ELF AND EFL: ARE THEY REALLY DIFFERENT?

1. Introduction

The terms 'English as a foreign language' [EFL] and 'English as a lingua franca' [ELF] are both double-sided. They can refer to activities: the teaching and learning of English to and by non-native speakers (EFL), and the use of English by non-native speakers for international communication (ELF). They may also be used to designate kinds of language: the English that is taught to and/or learnt by non-native speakers (EFL), and the English that is used by non-native speakers for international communication (ELF). The distinction between the terms is often important for ELF specialists, who see ELF (in either sense) as having its own existence, independent of the native-speaker [NS] norms that are held to be central to EFL. My purpose here is to examine the reality of this opposition and its implications. I will consider in particular the following questions:

- How far can non-native speaker [NNS] usages be regarded as 'mistakes'?
- Does the spread of lingua-franca use have implications for the teaching of English?
- Is there in fact an identifiable kind of English that can reasonably be called 'ELF'?
- Will lingua franca use of English change the language?
- Are ELF and EFL really different?

The views outlined in what follows are broadly parallel to those put forward in by Ferguson (2009) in his very lucid and detailed 'conceptual enquiry' (2009), which deals with much the same range of issues, though from a somewhat different perspective.

2. Do NNS of English make mistakes?

ELF scholars commonly argue that NNS usage should be evaluated not by NS norms, but by ELF-specific criteria, and that the notions of 'mistake' or 'error' are therefore inappropriate in this context. How valid are such assertions? This is not at all a straightforward question; the answer depends a good deal on what it may mean to say that something is a 'mistake'.

People who are learning complex skills rarely get everything right from the outset. Children practising the piano play wrong notes. Skiers get their weight too far back and fall over. Beginners at chess lay themselves open to fool's mate. It is conventional, and quite reasonable, to call such things 'mistakes' or 'errors'. The same is true of learning languages – including the English which will be used for lingua-franca purposes, which also has to be learnt. Someone who asks for an 'apple' when he or she wants an orange, or who confuses *he* and *she*, or who says "John told about the meeting" to mean "John was told": all these people are making mistakes.

Clearly some mistakes matter rather more than others. Not getting a crescendo right is probably less disruptive than playing B flat instead of B natural. Not making full use of your ski poles in a turn is generally less serious than putting your weight on the wrong leg. Saying "I'm having three children" is unlikely to cause confusion, while telling a greengrocer that you can "become a cabbage cheaper in the supermarket" (in the unfounded belief that *become* is the equivalent of German *bekommen*) will at the very least get you laughed at. Context of course can affect the impact of a mistake: the B flat matters more on the concert platform than in the rehearsal room, and the unbalanced turn is less serious on the nursery slopes than on the edge of a cliff. Similarly, many language mistakes may be neutralised where the linguistic and situational context provide adequate clues to what is actually meant.

Where a mistake has little communicative impact, how much does it matter? Is there indeed a case for saying that some non-native usages are not really mistakes at all, but perfectly valid forms which simply do not happen to conform to NS norms? After all, many NNS succeed in communicating successfully in English which has numerous non-native features. In Cogo and Dewey's words (2012: 78), "Deciding what constitutes an error is not only a complex issue, it is possibly not an ELF-compatible way of thinking about language".

It is certainly a complex issue. To say that someone is making a mistake involves knowing what that person is trying to do. Franz Marc did not paint blue horses in the erroneous belief that the animals were really that colour. If you are told that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, it is helpful to know whether the speaker is a young bride or a trainee surgeon. Similarly, for deviations from NS norms to be rebranded as legitimate usages rather than mistakes, we must be quite clear about their motivation. Is someone who says "I pay you tomorrow" trying to speak standard English and getting it wrong, or just happily adopting a less structured approach to the use of tenses?

Many learners of English certainly do wish to conform to NS standards, at least up to a point. If they produce NNS word forms like *examinate* or *increasement* (cited in Seidlhofer 2011:102–3), or if they structure sentences in non-standard ways, this is not necessarily by choice. Perhaps they would like to use the equivalent standard forms but don't know them, or can't retrieve them quickly enough from memory; so they resort to compensatory strategies and create viable-looking equivalents on the basis of analogy. Or they may actually believe that these forms are standard, having mis-remembered them, or learnt them from other NNS. Such

speakers are likely to welcome correction, and would probably be baffled by the suggestion that they are not making mistakes. Evidence for the desire of many non-native users of English to approximate to NS usage is the fact that more accomplished and experienced NNS do generally seem to converge on NS norms – people with limited English tend to be further away from NS standards than more proficient speakers. Indeed, some highly successful NNS are virtually or completely indistinguishable from mother-tongue English speakers except perhaps as regards accent.

