

Addressing the issue of teaching English as a lingua franca

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The status of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has become an increasingly popular discourse in Applied Linguistics and current ELT. It has been suggested that native speakers and their Englishes have become relatively unimportant in international communication and that research interests should now fall on non-native speakers and their use of English. In this article, I will examine the conceptual and operational framework underpinning the case for a description of English as a lingua franca and address issues and problems that need to be taken into account if such a description is to be implemented in second language pedagogy. I will argue that a native-speaker model could serve as a complete and convenient starting point and it is up to the TESOL professionals and the learners in each context to decide to what extent they want to approximate to that model.

Introduction

In less than a lifetime, English has developed from ‘the native language of a relatively small island nation’ to ‘the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever known’ (Kachru and Nelson 2001: 9). It has been widely spread through emigration, colonization, and globalization, has been acquired as a first, a second, and a foreign language, and has been used for internal, external, and international purposes. Drawing on these dimensions, Kachru (1985) distinguishes between the inner circle (e.g. the UK and the USA), the outer circle (e.g. India and Nigeria) and the expanding circle (e.g. China and France), with the acknowledgement that it is the users in the expanding circle who actually strengthen further the claims of English as an international or universal language (p. 13).

In the global spread of English, the concept of ‘world Englishes’ has become increasingly popular, since linguistic diversity is inevitable and variation in the aspect of phonology and morphosyntax has already been seen within inner-circle Englishes and among outer-circle varieties. Furthermore, English has often been used in geographically and historically remote settings from the inner circle for purposes ranging from conducting professional discourse to carrying out everyday conversation, which require no participation by its native speakers. Seen from these perspectives, English, in its establishing role as the global language, should be allowed to develop independently in various contexts across the world, regardless of the change and innovations that take place in the inner circle. As a result, one might expect to witness the birth and growth of some kind of ‘expanding-circle English’, or English as a lingua franca.

In this paper, I will explore the case for a description of English as a lingua franca and its teaching implications. I will use native and non-native speakers respectively to refer to users of English in the inner circle and the expanding circle. I will also use non-native speakers and L2 learners synonymously and refer to their curriculum as second language pedagogy, although I am aware that learners in the expanding circle tend to learn English more as a foreign language than as a second language.

Frameworks for English as a lingua franca

Conceptual

One of the main themes running through the discussion of English as a lingua franca is the irrelevance of native speakers, their Englishes, and their ownership of English, evidenced by the fact that English is the language for international communication and is nowadays used by more non-native than native speakers, and that most non-native speakers will need it in order to communicate with other non-native speakers. This leads to theoretical claims such as ‘World English (WE) belongs to everyone who speaks it, but it is nobody’s mother tongue’ (Rajagopalan 2004: 111) and ‘how English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, the United States, or anywhere else’ (Widdowson 1994: 385), and pedagogical assertions that as long as English is learned as an international language, it should not come from an inner circle country and should not be taught as an inner circle language (Matsuda 2003).

Since native speakers are no longer important or relevant in the global spread of English, it now seems rather redundant for L2 learners worldwide to conform to native-speaker norms. L2 learners are now entitled ‘privileges’ hitherto reserved exclusively for native speakers, such as a claim to ownership, a right to use English without others passing judgements, an equal footing with speakers of other English varieties, and, perhaps more profoundly, a right to shape the future of English (Melchers and Shaw 2003). This discourse has become so influential, particularly over the past few years, that any personal or regional, linguistic or socio-cultural attachment to inner circle countries and their Englishes would appear highly politically incorrect. Indeed, it has been suggested that the general public, including students and their parents and perhaps TESOL professionals too, need to be re-educated in order to ‘correct’ their attachment to native-speaker norms and their misconceptions towards English as an international language or as a lingua franca (Matsuda op. cit.).

Operational

Second language pedagogy, seen from this perspective, should no longer prepare learners to achieve intelligibility for native-speaker receivers (Jenkins 2002) or aim to develop the kind of communicative competence based on descriptions of a native-speaker model. A better way to prepare learners for international communication would be to provide a description, within the field of phonology and morphosyntax, of what learners need in order to achieve and sustain mutual comprehension. A seemingly promising and far-reaching theoretical framework is constructed by Seidlhofer (2001), with the central argument that in order to ‘counteract the reproduction of native English dominance’ (p. 133) and to claim ‘ELF as a use in its own right, and ELF speakers as language users in their own right’ (p. 137), codification in the form of computerized corpus data and

compilation of dictionaries must be undertaken so as to establish a standard on the one hand, and to assert ELF legitimacy on the other. Since both are on an equal footing, ENL (English as a native language) should not and cannot pass judgement on ELF (English as a lingua franca), a distinction made by Seidlhofer (op. cit.), such as referring to an ELF usage as incorrect or ungrammatical. ENL and ELF are both varieties of English, deriving from different users using English in different contexts and, as such, assert the same authority and authenticity in their own contexts.

