From EFL to ELF: Possibilities and Restrictions

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Abstract

During my university course, I had had the opportunity to attend some conferences presented by native English linguists. I experienced the difficulty, rather the hopelessness for a non-native speaker to successfully achieve the idealized Standard English pronunciation. I understood that the wish, to which I have aspired for a long time, was very remote from its realization. I, honestly, felt myself excluded from native-like speakers' crowd. At this right moment of reflection, my background knowledge about language acquisition went up to the surface of my thoughts; to what extent is language learning out of reach of language acquisition. Anyway, optimistically, I found my scope in English as a Lingua Franca. Effectively, within English as a Lingua Franca, I am allowed to range my own construction of English learning as "my English". In fact, this paper discusses this legitimacy of multiple English varieties and its acceptance under the heading of English as a lingua franca. This discussion deals with native and non-native speaker models and how the issue of English ownership is still being questionable. Next, the positive and negative aspects of teaching English as a Lingua Franca as opposed to teaching English as a Foreign Language are exposed in order to entail the possible adequate implications for English as Lingua Franca pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The powerful race of English globalization has led the language to undergo an overall change that is often interpreted in two-folds. On the one hand, it is considered

that English has lost some of its own characteristics. On the other hand, the world widespread of English makes the language more efficient and more functional in many fields. However, a multiplicity of identities, not necessarily of multicultural sources but also of intercultural ones, is attributed to English. In fact, English as Lingua Franca[1] (henceforth ELF) interactions may include speakers from different countries where English is either the mother tongue and the official language at the same time, or a foreign language learnt in academic settings.

Moreover, as English language is constantly changing, particularly when it is used as a lingua franca, the traditional dichotomy between native and non-native speakers is still widely debated. Hitherto, the native speaker model has always been the fundamental goal of traditional English language teaching. However, such model is regarded nowadays as unachievable and an irrelevant target as there is no longer Standard English and there exist no idealized native speakers. Nowadays, the great challenge for ELF is to answer the following question: Which model or variety of English should and can be taught? This issue is at the heart of the present discussion.

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[1]. Firth (1996, p. 240) defines ELF as the language used by "persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication".

2. Native Speakerness and Attitudes

Since the emergence of ELF, the Kachru's 1985[2] conception of Standard English is being questionable. Nowadays there are multiple standard Englishes (Canadian, Nigerian, Indian, Singaporean, Caribbean… etc.) which are developing their own dictionaries. In fact, the idea of English ownership is unstoppably being spread out the inner circle to the outer and to the expanding circles. Widdowson (1994) argues that non nation or group of nations can claim the sole ownership. English users deserve the right to possess a sense of language ownership. As the number of non-native speakers of English exceeds largely that of native speakers, it has to be agreed that the target language belongs not only to natives but to all participants in daily and/or academic or professional communications. The Kachruvian model seems to be very obsolete for ELF use. Undeniably, although it has been assumed that the concentric model perfectly represents linguistic reality, it fails to consider the growth of English in the world. Indeed, ELF serves people's needs in business negotiations or international conferences. Therefore, more attention should be drawn on speakers' competency than speaker's geographical positions.

However, ELF leads to a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, most of English speakers are non-natives and

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[2]. See the three concentric circle model of World Englishes (Kachru, 1985) which comprises three circles: the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle.

the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve native speakers of the language at all. On the other hand, there is still a tendency for native speakers to be regarded as custodians over what is acceptable usage. So, Beyond any doubt, ELF confronts serious reluctance to be accepted as a global language which satisfies international communicative purposes via daily activities, networking, economic integration and the internet. Cogo and Dewey (2006)[3] confirm that "a vast imbalance stands significantly in the description of English as a native language and English as a lingua franca in favour of the former, at the expense of the latter". Definitely, the English native norms are still provided by only those who belong to Kachru's inner circle[4]. These norms seem to have a great influence on scholars, teachers and learners' attitudes. Moreover, in the regard of those who embrace negative attitudes towards English as a lingua franca, ELF is a weal and poor version of English language containing a wide range of mistakes with no possibility of codification as no linguistic structure has been laid down. They view the spread of English in terms of the spread of native English where ELF is considered as inappropriate. However, those dissenting attitudes over ELF cannot categorically deny the chances which ELF offers to achieve communicative effectiveness. ELF

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[3] Cogo and Dewey (2006, p. 60)
[4] The inner circle represents countries where English acts as the first language, including USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

should be perceived as a natural language that breaks socio-cultural boundaries and breaches the inner-circle supremacy. Inevitably, and despite being welcomed by some and deplored by others, we have to recognize that nowadays English is being used by native speakers and non native speakers, as well. So both users are evenly contributing to shape this language.

