

# Reflections on ELT pedagogy: Functioning and communicating in English

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**Resum: Reflexions al voltant de la didàctica de la llengua anglesa: funcionant i comunicant en anglès.** La globalització i els contextos comunicatius multiculturals han contribuït a l'expansió de l'anglès com a principal llengua internacional i, com a resultat, l'ús de l'anglès com a llengua franca s'ha incrementat. En considerar aquesta situació, el concepte d'anglès com a llengua estrangera ha deixat de complir amb les necessitats de la nostra societat multicultural en constant transformació. D'acord amb això, la investigació en didàctica de l'anglès ha canviat també de l'anglès estàndard i la correcció gramatical a la competència i l'eficiència comunicatives. A dia d'avui, aprendre anglès és un procés de dos sentits, en el qual l'objectiu de la majoria (depenent dels estudiants i de les seves metes) és d'aconseguir una competència comunicativa intercultural per a l'adquisició de coneixement, competències, actituds i consciència cultural crítica necessaris per a comunicar. El canvi essencial, per tant, ha anat d'una aproximació encarada a atènyer formes "fixes", a un mètode en què aprenem la manera de "funcionar" amb el llenguatge en diversos contextos.

**Paraules clau:** Anglès com a llengua franca, anglès com a llengua estrangera, didàctica, competència comunicativa, funció.

**Abstract: Reflections on ELT pedagogy: Functioning and communicating in English.** Globalization and multicultural communicative settings have contributed to the expansion of English as the main international language and as a result, English as a Lingua Franca use has been on the rise. Considering this situation, the concept of English as a Foreign Language seems to no longer fulfill the needs of our multicultural society in constant transformation. Accordingly, research in English pedagogy has also shifted from Standard English and grammatical correctness

approaches, to communicative competence and communicative effectiveness. Nowadays, learning English is a two-way process in which the goal for many (depending on the students and aims) is to achieve intercultural communicative competence in order to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness necessary to communicate. The essential shift has therefore been from an approach aimed at achieving fixed “forms”, to a method in which we learn how to “function” accordingly with the language in variable contexts.

**Keywords:** English as a Lingua Franca, English as a Foreign Language, pedagogy, communicative competence, function.

## 1. Introduction

In today’s society, globalization and the multiplication of intercultural communicative settings have played an essential part in English developing into a global and international language. In fact, there has never been a language so extensively used by different people and so firmly established as the dominant language in such numerous and distinct fields of activity as academia, advertising, business, commerce, international diplomacy, music, tourism, transportation, and sports, to just mention a few (e.g. Melchers and Shaw 2003, Preisler 1999, Truchot 2002, Berns *et al.* 2007).

It is noteworthy that apart from it being spoken by approximately 350 million native speakers (Crystal 1997), English is at present predominantly used for communication among non-native speakers who do not share another common language. This interconnectedness has not only affected our daily lives, but it has also triggered the need to encounter a common voice in order to bridge language barriers. In fact, recent estimates of users of English worldwide vary between one billion and two billion (Kachru 2006); hence, the English language plays an essential role in creating a common voice shared by the great majority of the world’s population. This new multicultural reality has additionally contributed to the development of new emerging language repertoires due to the immediate processes of language contact generated by specific communicative needs.

As a result, changes in the perception of the role of English worldwide have greatly affected current thinking on English language use and English language teaching (ELT). The traditional idea of it being a foreign language to those who do not possess it as a mother tongue has given way to the notion of it being a lingua franca for both native and non-native speakers alike (Jenkins 2007, Seidlhofer 2011). It is these aspects of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) that this paper discusses, as well as how this change in English language use has contributed to an increased socio-political and intercultural awareness that will inevitably lead to changes in ELT.

## 2. English as a Foreign Languages vs. English as a Lingua Franca

The world has become so interconnected with English as its most common language that, in most cases, a traditional variety orientation no longer seems to reflect the current use of the English language (Jenkins *et al.* 2011), especially when considering its contingent, flexible, fluid, hybrid, and intercultural nature (Dewey 2007).

