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1

English as a Lingua Franca: Descriptions, Domains and Applications

Alessia Cogo

There has been a remarkable growth of interest in the phenomenon of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in recent years, and as a result this has become a productive field of research, which has now found its place in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics discussions. Interest in this area started with a couple of seminal publications: Jenkins (2000), an empirical study of phonology and related concepts of intelligibility and accommodation in English international contexts, and Seidlhofer (2001), which called for more empirical descriptions of ELF communication and effectively marked the foundation of VOICE (Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English), a corpus of ELF naturally occurring spoken data. This work signed the beginning of ELF research, which, in the 15 years that followed, has increased exponentially and has developed into a vibrant area of investigation. This field today includes numerous scholars from all over the world, a dedicated Research Network under the auspices of AILA (the ELF ReN, www.english-lingua-franca.org), the foundation of two more large-scale corpora (ELFA, English as a Lingua Franca in Academic settings, and ACE, Asian Corpus of English), an annual international conference (which started in 2008 in Helsinki and subsequently took place in Southampton, Vienna, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Rome, Athens and Beijing), and a journal dedicated to work in this area (Journal of English as a Lingua Franca) and book series (Developments in English as a Lingua Franca), both published by De Gruyter Mouton.

Since the early publications, developments have been fast and certainly not free of controversies and even heated debates. In this overview, I explore what ELF is, from different definitions, and I cover the empirical work of linguistic description in lexicogrammar and pragmatics, including the debates concerning the nature of ELF communication. I will keep this part relatively brief, as the main aim of this volume is to explore not the description but the applications of ELF research for ELT. So, in the last part, I review sociolinguistic applications of ELF research in professional and academic domains, and
finally address implications and applications for English language teaching and teacher education.

What is ELF? Definitions, conceptualisations and debates

Seidlhofer defines ‘ELF as any use of English among speakers of different first languages’ (2011: 7) and linguacultural backgrounds, across all three Kachruvian circles. In contrast to some earlier definitions and conceptualisations (e.g., Firth 1996; House 1999), this one includes native speakers of English, who may use ELF as an additional resource for intercultural communication. This position is shared by most scholars today (Jenkins 2007; 2014; Mauranen 2012; Cogo and Dewey 2012), but in the past has created a great deal of controversy and debate (Cogo 2008 in response to Saraceni 2008; Cogo 2012a in response to Sowden 2012; and Dewey 2013 in response to Sewell 2013).

Apart from the inclusion-exclusion of native speakers, conceptualisations of ELF also have revolved around key notions such as variety, community and language. Most scholars today would agree that ELF is not a variety, and not a uniform and fixed mode of communication. Nonetheless, corpus research was initially concerned with identifying recurrent and systematic characteristics of ELF as well as co-construction processes of a pragmatic nature. The ‘feature’ focus, though, was what primarily drew the attention of scholars challenging ELF research and misconstructing it as another attempt to ‘create a variety’. Rather, ELF is a flexible, co-constructed, and therefore variable, means of communication. The variability is locally constructed in different geographical areas and domains, but not necessarily geographically constrained, since remote, virtual communities may also develop ELF communicative practices (Jenkins 2014; Mauranen 2012; 2014).

ELF’s intrinsic and contingent fluidity and variability therefore challenges traditional notions of ‘variety’ and ‘community’. The concept of ‘community of practice’ is generally considered a more appropriate conceptualisation of ELF communities (Seidlhofer 2011; Jenkins et al. 2011), which do not fit within the nation-state boundaries and go beyond fixed notions of competence, in relation to nativeness, and language norms. Work on conceptualisation has also emphasised the differences between ELF and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially in respect of the linguacultural norms used as points of reference (native speaker norms in EFL contexts), the objectives of communication (such as membership in a NS community) and the processes involved (imitation and adaptation to NS), as Seidlhofer summarises it (Seidlhofer 2011: 18). Jenkins also includes a fundamental difference in paradigm: while ELF is part of Global Englishes, EFL belongs to the Foreign Languages paradigm, whereby languages are learnt in order to communicate and identify with native speakers’ communities (cf. Jenkins 2015). Global Englishes, instead, includes
communication in Outer circle contexts (normally defined as World Englishes) as well as across Inner and Expanding circle contexts. It is a more inclusive label, which overall emphasises difference and variability, over the reductive, deficient and fixed perspective of EFL (for more on this, see Jenkins 2014).

