FROM FORM TO FUNCTION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVES

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Abstract

English is now the most important language for international communication in academia, business, and diplomacy around the world, used by more non-native speakers than native ones. This paper examines English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)—the functional use of English as a shared communication tool between people who speak different first languages. It analyzes ELF's defining characteristics, focusing on its core phonological features (which sounds are essential for mutual understanding) and its pragmatic strategies (how speakers adapt language in real time to ensure clarity). The paper distinguishes ELF from the related World Englishes paradigm, positioning ELF as a distinct sociolinguistic model. A key argument is that ELF fundamentally redefines the ownership of English: the language is no longer the exclusive cultural property of traditional English-speaking nations but becomes a shared, pragmatic resource owned by all its global users. This shift has profound implications. Consequently, the paper synthesizes how this reality necessitates a major paradigm shift in English Language Teaching (ELT). It argues that pedagogical goals must move away from enforcing native-speaker norms and instead prioritize developing learners' strategic competence and communicative resilience for effective interaction in multilingual settings.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Global English, World Englishes, Language Pedagogy, Communicative Competence

Introduction

The rise of English as a global lingua franca (ELF) is arguably the most remarkable sociolinguistic change of the contemporary world. English is now the world's most widely used language for international communication in all fields – business, politics, education, research, media, and the internet. Its most defining feature is that, unlike any other language in the world, the majority of its users (3/4) are non-native speakers (NNS). Despite the fact that the NS population is rapidly declining (e.g. between 350-600 million NS of English especulated (Kachru, 1997) the number of global users is reaching 1.5 – 2 billion, with non-native speakers outnumbering natives in a ratio of 4 to 1. (Crystal, 2003). This phenomenon calls for a major conceptual shift with respect to the language, transcending conventional approaches to English and its traditional, nation-bound centers, to explore the new and flexible forms of English that are emerging and enabling global communication.

Within given historical contexts, specific regional and functional use of a lingua franca, be it Latin, Arabic, or French, is understandable. However, due to historical trends, the expansion of English, primarily due to British colonialism, and then further strengthened in the late 20th century as a result of American geopolitical, economic, and technological supremacy, created a singularly complex and diverse global linguistic environment English is increasingly being 'de-nationalized' as it is no longer regarded as the linguistic possession of native English speaking countries (Widdowson 2007). This notion underpins the viability of a theoretical construct of English as a Lingua Franca, as Seidlhofer defines it (2005) as "the use of English in cross-language communication." This definition shifts the focus away from a sole emphasis on conformity to a native speaker, to achieving a purpose of a particular communication and success in a multilingual environment.

The intersection of the World Englishes (WE) paradigm and the study of ELF is singular. While WE scholarship, especially Kachru's (1985) Three Circles model, documents most of the recognized and geographically centered varieties of English (e.g. Indian English, Nigerian English), ELF studies the diverse, utilitarian, and frequently ephemeral varieties of English that emerge from transcultural communication in situations where the involved parties do not share the same mother tongue. By focusing on the processes that enable transcultural communication, ELF analyses the different strategies (e.g. accommodation, meaning negotiation, and lexical innovation) the communicators use to attain mutual intelligibility (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). As a result, many features of English that have been considered "errors" from the standpoint of traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) are reconceptualized within ELF studies as functional 'errors', variations, or even wholly definable constituents of a new contact language.

This particular, profound, reconceptualization provides new, fresh perspectives, in applied linguistics, where it can challenge multidisciplinary collaboration i.e., pedagogy, assessment, and policy making. The traditional ELT and the native speaker paradigm, with the focus on the primarily British and American speakers, is outdated and ELF research shows it can provide unfair inequalities in the ELT field. ELF this represents a paradigm shift in the pedagogy focus on the teaching and learning frameworks toward fostering communication, endurance, strategic competence, and intercultural awareness. The tools of world English language usage, with its different accents and varying forms, will provide the desired outcome. Furthermore, this shift requires the interrelationship of language testing, and language policy frameworks that promote the dominance of the native speaker and will continue to disadvantage the majority of the world English language speakers.