The problem, of course, is that it is not easy to generalise about speakers' aims. We cannot, without evidence, assume either that a particular speaker would like to emulate NS standards of correctness, or that they would not, or that they are somewhere between the two positions. However, many lingua franca English speakers are certainly unconcerned about emulating NS norms of correctness except in so far as these are likely to serve their communicative purposes, and are perfectly satisfied with approximations that are transparent and effective. For such speakers it seems quite reasonable to say that the forms they use have their own validity, and should not in principle be judged by NS norms or labelled 'mistakes'. A crucial question, however, as Seidlhofer points out (2011: 195) is how effectively the 'deviant' form functions in making meaning. The English of some NNS is simply not very good, and can be difficult for others (NS or not) to understand. L1 transfers may be, as Seidlhofer claims (2011: 88) "positive signs of effective learning", and I fully agree with her view of L1 as a resource for L2 learners (something that is often overlooked). But L1 transfers vary in effectiveness: some can be baffling to interlocutors who have other mother tongues, like the use of *analogy* by Greek-speakers to mean 'proportion' (Prodromou 2008: 199); or a number of the forms such as *lifting*, *handy* and *pullunder* cited by Seidlhofer (2011: 101) from Trudgill (2002:151); or imported structural conventions for topicalisation, pronoun ellipsis or part-of-speech assignment. Guido (2008) shows how serious communicative difficulties in certain lingua-franca contexts can arise precisely from the use of ELF, involving the non-native speakers' transfer of native language structures and socio-cultural schemata into the English they speak. Even those who are unconcerned about the niceties of NS usage will certainly wish to communicate effectively; forms that unwittingly impede communication are mistakes, whatever the speaker's attitude.

The question of whether to call ELF usages 'mistakes' is not only complex; it is also perhaps generally rather unimportant. In most contexts, surely, it hardly matters whether we diagnose a particular NNS form as an error, a cross-linguistic import, a creative innovation, or a valid extension of the as yet unrealised possibilities inherent in the language. Most people take it for granted that NS and NNS language will inevitably differ, and few outside the teaching profession question the 'right' of people to do whatever they need to do in order to communicate successfully in a language that is not their own. Language teaching, of course, can be a very different matter.

3. ELF, EFL and language teaching

Languages are vast; time for learning is limited. Teaching programmes can only offer small samples of a language. Learners take in some of what they are exposed to, they get some of it wrong and they forget some of it. The end-product, as Seidlhofer points out (2011: 186), "is clearly not the English that has been *taught*, but the English that

has been *learnt*". In using this end-product, learners will conform to some norms and not others. (Someone who conforms to no native-speaker norms is not speaking the language at all, as a lingua franca or anything else. A learner who conforms to all native-speaker norms is a very rare creature indeed.) They will draw on such English as they know, make mistakes, flout many NS norms, find and negotiate one-off solutions to problems, accommodate, innovate and so on, in the ways studied by ELF researchers, just as speakers of foreign languages have always done. NNS forms that affect communication will tend to disappear – nobody says twice that they can become a cabbage. In other areas, learners will vary widely in their ability and willingness to approximate to native-speaker usage.

Many language teachers, and the educational systems and traditions they work in, are concerned to respect this reality, promoting fluency and communicative effectiveness, and avoiding emphasis on formal accuracy for its own sake in teaching and testing. The theoretical currents of the last few decades – the Communicative Approach and offshoots such as the Common European Framework – have done much to encourage the profession to move in this direction. Despite the apparent implication by some ELF scholars that the majority of 'EFL' teaching and testing is unrealistically based on NS linguistic and cultural targets (see for instance Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b: 138–141; Cogo and Dewey 2012: 19), a fair proportion of academics and practitioners do in fact share the ELF perspective: that non-native learners of a language can and should be expected to conform to native-speaker norms in some respects, but not necessarily in others. (See for example Taylor 2006, Cook 2007, and the Introduction to Swan 2005.)