The emphasis on fluidity and flexibility is a crucial aspect of ELF research and makes it possible to go beyond static descriptions of the formal linguistic properties and focus, instead, on practices and processes, such as ‘languaging’ and ‘translanguaging’ (Cogo 2012b; Hülmbauer 2013), which emphasise the multilingual nature of ELF and the language contact situation of most ELF communication. This places more importance on speakers’ creative practices in their use of plurilingual resources to flexibly co-construct their common repertoire in accordance with the needs of their community and the circumstances of the interaction.

Conceptualisations of this nature are challenging both for scholars working in the field and for teachers trying to apply an ELF-oriented perspective. The challenge for researchers is to work with the inherent variability of ELF communication and for ELT practitioners to incorporate a difference and variability perspective in their classroom practices. I will now explore the variability in the descriptive work of sociolinguists working in ELF and then turn to the applications for practitioners.

**Empirical work on linguistic description**

Speakers in ELF encounters normally come from different linguacultural backgrounds, and are likely to display varying levels of competence in English. They are expected to have had different experiences with the language, having learnt it formally in the education system or informally under different circumstances in different parts of the world. In all this, the influence of the local context and the domain in which they function are likely to manifest themselves in various localisations at the different linguistic levels.

Descriptive research of ELF communication has been particularly productive in the past 15 years, especially since the creation of a number of corpora of spoken data (VOICE, ELFA and ACE, as well as some individual and small-scale corpus projects), and increasingly more work on written data too. In this section, for reasons of space, I will provide only a succinct summary of work on the nature of ELF that is relevant for structuring and situating the contributions in this volume. This will include the main findings of research in pronunciation, pragmatics and intercultural aspects. Research in lexico-grammar is not reviewed here as papers in this collection do not involve this aspect in the teaching practices explored.

Pronunciation was the first area of linguistic description to be empirically researched. Jenkins’ seminal work (2000) explored intelligibility in ELF spoken
communication and the kind of accommodation processes speakers engage in. Her data showed the speakers’ ability to accommodate to more or less ‘native-like’ speech in order to enhance intelligibility. The findings also cast light on the core aspects of pronunciation that are essential for intelligibility – that is, all the consonants (apart from the dental fricatives), consonant deletion in initial clusters, vowel length distinctions and nuclear stress. As such, teaching implications require that practitioners focus more on the pronunciation items that are core and are found to enhance intelligibility, rather than on the entire pronunciation inventory. This research also has fundamental implications for assessment – the ELF pronunciation influenced by speakers’ linguistic repertoires can be considered as legitimate rather than as pronunciation errors (cf. Deterding 2013; Schaller-Schwaner, this volume; Walker 2010).

Research in pragmatics has been more extensive, but has provided similar results in terms of recurrent uses of ELF rather than random learner errors. Numerous pragmatic studies have focused on understanding/non-understanding in the attempt to identify those aspects or expressions that facilitate the solution of understanding problems (see Cogo and Dewey 2012; Kaur 2009; Mauranen 2006; Pitzl 2005). Research has shown that misunderstanding issues are less frequent than might be expected and that interlocutors tend to pre-empt or signal possible issues in a problematic exchange. The focus, therefore, has been on the strategies used for dealing with pre-empting, addressing or resolving issues in communication, such as the use of repetition, paraphrasing or co-construction of idiomatic expressions (Cogo 2010; Kaur 2012; Pitzl 2009; Seidlhofer 2009).

Another aspect of pragmatic investigation is the repertoire of multilingual practices that is creatively co-constructed and flexibly integrated (Hülmbauer 2011; Kalocsai 2013; Pitzl 2012; Vettorel 2014) in ELF communication. This implies strategies involving both code-switching and trans-languaging (Cogo 2012b) for meaning making, expressing a specific orientation to the talk (playful, engaged, irritated etc.) and expressing cultural and identity functions.