It begins with a functionalist and critical sociolinguistics framework. In this case, the primary functionalist tool is the Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, along with corpus scholars like Seidlhofer). This is important because it shifts the analytical focus from an abstract and rigid syntactic goal of an intelligible grammar of a speaker to an attainable sociolinguistic goal of mutual intelligibility as a communicative outcome. Coupled with this approach, I analyze grammar features of the utterances and the means by which speaker(s) communicatively succeed in overcoming any lack of intelligibility to an interlocutor. I apply a critical sociolinguistic approach to the framework last, since I can assume an audience where the use of English may be global, and the use of English global is in a dominant, imperial, and exploitive sense (Phillipson). There is a socio-political dimension of the use of English that implies ownership (Widdowson) of English. In this sense, English means a world language with an identifiable center of power and an exploitive periphery. In this sense, I ask, dominant communication, what is the center, and the world language of the periphery, who is the center? Thus, the socio-political framework integrates the two, distinctly, functionalist and critical sociolinguistic perspectives, and critiques the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The two perspectives describe an empirical instance of the use of ELF and critique the idea of its socio-political use in a functionalist sense in the world of language.

Research Objectives

- To delineate the core linguistic and pragmatic features of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) interactions analyzing how they systematically prioritize communicative efficacy over native-speaker norm conformity.
- To position the ELF paradigm within sociolinguistic theory by contrasting it with the World Englishes framework and evaluating its implications for the ownership and ideology of global English

- To synthesize the pedagogical implications of ELF research by constructing a critical comparison of traditional native-speaker-centric models with a proposed ELF-aware approach for curriculum, assessment, and teaching practice.

Literature Review

Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) exemplifies a notable change within applied linguistics, where the focus has moved from the traditional native-speaker orientation to a more functional/sociological contextualization of English use globally. This review attempts to provide an overview of the significant literature in an outline of the theorization, the empirical reality. and the most urgent issues from the perspective of the field of English language teaching concerning ELF (Tan, 2024).

Developing disciplines such as ELF stem from the study of the English Language with a truly radical approach. Compared to Kachru (1985), World Englishes, the World Englishes paradigm is the most fitting to describe diff Varieties of English as singular, plural, and institutionally defined (i.e. Indian English) and has, in many ways, heretical features. From this point, as ELF is a Seidlhofer (2011) is assumed to have the rights, varying, adapting and (most critically) the right to communicate with other non-native speakers of English. From this perspective, such a new approach annihilates the illusory 'Standard English' myth and places 'Communicative English' and the non-native English speakers, the users, paradoxically at the center of the continuum. From this perspective, English is not the language of a particular culture, country, or nation, but a language that is world apart from the cultures and countries, and is due to be reunited with the cultural and pragmatic Intelligibility of Language.

The paradigm shift in research pertaining to ELF interactions is being supported by empirical studies focused on ELF interaction in its linguistic dimensions. Through pioneering studies in (Seidlhofer & Jenkins, 2003) analyse the Linguistic Franca Core and describes some of its phonological elements that facilitate the achievement of mutual intelligibility. For example, in the Linguistic Franca Core it exemplifies consonant clarity and argues that native phonological features of the accented speakers of the native language are often redundant. Aside from Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2012) are also in the realm of corpus linguistics and have reported the same lexical and grammatical reduction phenomena in the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) characterized by the article use and inconsistent verb tense modulation. The use of articles as well as the verb tenses that are altered are not mistakes resulting from ignorance of the English language. Instead, these modified structures of English are the results of some planning on the part of the speaker. Other, more self-regulated than interdependent, strategies the speaker may use, include accommodation and code-switching.

The greatest consequences of this study relate to the intersection of policy and language teaching. There is a gap in global communication and the native-speaker model of English Language Teaching (ELT) built upon British/American English. An ELF-sensitive pedagogy is quite disruptive to multiple traditions, as your objectives articulate. This entails a shift from focusing on the native-speaker model accuracy, to native-like strategic competence plus (cross) cultural readiness; from the exclusion of non-native English speaking (ES) resources to the inclusion of a variety of global Englishes and authentic English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) resources; and from norm-referenced testing to tests of empirical communicatively effective. There is little doubt this presents difficulties for educational policy, curriculum design, teacher education, and assessment in a thoroughly globalized, multilingual context. ELF is certainly not, as some of the literature has proposed, a deficient type of English. It is a fully operational, legitimate means of communication.

For the 21st century, the existence of ELF presents a plethora of multiple, complex, and important issues.

Methodology

The main focus of this article is synthesis of the existing literature and its critical analysis. The article derives its main argument from the analysis and the comparison of the available foundational literature. The main sources include the theory literature such as Seidlhofer and Widdowson; the descriptive linguistics literature such as Jenkins's Lingua Franca Core and Cogo and Dewey's corpus analysis; and the critical sociolinguistics literature such as Phillipson. The use of discourse and text analysis in this article was aimed at Literature Review to meet its objectives of cataloguing the linguistic elements of the shift from form to function, of contextualizing the theories by juxtaposing the paradigms of the ELF and World Englishes, and of finding and integrating the evidence that justifies a direct critical comparison of the traditional and the proposed hybrid ELF-aware models of pedagogy. The literature integration and the argument for a shift in understanding and teaching global English is effective.