It remains true, however, that much of the language teaching that goes on round the world – perhaps most – adopts unrealistically perfectionist approaches which deny the reality of language learning and use. Many teachers and educational authorities seem to regard NS-like competence, or a close approximation to it, as a viable target for language students. This attitude betrays a remarkable level of cognitive dissonance. Such people must be aware that the linguistic breadth and accuracy which young mother-tongue speakers have acquired after, say, 50,000 hours of exposure cannot conceivably be approached in the few hundred hours that are generally available to secondary-school language learners. None the less, there is a pervasive pretence that it is possible and useful to aim at such a target. In such contexts accuracy is often regarded as an absolute virtue, regardless of the communicative load (if any) carried by specific structural points. Teachers deal unselectively with all the grammar in their books, correct all their learners' mistakes, and complain that the students, mysteriously, are still not getting things right. Examinations may put such a premium on grammatical accuracy that learners have little time to study anything else.

I believe that such attitudes are responsible for a great deal of failed language learning and teaching. Discouraged by their inability to achieve the unattainable standards of accuracy apparently required, many students stop trying. The result can be the kind of classroom characterised by – in the words of a German high-school teacher of English I once spoke to – "fehlerfreies Schweigen": error-free silence. Teachers who have come up through systems which prioritise accuracy over fluency, and declarative over procedural knowledge, may have gained their teaching qualifications without being able to make effective use of the language they are teaching, or perhaps to do anything very much except perpetuate the approaches that have failed them. In extreme cases, educational systems of this kind may devote enormous resources to turning out teachers and learners who may know a good deal

about English, but can neither speak nor understand it – a totally absurd situation (Swan 2012: 217–220).

This contrast between unrealistic pedagogic targets on the one hand, and the reality of language learning and use on the other, is a very old story, and it has nothing directly to do with the increased lingua franca use of English. However, the ELF enterprise is certainly doing extremely valuable work in bringing the situation to the centre of everyone's attention, undermining counter-productive attitudes, and moving the profession in the direction of a realism that is becoming more and more important in today's English-dominated world. In addition, research into lingua franca use can be expected to provide increasingly solid empirical backing for teachers' intuitions about selection and prioritising, as it accumulates evidence about which aspects of English – lexical, grammatical, phonological and pragmatic – are essential for international communication, and which elements of the standard codes can safely be ignored by those learners who do not wish to move towards NS-like performance. All of this may bring us much closer to responding to Seidlhofer's eloquent plea (2011:197) for realistic objectives in language teaching.

ELF research must however retain a sense of realism itself. To change attitudes to language teaching is one thing; to change its content is a less straightforward matter. Seidlhofer (2011: 20) sensibly warns against "unwarranted premature extrapolation … to questions of pedagogy", and says (2011: 16): "I do not wish to be misunderstood to be making recommendations for any particular linguistic forms, or for immediate drastic changes in ELT for all learning purposes". However, such suggestions for change as Seidlhofer and others do make may be difficult to operationalise. Seidlhofer (2011: 190–1) criticises the many EFL materials and reference books which advise learners to avoid common mistakes, telling them for instance that *discuss about* is 'wrong', or that *enjoy* 'cannot' be followed by an infinitive. Cogo and Dewey (2012: 172–3) voice similar criticisms. As someone who produces such materials, but who at the same time is fully in sympathy with the ELF call for tolerance of NNS English, I am not insensitive to this argument. On balance, however, I feel it is flawed, in that it conflates two different contexts: learning and use. Whatever the realities of ELF use, learners need clear and consistent learning models. In Prodromou's (2008: 255) neat formulation, one "cannot make a model from a muddle". Learners should certainly be exposed to various types of extensive input, including examples of effective NNS English. But where they are given basic information about core elements of the language, this will inevitably be drawn from the common ground of the standard varieties. Potential but unrealised language forms (e.g. *unpossible*, *culturise*, *beautifulness*), whatever one feels about their status, can scarcely be listed in their unpredictable variety and included in a learner's dictionary. What would an ELF-oriented grammar tell learners about English comparative structures – just that *older of*, *older that*, *older than* and *older as* all occur (to say nothing of the multifarious non-European variants), and that all of them are right?

The role of such pedagogic materials is to say what happens (and therefore, inescapably, what does not happen) in the variety of English chosen as a source of input. Many teachers and learners want such information, whether or not they intend to act on it themselves; and if they do wish to act on it, 'correct' and 'wrong' are relevant concepts. I would not wish to use a French learner's dictionary which failed to make it clear that *actuel* corresponds to 'current', not to 'actual'; or that avoided giving me information about noun genders because lingua franca French speakers sometimes use *le* where native French speakers use *la* and vice versa. Grammars, dictionaries and usage guides are, so to speak, maps of linguistic areas, designed for

those who wish to know about or navigate in these areas. Cartographers do not expect people to go to all the places on their maps; nor do they prescribe the routes people should take, though the information on the maps may help them to make informed decisions. Maps can be misused, and those of us who produce language teaching and reference books know that they, too, can be seriously misused in the interests of the perfectionism that I have criticised above. I am not happy about this; but I am not sure that I should feel guilt by association.