**ELF in business and academic contexts – pedagogical questions**

This section is dedicated to specific contexts of ELF research, and includes the applied work of scholars that have examined how ELF works, is constructed and is practised in the business and academic domains.

In international business contexts, especially multinational corporations, the use of English as a ‘corporate language’ has become a common practice, if not an official recognition of the company’s language policy. Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF for short) is now a requirement in globalised business and, even more, an essential aspect of business knowledge. Kankaanranta and Planken (2010: 399) compare the use of BELF in professional contexts ‘to the
ability to use a computer: you could not do your work without it in today’s international workplace’. The ‘it’ in this quote, though, is not the English of native speakers, but is ELF in a business context, a mode of communication used among professionals operating globally. Most studies in this area confirm the overall tendency of focusing on content of the message and understanding of business ideas, rather than foregrounding accuracy in linguistic terms. In the words of one professional in Ehrenreich’s study, ‘I must say I’m confronted with so many levels of correctness that I don’t actually care whether something is correct or incorrect. As long as the meaning is not distorted’ (Ehrenreich 2010: 418).

It is not uncommon for professionals to make reference to variation in linguistic proficiency among the people they come in contact with in the workplace, and often comments include easiness or difficulty of accents, and native speakers tend to be singled out as the most difficult interlocutors (cf. Rogerson-Revell 2008; Sweeney and Zhu 2010). This is not so surprising if we think that professionals operate with a range of L1 and L2 speakers of English who potentially display variation in their speech at all levels, lexico-grammar, phonology and pragmatics. What makes their communication work, therefore, is not so much adherence to ‘native speaker norms’, but a flexibility to accommodate the unexpected and adapt their pragmatic and strategic competence to the various communicative challenges of the international workplace. Various scholars have emphasised the importance of accommodation as well as relational talk and rapport-building as essential aspects of communication in BELF environments.

Studies exploring business discourse, notably through the analysis of naturally-occurring data from BELF contexts, have also demonstrated that BELF communication is intrinsically intercultural, and for that business professionals need to be able to deal with not only multiple backgrounds and identities, but also different ways of operating or acting in multiple business cultures (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). On that basis, because of the cultural hybridity of these contexts, some scholars also focused their research on the negotiation of meaning, the co-construction of understanding and the strategies used to solve non-understanding (Cogo and Dewey 2012; Pitzl 2005; Zhu 2015). This discourse focus has highlighted the importance of collaborative practices at all levels of professional communication and provided important findings in BELF-based interactions, which could partly feed into pedagogical discussions (of which more later).

The other aspect the research in BELF has emphasised is the multilingual nature of most business contexts. Studies have shown that English is not the only language at work in international businesses and professionals normally bring into play a repertoire of resources in their communicative practices. Some studies emphasise that English is a ‘must’ while a repertoire of resources
is appreciated strategically (Ehrenreich 2009, 2011; Pullin 2015); others show how multilingual resources come into play within English in the professional workplace (Cogo 2012b; Hülmbauer 2013; Zhu 2014). In other words, though there is a general understanding that English facilitates communication, there are also studies that explore the issue of language choice and the importance of other languages for work matters, not only for relationship building (Charles 2007; Chew 2005; Erling and Walton 2007; Evans 2013; Zhu 2014). In these studies, BELF is not always seen as the undisputed and natural choice for team communication, and issues concerning English, in its potentially excluding or gatekeeping role, are examined.

Pedagogically, the field of BELF has seen the publication of various papers on the conceptualisation and teaching of BELF in higher education (especially in business schools) and in general business English courses (see for example, Kankaanranta et al. 2015; Pullin 2015, among others).