3. ELF vs. EFL in Language Teaching

English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) refers to English learnt to produce utterances as similar as possible to the native speakers' standard. EFL aims at improving learners' performance to approximate the native variety as closely as possible. However the ELF objective is to achieve successful communication via utterances "that do not deviate too far from the utterances of the native speakers" (Kirkpatrick, 2007)[5]. The crucial difference between ELF and EFL stands in their objectives; ELF points to intelligibility[6] and EFL target is native-like accuracy. In other words, Standard English is the appropriate and preferred variety for teaching EFL. However, in a lingua franca context, a native variety is not essentially the most pertinent.

Besides, this notion of Standard English, which is always associated with the codified variety of English, refers to

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[5]. Kirkpatrick (2007, p. 191)

[6]. Munro and Derwing (1999, p. 289): "Intelligibility may be broadly defined as the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by a listener."

the native model which is adopted in English syllabus of our schooling system. Such traditional and prestigious model is usually welcomed and respected by both teachers and learners. It is still believed that the model in question provides the 'proper' and the 'correct' English. Furthermore, EFL model has the major advantage of being codified, that's to say, all sorts of dictionaries and linguistic books are largely available. Yet, the concept of Standard English has been severely criticized since there is no English Standard variety, at least, there are two standard Englishes, namely British English and American English. Then, the broad variety of nowadays technological tools has moved people towards using many other non-standard varieties of English. The native-like model is not more than useless to sample the everyday English communications which mostly involve non-native speakers since they outnumber, by large, native speakers. In such conditions, reaching the highest proficiency level of a native Standard English seems not only hard and defeatist but worthless, as well. However, English as a foreign language is still taught as a language belonging to the United States or the United Kingdom. There is a very serious reluctance to accept accents of non-native varieties of English; they are considered inappropriate and irrelevant. Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) and General American (henceforth GA) are constantly the authority in English language pronunciation. Indeed, non-native EFL teachers worship Standard English variety. They even feel themselves

From EFL to ELF: Possibilities and Restrictions

inferior to native speaker teachers because they always think that their pronunciation is inappropriate and that they are weak at listening, vocabulary and speaking skills. Although non-native teachers show a constant willingness to perform their language skills, they lack self-confidence and express a certain degree of anxiety about how to be more accurate and closer to native speaker teachers' competence. Therefore, being in a tidal wave of that inferior feeling, non-native teachers don't care about communicative English teaching, which is the chief goal of ELF. Briefly, the issue about whether native or non-native teachers are superior is fading away. The decisive key for teachers inside the classroom is to what extent are their teaching strategies efficient, whatever their original country is.

In any case, this exceptional global spread of English as a lingua franca, has led English language teaching to move away from exclusively focusing on native speakers' norms. ELF attempts to involve the recent views expressed in the field of world Englishes in order to update the domain of English pedagogy. Much interest is devoted to the study of English variations in local and international settings. Knowing about how English is used to construct native speaker's identity, on the one hand, and how the language is negotiated to achieve a successful communication, on the other hand, helps in performing the potential perspectives for English language teaching.

The above discussion does not mean that ELF is without drawbacks. Rather, the most important element that ELF can be blamed for is that hitherto it has not been sufficiently codified[7] because of the continuous need for more data since ELF language is used by a large population in the world. So the teaching materials are almost in lack. As well, no comprehensive model has been attributed to ELF. It is still hard to fix grammatical or phonological rules to govern that global language. So an eventual codification of ELF is somehow difficult to be put in practice due to its complex nature. Yet this shortage of rules does not disrupt intelligibility and as Kirkpatrick (2007) argues that the English language spoken today is nothing like Old English.

4. Reforming ELT by ELF?

Success in English Language Teaching (henceforth ELT) has always been linked to the degree of difference to Standard English model. Students are asked to respect the native norms in order to guarantee a full accomplishment. In fact, the overall focus in ELT is on intercultural communicative competence. The problem is that over thirty years, this 'new' approach didn't bring too much difference since Standard English provides the yardstick for pedagogical orientations. Nonetheless, this state of affairs in ELT is quickly changing. ELF is being

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[7]. Research into ELF still continues to gather more information to establish a comprehensive ELF corpus which provides a codification for the written language.

gradually implemented in English language setting, including teachers' education, syllabus design, textbooks and assessment and so on. There is likely a shift in the target of ELT to a successful multilingual speaker of English. But, how can ELF be taught?

First, the need to redefine the goal of language teaching should get rid of ideologies of nativeness and standard language. The notion of standard variety that has always been linked to RP and GA should be moved away to welcome all relevant English varieties. In ELF contexts, the new tendency should be directed at pronunciation for international intelligibility. Next, the big challenge for ELF in language teaching is to bring new alterations to the communicative competence approach. It is not easy to select native target culture within a global world of Englishes. So, ELF has to adopt a teaching strategy that succeeds to recognise non-native English speaking communities with communicative competence perspectives.