Taking into account the current role of English, for most academic researchers focusing on ELF, the concepts of EFL and ELF are two distinct phenomena that need to be distinguished. According to Jenkins (2011, p. 929), ELF belongs to the global Englishes paradigm in which all Englishes are regarded as *sui generis*, whereas EFL belongs to the modern foreign languages paradigm, according to which the aim is to approximate ones' language use as close to the native speaker as possible. As a result, ELF takes on a *difference* perspective when compared with the *deficit* perspective of EFL. In other words, according to ELF, differences from native English may be understood as legitimate variation, while in EFL they will always be judged as errors. Jenkins further argues that, "ELF's metaphors are of language contact and evolution, whereas EFL's metaphors are of interference and fossilization" (2011, p. 929). And lastly, code-mixing and code-switching in ELF are regarded as part of a bilingual's pragmatic strategies, whereas in EFL they are regarded as proof of gaps in knowledge.

Thus, when considering an EFL perspective, the non-native speaker is positioned as an outsider striving to obtain access to the target community. S/he will never completely be a part of it; the language will ultimately always be viewed as another person's mother tongue. Graddol (2006) explains that according to this perspective, "the learner is constructed as a linguistic tourist – allowed to visit, but without rights of residence and required always to respect the superior authority of native speakers" (2006, p. 83).

ELF, on the other hand, is regarded 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). However, when taking into account the total amount of English speakers in the world (one to two billion according to Kachru 2006; 1.5 billion according to Graddol 2006), Graddol (2006) argues that the number of native speakers of English (roughly 375 million) is considerably lower when compared to those who have acquired it as an additional language (375 million L2 speakers and 750 million EFL speakers); as a result, he points out that this extraordinary increase in the number of English speakers (especially within L2 and EFL contexts) is evidence that the position of native speakers and the prestige formerly associated with standard English norms are now being questioned.

It is also imperative to stress that this conceptualization of ELF is defined functionally in relation to its use in intercultural communication, as opposed to formally regarding its reference to native-speaker norms. Instead of users being held down by institutionalized forms that place a constraint on the naturally occurring processes of language production,

Hülmbauer *et al.* (2008) stresses the importance of equal communicative rights by ELF users, especially regarding appropriation:

Speakers of any L1 can appropriate ELF for their own purposes without over-deference to native-speaker norms. This counteracts a deficit view of lingua franca English in that it implies equal communicative rights for all its speakers. So defined, ELF is emphatically *not* the English as a property of its native speakers, but is democratized and universalized in the 'exolingual' process of being appropriated for international use. (Hülmbauer *et al.* 2008, p. 27)

Seidlhofer (2011) also further develops on form and function, and how ELF use is adapted according to the communicative situation. According to her, non-conformity to native speaker forms is the natural outcome of the decisions made by the users and the communicative situation in question:

Like any other use of language, formal properties of ELF are functionally motivated, and since the functions they are required to serve differ from those served by the forms of native speaker usage, their non-conformity is a natural consequence of appropriate communicative adaptation. (p. 124)

It is important to underline that non-conformity to form does not impede functional effectiveness; on the contrary, it can actually enhance it. Such examples of this can be seen in the exploitation of the virtual resources of the language for making suitable reference to things.

In order to understand the complex nature of ELF use and its functional effectiveness, much research has been carried out at a range of linguistic levels, especially in lexis and lexicogrammar (Seidlhofer 2004, Cogo and Dewey 2006), phonology (Jenkins 2000, 2002) and pragmatics. In the specific case of pragmatics, many studies have explored the means by which participants from different socio-cultural environments achieve understanding and build a common ground. Particular attention has been given, for instance, to the signaling and negotiation of non-understanding, as well as to the resolution of instances of miscommunication. One common finding that has been observed in ELF interactions is that non-understanding and miscommunications tend to occur less frequently when compared to native speaker communication. When it does happen, ELF interlocutors demonstrate a high level of interactional and pragmatic competence in how they indicate non-understanding so that the conversation is not disturbed, while simultaneously providing enough evidence to the other speaker for the problem to be resolved (Pitzl 2005). Some of the pre-empting strategies employed by ELF speakers, which have proven particularly relevant to guarantee understanding and mutual intelligibility, include: clarification, self-repair and repetition (Mauranen 2006),

as well as paraphrasing (Kaur 2009) and the exploitation of plurilingual resources, namely code-switching (Hülmbauer 2009).