ELF research has also spread to cover the academic domain: as higher education becomes increasingly international, facilitated by staff and student mobility, academia creates ‘a rare opportunity to investigate the intricacies of language contact of unforeseen complexity’ (Mauranen 2012: 1). In the words of Mauranen, Pérez-Llantada and Swales, academia ‘is one of the domains that has adopted English as its common language, and is one where international communication characterises the domain across the board’ (2010: 640). As in business, in ELFA (i.e., ELF in Academic contexts) too the research has focused both on academic discourse and on the practices and attitudes towards English in these contexts. In the rest of this section we are going to address them in turn. As with business contexts, in the academic domain there seems to be agreement that the spoken medium content-orientation is perceived as more important than linguistic ‘correctness’.

Starting from discourse, Mauranen and her team in Helsinki have produced various studies based on the ELFA corpus (Mauranen 2010a; 2012; 2014). A good amount of research in this area concerns what is generally considered an essential aspect of ELF(A) discourse, namely explicitness. In order to achieve clarity and deal with unpredictability, different kinds of explicitness strategies are found to be used: metadiscourse, markers of local organisation and negotiation strategies (Björkman 2011; 2013; Cogo and Dewey 2012; Mauranen 2010b; 2012). Other studies have investigated self-repetition, paraphrasing (Cogo 2009; Kaur 2012; Lichtkoppler 2007; Mauranen 2006; 2012) and mediation (Hynninen 2011), which were found to be frequent strategies of academic discourse. Smit (2010) carried out an ethnographic study of classroom discourse exploring, among other things, strategies of negotiation of meaning and repair. These findings concern the area of pragmatics, but further interesting research has been carried out for lexico-grammar, where Ranta (2006) found the innovative use of the progressive forms, such as in ‘the air we are breathing’
(rather than ‘the air we breath’), as indicative of a new function, that of drawing attention to the point the speaker is making. Metsä-Ketelä (2006) also concludes that the use of ‘more or less’ in spoken academic discourse assumes a minimising function, which is only present in ELF discourse. Emphasising the relation between syntax and intonation, Björkman (2013) stresses the significance of question formulation in ensuring effective communication in academic setting. Her study of a Swedish university also explores attitudes towards non-standard language: here Björkman notes that non-standardness, led by a move towards explicitness, is perceived as neither irritating nor incomprehensible by her participants. Finally, while a lot of research has been carried out to explore ELFA spoken communication, this trend has more recently changed, with an increasing number of studies addressing the written mode, especially research in WrELFA (the corpus of Written ELF in Academic settings, University of Helsinki).

In terms of attitudes and ideologies, ELF scholars have engaged with English language policy in so-called ‘international’ universities, especially those universities and other educational settings that use English as a medium of instruction (see also Quinn Novotná and Dunková, this volume). Jenkins’ recent work in this area (2014) has engaged in compelling criticism of the international universities, whose ‘international’ students are required to conform to ‘national’ (i.e., inner circle varieties, and most often UK or US) norms in their use of English, while local students are seldom asked to learn how to accommodate to them. The inequality between English NS and international students is also evident in the orientations towards NS-norm-based exams for university admission, and in the voices of the students themselves, who, in Jenkins’ interviews, show the extent to which their academic performance is measured again NS norms, and how they often the extra difficulty they encounter in their English-medium programmes is not being understood. Outside the university settings, the debate around ELFA concerns more specifically writing for research publication and the publishing practices of scholars working outside the English-speaking world. This is a widely-debated topic which intersects the ideologies of standard English, monolingualism and the native speaker (Ingvarsdóttir and Arnbjörnsdóttir 2013; Jenkins 2011; Kuteeva and Mauranen 2014; Lillis and Curry 2010), with a strong tendency towards English at the expense of other local languages and to the detriment of scholars writing and publishing in these languages (Canagarajah 2002; Flowerdew 2008).

To conclude the overview of two of the domains of ELF research, it is important to draw attention to an overarching question that often arises in relation to the role of the learner or user in these settings. The social environments of the classroom and the workplace have their implications for the user/learner dichotomy, and while generally ELF research emphasises the need to see speakers as ‘users’ in their own right, the situational contexts often require a complex
re-consideration of these two roles. In a classroom context, for instance, the learner role may dominate over any other, but outside the classroom, other social parameters may become more relevant. Similarly, in the workplace people can alternate their roles as learners and users. These roles are ‘not simple and constant, but assumed situationally’ (Mauranen 2012: 5) and they often interplay with considerations of attitudes and identities.