Opportunely, the most compelling point is that ELF with its main cross-cultural role can make easier the incorporation of intercultural communicative approach into ELT. From that side, ELF shows more realistic significance than English as a native language. It will be more efficient to focus on the extra-linguistic parameters of ELF when dealing with language teaching. The

communication strategies and accommodation[8] skills that are mostly present in ELF contexts can be of significant relevance in intercultural approach. Additionally, ELF learning context offers a multitude of English varieties that unquestionably will help learners to enhance their communicative abilities. Effectively, by being exposed to a wide range of languages, learners will find a new tendency towards learning English which will probably take innovative shape. Evidently, teaching only a native variety will put the future of learners at risk. Thus, teaching materials should imperatively familiarize EFL learners with different English language varieties and cultures that serve in international interactions. Textbooks, as the first and the primordial teaching tool, have to include distinct varieties of English via the instances of discourse or the characters of reading passages. The fact of illustrating people from only inner circle countries will restrict learning English to native varieties. The main step for ELF teaching is tied to the ability to deprive the teaching materials' designers of this 'archaic' idea of nativeness and authenticity. However, the prevailing teaching and testing materials are still native English oriented. Moreover, the fact that most of classes in schools and universities lack of international contexts leads automatically toward EFL rather than

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[8]. Murray (2012) considers the accommodation used by non-native speakers superior to that of native speakers because a non-native speaker demonstrates a great ability in 'attuning to' his interlocutor utterances.

ELF. Thus non native speakers' creative spirit and potential communicative abilities remain dispelled in classroom models though ELF is present in spoken as well as in written language. One has just to have a look on local publications, such as newspapers, or on web pages from different countries then to compare linguistic features so that he can pick out differences in lexis and grammar. By the same token, evidently, momentous developments in English language have considerable consequences on ELT. Yet, if language teaching is perceived to be changing in its goals and its approaches, it is reasonable to expect that something should change in English teachers' education. Additionally since teachability presents a crucial aspect, it should be given big interest. Teachers should first be aware of the necessity to change the traditional ELT. Thus, one of the best ways to implement ELF in teaching may be a good preparation for future English teachers. This training should be comprehensive and cross-culturally oriented. This means that the instructors should be able to teach in different contexts all over the world where they must show competencies towards distinguishing between learner's error and his local variety because in ELF teaching, there is no constant native framework to follow. Yet, it would be interesting for them to realize that they have become, to a certain extent, autonomous teachers, surfing in the large space of ELF independently, freed from native authority. Interestingly enough, nowadays ELF researchers' main concern should be deviated from
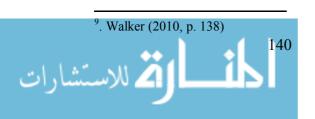
theorizing ELF teaching approach to finding concrete ways and techniques about how to implement ELF in classroom settings via different learning instruments. With no significant incidence, ELF is gradually fitting in ELT. In novel teachers training manuals, some sections are dedicated to the worldwide spread of English. However, no engagement of ELF, in teaching methodologies, has been noticed. Hitherto, Walker's (2010) handbook for teachers presents probably the most important work about the use of an ELF approach to teach pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

Within this growing awareness of the predominant role of ELF in ELT, many linguistic inquiries are made with excessive rate in order to realize the reflections of English widespread in teaching practice. The climate is in favour of ELF scholars, teachers and learners to intensify their endeavours since there is a large agreement on the assumption that intelligibility comes before correctness, and intercultural strategies are needed to negotiate meaning. However, teaching ELF is not so easy; "teachers have a long way ahead of themselves if they decide to opt for ELF" (Walker, 2010)[9].

But, in essence, though ELF is in a constant variability, all the works undertaken by ELF researchers aim at finding the appropriate way to the adoption of ELF for

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[9]. Walker (2010, p. 138)

teaching. Many efforts were made to broaden ELT from ELF perspectives. Yet, things with teaching ELF are not going too close to the end of their achievements. The requirement of descriptive work that mark the linguistic features of ELF is behind the non-foundation of ELF-focused curricula. In other words, all these attempts for teaching ELF have their rank only with mere recommendations towards teaching ELF. I mean that such studies didn't bring detailed pedagogical suggestions. Therefore, a credible and legitimate future for ELF is not for sure. In short, our globalized world is full of challenges in terms of economy, socio-culture and communication. So it seems that the only way for modern pedagogy to face those thorny issues is to re-conceptualize English language syllabus according to the new status that English has attained. Such objective seems out of reach unless ELF and EFL are welded on a common pedagogical ground. The key-concepts which have provoked this clear cut between ELF and EFL, such as English ownership, Standard varieties, native models and intelligible communications should be reviewed so that the essence of EFL models would be preserved and the needs for successful ELF interactions would be satisfied.

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