Bearing in mind what has so far been discussed, ELF users can therefore be regarded as skillful interlocutors who are able to “negotiate and co-construct English for their own purposes, treating the language as a shared communicative resource within which they innovate, accommodate and code-switch, all the while enjoying the freedom to produce forms that NSEs [native speakers of English] do not necessarily use” (Jenkins *et al.* 2011, p. 297). In addition, they are also viewed as exhibiting considerable linguistic variation according to the specific interactions and the series of purposes in question, including not only the promotion of intelligibility between speakers from different L1s, but also the projection of cultural identity, the promotion of solidarity and the sharing of humor (Jenkins *et al.* 2011).

These reflections on form and function in ELF have contributed to an increased awareness of the need to perform and communicate effectively in a wide number of domains. The current challenge for ELF researchers, and even more so for ELT professionals, is to discover methods of dealing with this variability characteristic of ELF so that it may be included in language teaching. One thing however is certain, a visible shift in English language pedagogy research is underway. More traditional approaches preoccupied with models of Standard English and grammatical correctness are giving way to those more concerned with developing communicative effectiveness and aspects of communicative competence (Berns 2006, Byram 1997, Byram and Mendez Garcia 2009, Canale and Swain 1980, Hymes 1962, 1972, Halliday 1978).

### **3. Reconsidering approaches to ELT: from form to function**

Traditionally, and in line with an EFL perspective, teachers are educated according to the description and instruction of *proper* language, giving particular attention to the acquisition of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic forms; nowadays, however, there are other concerns that demand at least as much attention as language correctness. For instance, instead of aiming at attaining near-native proficiency of a prestigious variety, an ELF approach is much more susceptible to the development of pragmatic ability. Subsequently, ELT may consider meeting the communicative needs of students and focusing on the functions of clarity in cross-cultural communicative scenarios (Modiano 2000).

Considerable debate has taken place between ELF research and ELT materials, methods and practices. However, when regarding what an ELF-oriented pedagogy may actually be and what teachers need to do so as to incorporate an ELF perspective in the classroom, there has so far been little discussion (with the exception of the last chapter in Seidlhofer (2011), for instance). There has actually been a considerable amount of controversy in the ELT profession, due to findings in ELF posing a substantial change

to longtime beliefs and practices (especially when considering the nature of approaches and methods, language assessment, language syllabus and teaching materials), which are unsettling for ELT practitioners who believe ELF goes against everything they have learnt (the ideal native speaker and Standard English). The idea, however, is not to abandon traditional practices and ways of thinking, but rather to reconsider the assumptions on which these practices are based. Seidlhofer (2011) argues that ELF does not change the pedagogic issues of ELT, but rather that it “changes the way we need to think about and act upon them” (p. 193).

ELF research presents insights into the heterogeneous nature of English use in different contact situations, so by developing an ELF perspective in ELT pedagogy, learners and teachers both gain knowledge of the inherent variability of English language use. The main objective is therefore for teachers to be able to make informed decisions about whether or not ELF is important for their own teaching contexts. Canagarajah (2005), for example, argues in favor of teaching materials, methods, and models that are developed at a local level. Kirkpatrick (2007) also puts forth similar arguments, in the sense that learners and teachers should focus less on language norms, and more on communicative practices and strategies in order to become effective speakers. More recently, Baker (2011) explores what ELF communicative practices and strategies might be, and how they can be transposed into the classroom. These practices do not belong to a specific community nor to a native speaker target community; instead, emphasis is placed on the ability to adapt, negotiate and mediate communication in dynamic and heterogeneous contexts.