Findings

The study discusses English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), noting the presence of a rigorous linguistic system that favors the channeling of communication on differing from native-speaker standards. This operationalizes the system through multiple strategies, which include the Lingua Franca Core for intelligibility, flexible article usage, as well as meaning negotiation, all towards real-time mutual understanding. The findings advanced here provide empirical grounding for a much-needed paradigm shift. While the predominant models of English focus on fixed standards of cultural representation, the analysis illustrates that ELF is centered on emergent adaptive norms for effective communication. The documented linguistic behavior of ELF users should not be viewed as a series of mistakes. Instead, it is evidence for the articulation of an efficacy-centered paradigm.

The analysis aligns the ELF paradigm within the bounds of distinct, yet necessary, applications of sociolinguistic theory and the World Englishes framework. While World Englishes offers a valuable perspective of postcolonial regional varieties of English, as a model of the institutionally recognized, regionally bounded, and varieties of English that reflect postcolonial identities, ELF captures the transnational, multilingual, and diverse linquacultural English-using communities. The distinct descriptions of the two models also inform different, yet powerful, ideological perspectives. ELF most sociolinguistically describes a fundamental reconceptualization of English ownership by, once and for all, disconnecting the English language from its historical, native, and center locations, and reclaiming English as an instrument for global integrated and transcultural communication. While this will always be the case, it will also always be in constant conflict with an ill-defined order of global English linguistic imperialism. The findings construct the argument that an ELF model of communication promotes an illusion of equity for users, yet the global English relevant order of communication is still an imposition of the dominant and controlling English structures and patterns of communication.

Critical findings from the synthesis of research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) indicate that present-day English Language Teaching needs a paradigm shift from a native-speaker-centric model to an ELF-sensitive model. From the original research, there is a clear discrepancy between the traditional model that attempts to achieve 'inner circle' (Britain/America) native speaker standards, and the actual use of English as a Lingua Franca. As such, an ELF-sensitive model and pedagogy is needed to address the criticism of the English language teaching profession and the standards, scope and goals of the 'Communicatively Effective Multilingual' model, rather than the

'native speaker' model; the goal is primarily to achieve Frameworks of Interdependence; the focus is on contextual and strategic competence rather than the native standards; assessment is centered on the communicative and substantive goals of the task rather than the accuracy of the language. The systemic nature of these shifts throughout the curriculum, the materials, and the training of the teachers, provides an innovation that is designed to prepare learners for the multilingual world as confident communicators and to address the inequity of the native speaker paradigm.

Discussion

Table 1

Comparing World Englishes and ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academia)

Aspect	World Englishes (WE)	ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academia)
Focus	Varieties of English used in different regions (e.g., Indian English, Nigerian English)	English used for academic purposes among non-native speakers
context	Postcolonial, multilingual setting	International academic setting(e.g. universities, conferences)
users	Native and Non- native users in different regions	Nonnative speakers (mainly) interacting globally
purpose	Communication, identity, cultural expression	Academic communication, research, knowledge sharing
norms	Regions-norms and standards	Emerging norms based of effective communication

The primary differences between World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca in Academia (ELFA) are illustrated in Table 1. While WE has a regional focus (e.g., Indian English), postcolonial identity is WE's primary concern and is reinforced by local norms. In contrast, ELFA is concerned with the transnational flow of academic English. In this case, the norms are emergent from successful communication of a predominantly non-native speaker teacher-student cohort. In this context, English is viewed differently, as a non-fixed central issue of national identity, and is instead focused on the co-creation of a flexible, functional, and instrumental resource for the flow of global ideas from the non-native to the so-called native speaker.

