probably rejected by the majority of English teachers, other suggestions like the combination of different models or variants or, by contrast, a standard international variety, a world standard English (comprising usages accepted in most international contexts) have also emerged.

These latter models might not be applicable either due to different reasons: despite the fact that teaching diverse variants might be interesting to students, it might also be difficult to put into practice because of the limited number of hours that teachers have to teach. In addition, students might not find them very practicable since their primary aim is to use English in ELF contexts. Finally, considering a standard international variety, it is often argued that in fact this does not exist (Ur 2010).

The idea of teaching ELF or incorporating any of the models listed above is often rejected by teachers. This might be partly due to the shortage of ELF materials as well as the difficulties that come along with changing former ways of teaching. Furthermore, the reluctance of teachers to teach ELF can be explained by the fact that none of the models mentioned above are practical enough to be used in the classroom.

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6. How can ELF findings benefit teaching English as a foreign language?

Despite the fact that more research is necessary on ELF, the findings are relevant and should have an impact on teaching English as a foreign language. ELF data are important as they reflect the tendencies of NNS of English as regards both the use of linguistic elements and the pragmatic aspects of communication. The notion of lingua franca core comprises elements that teachers should focus on while teaching, including segmental elements like consonant and vowel length distinction and also suprasegmental elements like nuclear stress. Nevertheless, the notion of lingua franca does not include all the elements that influence intelligibility. Discourse intonation, for example, though not included in lingua franca core, is often regarded as a core element of communicative competence since it signals prominence and structures discourse (Chun 2002). Ramirez Verdugo (2005) draws attention to the fact that non-native speakers use other intonation range and variety of contours than native speakers, and by doing so they do not signal the same communicative and pragmatic functions as native speakers do. Thus, teaching intonation to them would be beneficial. Besides intonation, elements of prosody, such as stress (also words stress), pause, and rhythm, influence intelligibility and, as such, should be also focused on in class.

ELF findings also point to the fact that instead of laying too much emphasis on the accuracy of linguistic forms, as regards both pronunciation and morpho-syntactic features, the focus should be shifted to non-linguistic forms that affect mutual understanding. This would imply not only a transition from the dominance of the nativeness principle towards focus on intelligibility (the intelligibility principle) but also the acquisition of communication and accommodation strategies that are shown to be present in ELF communication.

A shift towards intelligibility has already taken place in teaching ESL and EFL. Language teaching today is approached from a functional perspective with a focus on the communicative needs of learners. While communication practices might commonly take place in the classroom, a special attention should be given to them, all the more so since communication strategies play a significant role in ELF interactions. Effective teaching methods to improve the communication skills of students could include interactive activities like students interviewing each other, role play, small-group discussions, listening to and watching everyday conversations in English, engaging learners with online communication tools (by encouraging group work online). Practising communication strategies would not only foster active learning, and thereby enhance the language competence of students, but it would also help them to use the language more effectively and to overcome difficulties resulting from cultural differences.

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Regarding the expectations of ELF researchers that no native variety should be seen as a norm to be followed is the most difficult requirement to fulfil. Since ELF is primarily to be regarded as a communication tool and not as a language variety, it cannot replace a standard variety in class. Although there have been other models suggested as an alternative to the standard variety, none of them can be practicable in the classroom for the time being. Also, as Penny Ur (2010) notes, in order to show diversity and allow for deviations to take place, there should be a norm to follow, so that a standard version is needed for teaching. Following a standard version, however, does not and should not exclude elements of L1. NNS of English should not be discouraged from using their own accent or corrected when they do not pronounce words according to the norms of a standard variety. This is even more so since it has been demonstrated that non-native pronunciation does not hinder communicative success, on the contrary, it may even facilitate mutual intelligibility (Deterding & Kirkpatrick 2006).

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that ELF findings have a great relevance for teaching English as a foreign language. The most important advantage of ELF findings is that they reflect the language habits of ELF speakers, helping teachers asses their students' needs and adjust their teaching methods accordingly. While introducing ELF in the curriculum might not be needed at all, ELF findings can be incorporated in language classes, by "translating" and "adapting" them to students' needs. For this, it is necessary that a new language awareness take place, which – although follows a certain standard – does not regard it higher than other varieties and does not exclude influences of L1. This is especially important for pronunciation since NS accents continue to be preferred not only by teachers but also by students, as Nagy (2014) shows in her analysis of attitudes towards NS and NNS pronunciation.[2] It should be kept in mind that while a certain percentage of learners might use English to communicate with native speakers the majority of learners will most likely use English in an ELF context. As such, it is important that students be exposed not only to NS accents but also to NNS accents of English.

2 Nagy (2014) analyses the relationship between attitudes of non-native speakers of English towards NS and NNS accents as well as the correlation between their perceived and actual comprehensibility. Students had to evaluate NS and NNS accents in terms of personal attributes and comprehensibility. While there was a preference of students for NS accents, the students having evaluated them more positively with respect to both categories, their comprehensibility was higher for NNS than NS accents.

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