By disempowering the concept of native-like proficiency, ELT and teacher education can center their attention on skills and procedures that are advantageous for ELF interactions. Jenkins (2000) refers to several communicative strategies and accommodation skills characteristic of ELF communication of which the following are included: drawing on extralinguistic cues, gauging interlocutors’ linguistic repertoires, supportive listening, signaling non-comprehension in a face-saving way, asking for repetition, paraphrasing, self-repair, confirmation, in addition to the clarification of requests that allow participants to check and monitor understanding, among other skills (Mauranen 2006, Seidlhofer 2003). Likewise, the exposure to a wide range of varieties of English and a multilingual /comparative approach play an essential part in facilitating the acquisition of communicative abilities.

Similarly to ELF, communicative competence (Hymes 1972, 1980) and Systemic-functional Linguistics (Halliday 1978, Halliday and Mathiessen 2004) have also played a crucial role in language pedagogy, especially regarding approaches to language use in context of situation. Communicative competence, for instance, is defined as the ability users have to decide what to say, as well as when and how to say it, being their linguistic performance influenced by the context of situation. Hymes (1980, p. vi) further states that it is “social life [that] shapes communicative competence”; hence, the growing need

to teach English learners/users how to exploit what is possible in order to negotiate feasibility and adapt language appropriately according to the context and the goals wished to be attained (Seidlhofer 2011).

At an international level, a global definition for communicative competence (Nunn 2007) may be that competence in communication is a holistic, global and international concept encompassing several interconnecting components (such as, pragmatic, discourse, strategic, intercultural, interpersonal and linguistic features) of usable knowledge, and the skills and abilities needed to put these into practice within a range of communities and types of community. Nunn (2007) goes even further and considers the significance of several essential aspects for international communicative competence, which are: multiglossic, in the sense that interlocutors need to be sensitive to diverse identities and be skilled in conveying their own identity intelligibly; strategic, ELF interaction communicative strategies are essential two-way components of intercultural communication; pragmatic/discourse, the ability of adjusting language to context and solving differences of background knowledge as crucial; and lastly, intercultural, the ability to adjust to unpredictable multicultural situations, rather than only having knowledge of another specific culture.

Along the lines of what has already been discussed, Systemic-functional Linguistics also regards language as a social resource where meanings are negotiated in social contexts and by social beings. Therefore, taking on a Systemic-functional approach in ELT considers two main aspects: 1) to provide descriptors of how a language actually functions and 2) to put forth ways of helping students understand these uses; instead of focusing on the intended *products* when learning a language, it centers its attention on the *process* of learning in itself. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) stress the role of social context and the options it presents to language users for doing things with language. They refer to the options a given context offers as meaning potential – the choices (be they lexical, phonological or pragmatic) language users have to express, interpret and negotiate meaning between and among one another. However, the suitable choices and selections made locally by the user in certain circumstances are based on the limitations of his/her systemic knowledge. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 23) put it, “a language is a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice”.

Given that language takes on the form it does due to the functions it is required to serve, it seems that ELT can focus its methodology on teaching how the forms function and how they are strategically applied in communication. By adopting an ELF perspective, attention is then centered on the learner and the learning process itself, rather than on fixed and static forms (Seidlhofer 2011, Widdowson 2009). By learning how to mean (Halliday 1975), it is possible for language learners to make communicative use of the language they have acquired, in addition to naturally carrying on the learning process as they continue to increase its use. The processes of learning and using English

are therefore deemed as being simultaneous, instead of consecutive, in which the former is dependent on the latter.

