

# The ABC of ELT ... 'ELF'

**In this issue Jennifer Jenkins looks at English as a Lingua Franca**

The term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the English that is used as a contact language among speakers who come from different first language and cultural backgrounds. Although native speakers of English are not excluded from ELF interactions, they are a very small minority, given that English is the first language of only around 25 per cent of the world's English speakers (Crystal, 2003). More typically, then, speakers who engage in ELF interactions are non-native speakers of English communicating with each other. This means that ELF is rather different from EFL (English as a Foreign Language), whose goal of learning is to be able to interact with native speakers of English, and whose norms are therefore those of English as a Native Language. The term EIL (or English as an International Language) is often used interchangeably with ELF. However, the latter has come to be preferred by researchers because it both highlights the predominant use of this kind of English, i.e. as a lingua franca among *non-native speakers*, and pre-empts misinterpretations of the word 'international', which is sometimes wrongly assumed to refer to international *native speaker* varieties.

The phenomenon of ELF has existed for many years, to the extent that a number of its researchers believe that it 'has taken on a life of its own, independent to a considerable degree of the norms established by its native users' (Seidlhofer 2004: 212), and is developing in parallel with, rather than in imitation of, native English. On the other hand, descriptions of ELF are relatively recent. So far they have focused chiefly on the spoken language, including lexicogrammar, pragmatics, pronunciation, and academic English.

The earliest attempt to describe ELF on the basis of empirical evidence was at the phonological level. Jenkins (2000) proposed a core of phonological features (the Lingua Franca Core) necessary for mutually-intelligible pronunciation among non-native speakers. Taking the international intelligibility criterion one stage further, it was also argued that non-native versions (or variants) of the non-core features should be considered legitimate features of individual ELF varieties rather than errors. In other words, whereas an error in *EFL* is defined in relation to standard native English, an error in *ELF*, according to this view, should be redefined in relation to mutually-intelligible non-native English.

Similar work on ELF has been going on for several years at other linguistic levels, and more

recently, descriptions have begun to emerge from work on lexicogrammar, pragmatics, and academic English (see Seidlhofer op.cit. for details of the ELF corpora of, for example, Meierkord, Mauranen and Seidlhofer's own corpus, VOICE). At the lexicogrammatical level, items such as third person singular *-s*, the use of a single question tag form such as *isn't it?*, and the insertion of redundant prepositions (e.g. 'discuss *about*'), have been shown to occur systematically in ELF interactions without presenting any obstacles to intelligibility. Conversely, the use of native speaker idiomatic language, normally regarded as demonstrating a high level of L2 proficiency, has been shown to be a particular threat to intelligibility in ELF.

Clearly, if ELF is ever to achieve widespread acceptance as a variety of English alongside native English, these descriptions will need to be completed and then codified in dictionaries and grammar reference books. Codification, however, is still a long way from being a reality, and in the meantime, linguistic descriptions cannot provide the only basis for what needs to be taught and learnt in specific settings and for specific purposes. In addition, even if and when codification is accomplished, the gatekeeping activities of powerful institutions may continue trying both to exert a strong influence in favour of native speaker norms and to promote negative attitudes towards ELF norms among the very non-native speakers who stand to benefit from them the most.

On the more positive side, an increasing number of theoretical books for teachers (e.g. McKay, 2002), articles for both teachers and applied linguists, and even masters courses on ELF (or EIL) are beginning to appear. So although teachers who are in favour of ELF in theory are currently offered relatively little by way of guidance for putting the theory into practice in their classrooms, the situation may change rapidly. Watch this space, as they say.

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## References

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*Coming items in this series will include ESOL, NLP, etc. Readers are invited to suggest other acronyms in EFL that they would like to see in this column*