Issues and problems

The description of English as a lingua franca has, from the outset, restricted its focus down to the very instrumental function of English as the language for international communication. It is primarily and ultimately concerned with enabling learners to carry out international communication in various global contexts, reflecting a view of English as entirely and fundamentally an instrument of communication. It has largely overlooked aspects of language such as literacy, register, style, and various aesthetic concerns and has made no reference to a language's social functions, such as to project self-image, to establish self-identity, and to develop personal voice. The knowledge that such a description has to offer might be partial. To further elaborate the issues and problems that need to be taken into account if such an ELF description is to be implemented in second language pedagogy, I will address respectively (1) the problem of an intelligibility-driven language model, (2) the validity of computerized corpus data, (3) learner voice, and (4) English for international communication and intra-national competition.

The problem of an intelligibility-driven language model

The cognitive processes involved in producing language, as acknowledged and illustrated by Swain and Lapkin (1995), can be quite different from those involved in comprehending language. Comprehension, generally, allows many linguistic signals to be ignored, such as concord, definite/indefinite, and singular/plural distinctions, without seriously distorting the message being comprehended (p. 375). Production, on the other hand, particularly that of an L2, would inevitably involve a more complex, bottom-up approach of consciously applying syntactic rules in order to convey intended meanings, as opposed to the more top-down approach involved in comprehension. Swain and Lapkin seek to explore the role of pushed output in second language acquisition and put forward the argument that in producing an L2, learners will on occasion become aware of (i.e. notice) a linguistic problem. Noticing a problem can force learners into a more syntactic processing mode, can push learners to modify their output, and is part of second language learning (p. 371).

The ELF approach would appear to interpret differently the nature of second language learning and, as such, depart from traditional SLA concerns. The notion of 'a linguistic problem', for example, has first been challenged and refers only to inaccurate production that causes serious communication problems. As such, the inaccurate use of collocation or subject/verb agreement, as long as the conversation is sustained, would not be worth noticing and does not need to be modified. While SLA researchers seek to enable L2 learners to achieve target-like performance by means of noticing the gap and attending to linguistic signals which can be unattended to in

comprehension (i.e. enhancing grammatical competence), ELF applied linguists seem to be suggesting that what is needed for comprehension is all that is needed to be produced. Thus Jenkins (2002) suggests a revised pronunciation syllabus, the Lingua Franca Core, and Seidlhofer (op. cit.) appeals for a description of English as a lingua franca. The ELF approach, which suggests that a degree of phonological and grammatical redundancy meant to protect the preciseness and completeness of the message can be rightly omitted as long as intelligibility is being maintained, would appear to contradict and misinterpret the nature of language learning and second language acquisition.

The validity of computerized corpus data

The future of ELF seems to rely on the already overwhelming number of non-native speakers using English for international communication on the one hand and the development of computerized corpus data for empirical analyses on the other. ‘Ungrammatical but unproblematic’ features, such as ‘he look very sad’, ‘a picture who gives the impression’ (Seidlhofer op. cit.: 149), once occurring sufficiently frequently in NNS/NNS discourse, would arguably become standardized and exist as a variety alongside ENL. A couple of questions have to be raised in regard to this process of codification and standardization.

An ELF description would inevitably result in a qualitatively and quantitatively reduced version of ENL, following research questions such as ‘what seem to be the most relied-upon and successfully employed grammatical constructions and lexical choices’ or ‘are there commonly used constructions, lexical items and sound patterns which are ungrammatical in Standard L1 English but generally unproblematic in ELF communication’ (Seidlhofer op. cit.: 147). If, for example, grammatical features such as the use of past perfect progressive or the use of question tags are either not found or occur only very rarely in NNS/NNS spoken corpus, the teaching implication would arguably be that they do not need to be taught. As a result, L2 learners would have a perhaps significantly reduced ENL description. Within the reduced repertoire, the quality issue would then involve ungrammatical but unproblematic structures, such as ‘He look very sad’, on the one hand, and inaccurate but intelligible pronunciation, such as ‘I think [sɪŋk]’, on the other. Such a qualitatively and quantitatively reduced description of English would appear to be largely intelligibility-driven and speech-oriented and, it does not seem in any way appropriate to replace current grammatical and phonological descriptions of English for pedagogical purposes, particularly in state education worldwide. It does not address the issue of reading and writing, for example, and is not likely to satisfy learners’ needs that stretch beyond mere international intelligibility.