4. Is ELF a language?

From the reasonable claim that NNS English should not be evaluated by NS norms of correctness, it is a short step to regarding lingua franca English as a form of English in its own right, with its own norms – a form which might be used (despite Seidlhofer's caveats) in place of NNS standards for teaching purposes. I have to say that the position of ELF scholars regarding the linguistic status of ELF seems to me somewhat ambiguous. Some state explicitly that they do not claim a unique variety status for lingua franca English. Jenkins (2007: 19–20) and Seidlhofer (2011:192) talk about the misapprehension that ELF is claimed to be a "new variety" with features that are unique to it. Cogo and Dewey (2012: 5) say "where we describe emerging language forms we do so not in attempt to establish ELF as a distinct variety, but rather to illustrate the many varied language practices involved in lingua franca communication". If there is such a misapprehension, however, it is not altogether surprising. Discussion of ELF in the literature involves frequent reification, combined with quite strong claims which are not easy to reconcile with the positions stated above. All four of the writers just cited use 'ELF' to refer not simply to the use of English for international communication, but also to the English that is so used, with references to "ELF speakers" often clearly implying that there is a something ('ELF') that these speakers speak. ELF is "a legitimate manifestation of English in its own right" (Cogo and Dewey 2012:18). Corpus research is said to show that ELF has "frequent" and "systematic" features (Jenkins 2006a: 41; 2007: 14, 37). It is, in a sense, "an L2 variety that has no native speakers" (Jenkins 2006b: 148). It is or will become codifiable (Jenkins 2007: 238; Cogo and Dewey 2012: 166). There are local ELF varieties (Jenkins 2007: 21–22, 37; Cogo and Dewey 2012: 87). Despite their disclaimers, then, ELF does seem to be regarded by these scholars as either a variety of English, or (like NS English) a range of varieties.

It is, however, hard to see how ELF can be considered a language (or a set of language varieties) in its own right. As has been frequently pointed out (see for example the citations in Maley 2010: 32), NNS English has nothing like the relative homogeneity found in the Englishes of NS communities; nor can one identify substantial NNS subgroups whose English is homogeneous in this way. For ELF to have a linguistic (as opposed to sociolinguistic) identity, it must surely exhibit its own distinctive and substantial system of linguistic conventions, even if these are more flexible and diffuse than those of a mother-tongue variety. The 'frequent' and 'systematic' features discussed in the literature turn out on inspection to be a relatively limited inventory – generally a dozen or so items including:

- Third-person singular present-tense forms without final -*s*
- Use of either relative *who* or *which* for both personal and impersonal reference
- Use of articles in ways that differ from NS practice

- NNS lexico-grammatical patterning (e.g. *I want that you listen to me*; *Let's discuss about this*)
- NNS countability assignments (e.g. *informations*, *an advice*).

The words 'creative' and 'innovation' are frequently used to describe such usages. Innovations they certainly are not: the forms cited are stock entries in accounts of 'typical learner errors' published half a century ago. Whether they are in fact 'errors' is, I have suggested, a complex question; but they are typical of the forms produced when language systems present learning problems of one kind or another. Rebranding them as 'creative' suggests the exercise of more choice than is perhaps generally the case. Is somebody who says *who* instead of NS *which* deliberately reshaping this structural area in the light of his or her local and situational communicative needs (whatever these might be), or just sidelining a distinction which he or she has not grasped, or sees no need to make explicit?

The suggestion that these features are 'systematic' in NNS use is not generally specified further (though Cogo and Dewey (2012: 61–70, 98–101) do make a claim of this kind, which I find unconvincing, for NNS definite article use). As far as frequency is concerned, there appears to be no evidence that any of these features characterise the usage of a majority of NNS of English; nor that they will in the future. Cogo and Dewey (2012: 19) discuss the "emergence of innovative linguistic and pragmatic forms" and mention the possibility that these may "stabilize into characteristic ELF features". Indeed, they claim (2012:49) to have presented evidence in their previous research (Cogo and Dewey 2006) that the third person singular present verb form with zero ending "at least in certain types of ELF settings … appears to be emerging as the default option in informal naturally occurring communications" (2012:49). Unfortunately, neither Cogo and Dewey's 2006 paper, nor Breiteneder's findings in the same area (2005; 2009), based as they are on tiny corpora, demonstrate any such thing. To draw valid conclusions regarding the frequency of 3rd-person zero in the wider ELF context would require substantial further research based on a much larger corpus, as these researchers themselves acknowledge. Further, 'emergence' could only be demonstrated by comparative data showing that this form had become more frequent in comparable populations over, say, a 20-year period. The populations compared would also need to be controlled for L1 background: speakers of some languages may be particularly likely to use 3rd-person zero in English for familiar cross-linguistic reasons (see for instance Swan and Smith 2001).