**ELF implications for ELT: concluding comments**

As research on ELF communication and practices intensifies, questions on the applications of its findings for English language teaching also start to be addressed, and this volume is a contribution in this direction. The pedagogical areas that are strongly influenced by ELF research and implications are teaching approaches and methods, the syllabus, the materials and testing. As a consequence, changes in these areas would, of course, need to be accompanied by appropriate teacher training, which is a topic addressed by many contributions to this volume.

Discussions about the global role of English have constantly accompanied the language teaching profession. However, mainstream ELT activities, in terms of conferences, training and publications, have traditionally been kept rather separate from ELF research. In those cases, when discussions of an ELF-oriented pedagogy have taken place, there have been rather heated debates concerning pedagogical norms and practices. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that the ELT industry has recently shown more interest in Global Englishes aspects and also addressed the implications of research in this area. For instance, most IATEFL conferences in the past ten years or so have included papers in ELF and also whole SIG days on ELF-related issues, such as pronunciation. Publications directed at teacher trainers or teacher trainees have been a little more reluctant in including an ELF perspective, though some encouraging developments have appeared, such as Walker’s ELF-oriented pronunciation teaching manual (Walker 2010), and various papers have recently appeared in the *English Language Teaching Journal* (Baker 2012; Galloway and Rose 2014; Hall 2014; Suzuki 2011, among others) that more directly address ELF in relation to syllabus, materials and testing. In fact, it is precisely the *ELT Journal*, one of the main publications that brings together research and practitioners in the field of ELT, which has recently included ELF in its Aims. They read as follows:

> ELT Journal is a quarterly publication for all those involved in English Language Teaching (ELT), whether as a second, additional, or foreign language, or as an international Lingua Franca. (on page 4 of each issue of *ELT Journal*)

These positive developments in the ELT world have not, however, reached all aspects of pedagogical relevance for teachers and practitioners, and have
been especially scarce and non-reactive in relation to materials. Global textbooks are still rather conservative in their representations of other varieties of English or of ELF communication. The situation is similar for local textbooks. For instance, Matsuda’s study of locally produced textbooks in Japan showed a prevalence of ‘US standard sanitized textbook English’ (Matsuda 2014; cf. also Matsuda 2012). Although some textbooks showed a few comments or cultural observations on varieties of English and ELF, those would most probably be left unexplored by the teachers, and consequently students, unless teachers are trained to notice, expand and build on them. This further emphasises the importance of teacher education in material development and also of more studies investigating how teachers make use of textbooks and create their own material (see also Lopriore and Vettorel, this volume, for materials in the Italian context; Yu, this volume, for the critical evaluation of materials in the Taiwanese context; Grazzi, this volume, on computer-mediated material, and Goncalves, this volume, for migrant situations).

In terms of testing, ELF research continues to question the viability of external, normally native-speaker-oriented, norms as a reference for most international and local testing practices. Testing and the issue of how to evaluate proficiency need to be rethought, taking the ELF research findings into account and considering a shift from the notion of native speaker to those of ‘educated speaker of English’ and ‘competent user’ (Jenkins and Leung 2013). These concepts need to be specified and operationalised in order to go beyond ENL evaluations as the sole criteria of correctness and appropriateness.

Finally, an ELF approach to language teaching ultimately entails a shift in perspective, a ‘change in mindset’ (Jenkins 2007) and a ‘transformative perspective’ (Bayyurt and Sifakis, this volume) on the side of teachers and teacher educators. This also involves an understanding that English is not a monolithic entity and its plurilithic aspects can be integrated and localised in and for the language classroom (see also Wang, this volume, on language awareness; Dewey 2012, and this volume, on a post-normative approach). An ELF-oriented approach to ELT is not about deciding what needs to be taught in the classroom, and not about creating a specific methodology, but enabling teachers to consider ELF research findings and to reflect on their beliefs about the subject English today and how their practices can be adapted to include a more multilingually-sensitive English language pedagogy.

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