The frequent occurrence of a specific linguistic feature, both phonologically and morphosyntactically as recorded in computerized corpus data, will need to be supplemented by qualitative analyses in order to give accounts of speaker intention, such as to fulfil interpersonal functions of politeness or contextual appropriateness. ENL computerized corpus data have been under development for more than one decade and have resulted in a significant number of publications, including the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan

1999). Drawing on both American and British English sources, the use of ‘will’ and ‘be going to’, for example, and the use of noun phrase prefaces and tags have been accompanied by accounts of interpersonal intention ranging from being listener sensitive to showing personal attachment (see McCarthy and Carter 1995 and Biber *et al.* 1999).

Occurrences of a phonological or grammatical feature such as ‘He look very sad’, even though produced and comprehended by learners from widely different L1 backgrounds, may reflect an imperfect command of the target language on the part of the L2 learner. Frequent occurrence of a common error does not constitute a strong case for standardization and popularization. That is to say the ELF corpus would inevitably resort to the quantity-related concept of frequency of occurrence (e.g. how frequently ‘He look very sad’ has occurred in NNS/NNS conversation without causing serious communication problems), rather than the quality-related concept of fulfilling interpersonal intentions (e.g. why the speaker opts to use ‘He look very sad’ in a given context), particularly when a frequently occurring linguistic feature is just a common grammatical or phonological error. Moreover, one has to ask what constitutes ‘a reliable source of data’ which helps inform an ELF description. This is an issue concerning the representation of the age, gender, region, the social class and the L2 proficiency of the non-native speakers contributing to the ELF corpus on the one hand, and the criteria for deciding whether a linguistic feature occurs sufficiently frequently on the other. As a result, the validity of an ELF description remains largely in question. English as a lingua franca, seen from this perspective, is the description of the phenomenon that people are making use of their imperfect L2 repertoire to communicate more or less effectively in international and intercultural contexts. This is interesting and revealing but does not necessarily have implications for teaching.

Learner voice

The issue of teaching English as a lingua franca is loosely related to my ongoing PhD research, which aims to investigate how learners from different L1 backgrounds interact with each other in the target language (i.e. English) within the classroom context and how they perceive the usefulness or effectiveness of such interaction. The research is conducted in a British EFL setting and the participant contribution cited below came from young adults aged between 21 and 25. At the completion of my Stage 1 Data Collection (16/02/04–26/03/04), nearly all participants recalled the difficulties, particularly when they first arrived in the UK or first began the course, in understanding each other, caused mainly by a combination of strong accent, inaccurate pronunciation, and incorrect use of vocabulary or grammar. In response to my interview question broadly related to the notion of collaborative scaffolding (Donato 1994), such as how they could help or what they could learn from each other when working in pairs or small groups, one of my participants commented on the aspect of pronunciation,

but it’s not useful for their way to speak because they don’t speak well and they’re not useful for the pronunciation because they don’t use good pronunciation so they don’t help me to improve my pronunciation.
(Participant 1, Interview Data, 09/03/04)

while another commented on the aspect of grammar,

we are still upper-intermediate class so we make lots of mistake in grammar such as tense past or present and future I try to speak correct grammar but maybe I make lots of mistakes and same as partners they can make mistakes past future present continuous tense is quite difficult (Participant 2, Interview Data, 10/03/04)

I then asked my Participant 2 whether he would make an effort to correct his partner's grammatical error in small-group discussion when he did notice it. He said,

no just listen sometimes I say it's wrong because you are talking about past but you say present or something like this but sometimes I just ignore just listen what they are talking because if they make a mistake I can understand what they are talking about if past or present is wrong but I can understand so I just listen to understand even though I realise it's mistake because I can understand ya I don't want interrupt when they are talking and when we are talking to teacher teacher try to correct our sentence if we make a mistake (Participant 2, Interview Data, 10/03/04)

What seems clear in my participants' accounts is that a degree of phonological and grammatical inaccuracy can be tolerated in real world communication but that a description of such language exchange does not constitute an appropriate model for learning purposes. As a result, while my participants seemed to enjoy exchanging ideas, sharing opinions, exploring different cultures and getting to know people from different parts of the world, they would only turn to the native-speaker teacher, as it is in this research setting, when seeking answers to aspects of language such as grammar and pronunciation.