A frequent claim is that ELF users will be powerful agents in language change (e.g. Seidlhofer 2011: 8 citing Brumfit 2001:116)). This is sometimes backed up by the assertion that "any use of language changes it" (Cameron and Larsen-Freeman 2007:230, cited in Seidlhofer 2011:99). This implausible notion originates in complexity and chaos theory, where it is more at home than in linguistics. A more apparently reasonable position is based on the fact that lingua franca speakers constitute a majority of users of English. This does not, however, mean that they necessarily produce a majority of the *uses* of English. Most of the world's ELF speakers probably spend a relatively small part of their time using English; and 'speakers' is perhaps a misnomer for the many whose use of English is primarily receptive (see Maley 2010: 28–31 for some important clarifications). In any case, whatever its scale, it is hard to see how lingua franca use will lead to significant language change unless ELF develops beyond its present condition of an "inchoate and disconnected agglomeration of instances of use" (Maley 2010: 31). Certainly,

individual usages by influential NNS will sometimes diffuse through the media and become common property, but for NNS influence to operate on a language-changing scale, something more is needed. The most likely scenario would be for a particular group of NNS with a moderately homogeneous form of English (mainland Chinese?) to achieve such global importance that substantial features of their English came to serve as a model for other learners and users. This could indeed move ELF towards constituting a codifiable lingua franca, somewhat like the koine Greek of post-classical antiquity, and with a similar power to influence and shape the language of other users, NS and NNS alike. (For some speculations about ways in which English might develop in this situation, see Swan 1985.)

ELF cannot, then, sensibly be regarded as a 'variety' or group of varieties of English in its own right. The most appropriate conceptualisation of ELF is surely a negative one. It is not that its speakers conform to identifiable ELF norms; it is that, like the speakers of all foreign languages, they do *not* conform to all NS norms; and this in in various and largely uncodifiable ways. As far as the implications for language teaching are concerned, Jenkins (2007: 22) makes a centrally important point: that ELF research is concerned not to offer us alternative teaching models, but to tell us what it is *not* necessary to teach for effective international communication.

5. Conclusion: are ELF and EFL different?

It is clear that the ELF focus on the reality of lingua franca communication is bringing, and will continue to bring, considerable benefits to teachers and learners of English. If, as I believe, much of the world's language teaching is rendered less effective by over-perfectionist attitudes, then the work of ELF scholars may be of very great practical and economic importance. In this connection, the insistence of such scholars that we need to rethink the concept of 'error' in foreign language use must be taken very seriously, complex though the question is. This does not, however, mean that ELF stands in opposition to the teaching of English as a foreign language, as suggested in Jenkins' somewhat polarised comparison of the two enterprises (2006b: 138–140). EFL teachers have students many of whom will use what they have learnt for lingua franca purposes. In this sense, EFL leads to ELF; they are on opposite sides of the same coin. EFL teachers and programme designers are perfectly capable in principle of adopting a realistic attitude to language learning and use, even if they may often fail to do so in practice.

Research by ELF scholars will also provide an increasingly reliable empirical base for syllabus and course planning. The more we learn about efficient lingua franca communication in English, the better able we are to make informed decisions about priorities: what do we need to teach and what can we safely ignore? Here again, however, ELF and EFL are on opposite sides of the same coin, not in competition with one another: the findings of ELF are a component of EFL planning, and one feeds into the other

This valuable work will not, however, benefit from attempts to see ELF as more systematic than it actually is. ELF is not a language, either in opposition to EFL or otherwise. The many-coloured and uncodifiable Englishes of non-native speakers have not turned into a current or emergent variety with its own norms, capable of being taught as an alternative to NS English, and of influencing the development of NS varieties in important ways. Claims to that effect, or in that direction, involve

unjustified reification and unwarranted extrapolation from the analyses of very small samples of language use.

Berkeley, commenting on the self-inflicted philosophical conundrums of his age, said "We first raise a dust, and then complain we cannot see". I believe that this is often the case in discussions in this area, and that the confusion may be nourished by a false opposition between 'ELF' and 'EFL'. Perhaps we would be better off if we used the acronyms more sparingly.

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