Cook (1992), for example, expresses the preference for the term L2 user rather than L2 learner, in the sense that a user is someone who can stand between two languages, using both when appropriate. L2 users are therefore seen as being multicompetent; they have knowledge of at least two languages in their mind, in which each one will affect the other. In view of this situation, the ability to function through two languages cannot be measured according to monolingual native competence (Cook 1997) as the L2 user's knowledge of the second language is not typically identical to that of a native speaker (the appropriate aim for an L2 user is believed to be speaking the second language like an L2 user, not like an L1 use) and because the L2 user also has other uses for language when compared to the monolingual speaker. L2 users employ a more vast range of language functions than a monolingual for all their different needs (Cook 2005).

Seidlhofer (2011) likewise argues that language learners are also language users, and that it is only by using the language that they will continue to learn. As language users, they are free to exploit the language and learn how to “bend” it according to their communicative needs. As she puts it:

For me the essential point is that language learners are already language users and will quite naturally be inclined to exploit the foreign language as they exploit the one they are familiar with. Such exploitation is generally regarded as interference and usually measures are taken in teaching to suppress it. (...) The basic assumption is that you cannot be an effective user of the language until you have learnt it ‘properly’. My assumption, in contrast, is that learners learn the language by making use of it on and in their own terms and that in using it they develop the capability for further learning. (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 189)

According to this perspective, attention is centered on language as a process rather than on language as a product (the amount of knowledge learners are able to accumulate). In other words, people learn how to *language* (Swain 2006, Seidlhofer 2011), to make use of what they know of the language and make the most out of its communicative potential. As Swain (2006, p. 98) claims, “Languaging (...) refers to the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. It is a part of what constitutes learning.” Regardless of their competence according to native-speaker standards on an interlanguage scale, learners/users have obtained the necessary skills for putting the language they have acquired into actual effective communicative use; hence, providing for further learning according to the user's needs (e.g. academic or professional reasons).

Bearing in mind then that English is the world's lingua franca, and that in the majority of the cases communication takes place between those who do not share another

common language, it only seems natural that ELT should focus on how language can function in practice, rather than insisting on imposed forms. In order for this change in mentality and pedagogy to be visible in classrooms, it is crucial that teachers understand the implications. For this reason, (pre-service) teacher courses play an essential role in clarifying any misunderstandings and fears teachers/student teachers may have. Seidlhofer (2011) puts forth several suggestions at both a macro-level and micro-level, which may contribute to enriching teacher education courses. For example, at a macro-level she refers to more theoretical issues such as, language awareness, investigation on communication strategies, intercultural communication and language variation. While at a micro-level, she believes programs can cultivate an understanding in teachers of how the language they are studying and will be teaching can be incorporated within a broader framework of communication. Therefore, instead of giving importance to achieving proficiency in language forms, it is preferable for teachers / student teachers to develop an awareness of the nature of language itself and its creative potential.

#### 4. Final Remarks

The current role English plays in countless domains of our society has brought many changes to how the language is used and learned, both at a local and international level. As a result, English as a subject has been called upon for reconsideration, due to the increasing number of English users worldwide and their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The notion of teaching English as a foreign language, based on processes and aims that are unrealistic, no longer seems to meet the communicative needs of those who wish to take part in today's multicultural society in constant transformation. To counteract this tendency, an ELF approach emerges as an alternative way to think about ELT; an approach in which form gives way to function and to a redefined intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, it provides awareness to which features are more prone to activate the *linguaging* process and which also represent the best pedagogic investment for its users.

These changes in language use, especially regarding the perception of the L2 user, have brought much debate into the ELT circle. And as has already been mentioned, much still needs to be done in terms of teachers' awareness of the diversity of the current language use, and the emerging principles and practices of teaching English as an international language (Matsuda 2012). One of the essential places where this awareness and change can begin is in teacher training courses, as Seidlhofer (2011, p. 201) mentions, "Change always has to start somewhere. And the obvious place to start is in language teacher education".

To conclude, the idea of achieving total linguistic competence in any given language is beyond anyone's range (native speakers included); however, competent users are able

to compensate for their weaknesses in one area with the knowledge or skill in another, such as functioning and adapting their language according to the different interlocutors and communicative contexts.

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