The point I wish to make here is that my participants were in fact very much aware of their own and their partners' linguistic limitations and that, while interacting more often with other L2 learners than with native speakers in current and arguably future contexts, they all continued to push themselves towards more target-like production, referring to a native-speaker model, i.e. British English, as a point of reference. Rather than anticipating, creating, or participating in any form of 'NNS English', they showed an apparent interest in and made an apparent effort to approximate to a native-speaker English norm. What seems, therefore, to be largely neglected in current ELF research is L2 learners' perceptions of their own and other people's use of English.

In the course of their interviews, a number of my participants showed various degrees of anxiety, especially towards their forthcoming IELTS tests, referring to their pronunciation as bad or very bad and hoping I could correct their phonological and grammatical mistakes in our interview sections. They included a female Italian law student who wanted to master French and English in order to get employment in an international law firm, a female Japanese student who majored in American and British English studies and wanted to be a flight attendant, and a female Vietnamese student who studied auditing and wanted to continue her masters studies in the UK. These three participants of mine, from widely

different backgrounds and learning English in Britain for widely different purposes, all in one way or another look to a native-speaker model to meet their future needs and, while being sufficiently communicative, all wish to be further corrected in order to have an even better command of the target language.

My interim research findings therefore appear to reinforce Timmis's (2002) report on learner perceptions towards native-speaker norms and international English. That is, to use his words,

there is still some desire among students to conform to native-speaker norms, and this desire is not necessarily restricted to those students who use, or anticipate using English primarily with native speakers (p. 248).

In an article investigating the impact of English as a global language on education policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific Rim countries, Nunan (2003) reports findings such as 'compulsory English lowered from age 13 to 9' (Korea), 'compulsory English lowered from Grade 5 to Grade 1' (Taiwan), 'English becoming increasingly significant as university entry requirement' (China) and 'overwhelming concern in government and business sectors that Hong Kong will lose economic advantage if English language skills are not enhanced' (p. 594). While there is a real concern, as reported in the same article, with the impact of an early introduction to English on national language (Malaysia) and national identity (Korea), I wish to draw attention to the fact that English, while being the language for international communication, is also the language for international, and in fact intra-national, competition.

English has been held as one of the most important criteria by many intra-national and international gatekeepers in both education and employment, as experienced by my three participants above. The readjustments of education policies and practices reported by Nunan all in one way or another reflect the even tougher competition faced by the next generation worldwide. English for them is not simply the language to start conversations on a train or to place orders in a restaurant when travelling in a foreign country. It is the language of which they have to demonstrate a degree of mastery so as to win a place in education and employment in their own contexts and abroad. Rather than being the language used by and among non-native speakers in relatively stress-free and accuracy-unimportant settings, English has often been learned as an important school subject under the pressure to sustain accuracy and to provide evidence of proficiency. As such, an appropriate pedagogical model has to be able to satisfy demands ranging from minimum intelligibility, through general accuracy and fluency, up to comparable proficiency to that of a native speaker, rather than drawing exclusively or even primarily on the notion of international intelligibility.

What seems to be more urgently needed in preparing learners from widely different L1 backgrounds to interact with each other in English is to raise consciousness of intercultural understanding, such as being aware of and sensitive to the fact that people from different cultural backgrounds tend to express politeness, gratitude, and condolences in overtly different ways. This in fact is a responsibility shared by anyone who participates in the

international society, including both native and non-native speakers of English.

Conclusion

It is precisely because English is now used extensively for international and intercultural purposes that in order to ease or smooth the flow of conversation, to reduce the listener's burden of processing information, and to satisfy learners' needs that stretch beyond merely international intelligibility, L2 learners should be allowed, if not encouraged, to follow a native-speaker phonological or grammatical model. A native-speaker model, in my view, serves as a complete and convenient starting point, particularly with its socio-cultural richness, and it is up to the TESOL professionals and the learners in each context to decide to what extent they want to approximate to that model.

I am aware that 'native speaker' is a highly controversial concept and, to take pronunciation for example, RP or Received Pronunciation, the prestige British accent, is thought to be spoken by fewer than 3 per cent of the speaking population, while the majority of British people have either a regionally modified RP or a regional accent (Jenkins 2002: 84). Despite such a seemingly discouraging picture, the point here remains that L2 learners should be allowed to decide which English to learn, including which accent of that variety to aim towards. Empirical findings from the study of the grammar and phonology of English as a lingua franca might be useful in identifying what appear to be the most or least important linguistic devices in international communication. A native-speaker model, however, as I have illustrated in this article, would appear to be more appropriate and appealing in second language pedagogy than a description of English which is somewhat reduced and incomplete.

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