Table-2

Comparison of traditionally (English language Teaching) and ELF oriented ELT

Aspect	Description	examples
Simplification	Simplification of grammar and vocabulary for mutual intelligibility	Dropping articles using verb form
Accommodation	Adapting language to facilitate communication	Clarification, rephrasing and repetition
Code switching	Switching between language and varieties	Using local words of phrases in ELF communication

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Formulaic expressions	Using fixed phrases for common interaction	How are you? What's up
Discourse marker	Using words/phrases to manage conversation flow	So any you know
Negotiation of meaning	Checking understanding, clarifying meaning	"do you mean"? "is that clear?
Idiomatic expression	Using idiom cautiously	Avoiding complex idioms and using simple expression
Pragmatic strategies	Using strategies for request and politeness	"could you" I think …."softening
Franca lingua strategies	Using strategies specific to ELF interactions	Letting go of native like norms and concentrate on communication

Table 2 illustrates the empirical evidence regarding the ideological reconceptualization of English mentioned in the first part of Table 1 and the second Objective. The range of pragmatic strategies inventory, from the simplification and the accommodation and the strategic avoidance of opaque idioms, local phrases, and code-switching, illustrates the tangible, user-centered break from the native-speaker norm. These linguistic choices are not random; they are practices aimed at 'effective communication' (cf. Table 1 ELFA standards), which is the topmost objective. For example, the decision to abandon native-like standards in favor of communication is, in fact, not a communicative failure but is a communicative right declaration, to the linguistic code. This means he/she possesses the code and is, in turn, authorized to determine the standards of communication. The native-like standards determine the way communication takes place, but in a sense, the means are not important. Instead, communication, as the end, is the most important of means. From means (the native-like standards set communicative norms), to ends (the communication achieved), and, of course, the communication is most important. This realignment of standards, placing the means of communication, rather than the native-like standards, strongholds the communication (the ends) as the primary objective. It is a new, real standard shift of means. Consequently, Table 2 captures, in a sense, the mechanisms at work, the processes through which the empirical ideas of shared ownership/ non-hegemonic use, central to the ELF paradigm, find practical expression and manifestation in the day-to-day lives of people around the world.

Table 3

Comparing traditional ELT (English Language Teaching) and oriented ELT

Aspect	Traditional ELT	ELT-orientation ELT
goal	Native like proficiency	Effective orientation in ELF context
norms	Native speakers norms (like British /American English)	ELF norms, focus on intelligibility
focus	Native like proficiency , grammar and vocabulary	Communication strategies, accommodation
Teaching approach	Focus on native like proficiency model	Focus on ELF-aware material, real life scenarios
materials	Native speakers material like (books)	ELF aware material, authentic ELF international

| Teachers trainer | Learning English like native speakers | Training for EFL aware teaching, focus on strategies |
| Learners focus | Focus on native speakers norms | Leaning to communicate into effectively in ELT context |

Researching ELF suggests that we need to update English Language Teaching in a way that encompasses a more full-blown paradigm shift. It requires the way we think about the system to change. The goal is no more `native-like' to more `effective' communication in `multilingual' frameworks. This indicates a fundamental shift in the purpose of learning English. Conclusively, it means losing the target of perceived native-speaker English from a country such as the U.S. or U.K. to showing the ability to effectively communicate flexibly in context of the specific needs of the interlocutor. Relative to these changes, the most important part of the shift is to guide the learners to focus on practical strategies that will foster competency in communication, rather than on grammatical errors. The most important part of the shift is to guide tl learners to focus on practical strategies, rather than on grammatical errors. This shift will require the kind of uncomplicated reforms that foster the use of materials that reflect communication as it occurs in the world, rather than the idealized communication or native-speaker communication. It will also require a shift in the way we think about education. The most important change in the way we think about education is that teachers should model effective communication as a strategy rather than as a singular system. The most important change in education is that learners should not be expected to sound like natives. Instead, the focus should be on the effectiveness of the communication. This comprehensive redesign outlines a strategy for harmonizing language teaching with the sociolinguistic realities of English language use globally.

Conclusion

This study legitimizes English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as a fully functional system with its own pragmatics, which emphasizes mutual understanding and is not bound by the demands of a native speaker. This fundamentally shifts the paradigm in both the ownership and functionality of English, viewing it no longer as a cultural possession of a limited number of countries, but as a pragmatic tool for cross border communication. This acknowledgement, however, is bound to elicit a radical change in any approach to teaching English. The native speaker model of English Language Teaching, which prescribes cultural hegemony, grammatical superiority, and a monocentric view of culture, is fully defunct. In its place, there needs to be a focus on the pragmatic ELF approach, which emphasizes the development of strategic competence, intercultural mediation, and communicative resilience. This change, which is bound to cause a shift in the status quo, will enable the development of a more just, equitable, and effective approach to the teaching of language. In essence, it enables students to move beyond the imposition of a single standard and to fully engage as the pluralistic citizens of the world that we need.

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