

## KEY CONCEPTS IN ELT

# English as a lingua franca

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In recent years, the term ‘English as a lingua franca’ (ELF) has emerged as a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages. Since roughly only one out of every four users of English in the world is a native speaker of the language (Crystal 2003), most ELF interactions take place among ‘non-native’ speakers of English. Although this does not preclude the participation of English native speakers in ELF interaction, what is distinctive about ELF is that, in most cases, it is ‘a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication’ (Firth 1996: 240).

Defined in this way, ELF is part of the more general phenomenon of ‘English as an international language’ (EIL) or ‘World Englishes’. (For comprehensive overviews, see Jenkins 2003; McArthur 1998; Melchers and Shaw 2003.) EIL, along with ‘English as a global language’ (e.g. Crystal 2003; Gnutzmann 1999), ‘English as a world language’ (e.g. Mair 2003) and ‘World English’ (Brutt-Griffler 2002) have for some time been used as general cover terms for uses of English spanning Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle contexts (Kachru 1992). The traditional meaning of EIL thus comprises uses of English within and across Kachru’s ‘Circles’, for intranational as well as international communication. However, when English is chosen as the means of communication among people from *different* first language backgrounds, across linguacultural boundaries, the preferred term is ‘English as a lingua franca’ (House 1999; Seidlhofer 2001), although the terms ‘English as a medium of intercultural communication’ (Meierkord 1996), and, in this more specific and more recent meaning, ‘English as an international language’ (Jenkins 2000), are also used.

Despite being welcomed by some and deplored by others, it cannot be denied that English functions as a global lingua franca. However, what has so far tended to be denied is that, as a consequence of its international use, English is being shaped at least as much by its non-native speakers as by its native speakers. This has led to a somewhat paradoxical situation: on the one hand, for the majority of its users, English is a foreign language, and the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any 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. Thus, in order for the

concept of ELF to gain acceptance alongside English as native language, there have been calls for the systematic study of the nature of ELF—what it looks and sounds like and how people actually use it and make it work—and a consideration of the implications for the teaching and learning of the language.

Empirical work on the linguistic description of ELF at a number of levels has in fact been under way for several years now. Research has been carried out at the level of phonology (Jenkins 2000), pragmatics (Meierkord 1996), and lexicogrammar (Seidlhofer 2004, which also offers an overview of descriptive work to date). ELF corpora are now also being compiled and analysed, such as the English as a lingua franca in Academic settings (ELFA) corpus (Mauranen 2003) and the general Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) (Seidlhofer 2004). While space prevents summarizing the findings of this research here, two illustrative examples can be mentioned. Thus, Jenkins (2000) found that being able to pronounce some sounds that are often regarded as ‘particularly English’ but also particularly difficult, namely the ‘th’ sounds /θ/ and /ð/ and the ‘dark l’ allophone [ɫ], is not necessary for international intelligibility through ELF. Similarly, analyses of ELF interactions captured in the VOICE corpus clearly show that although ELF speakers often do not use the third person singular present tense ‘-s’ marking in their verbs, this does not lead to any misunderstandings or communication problems.

This gradually accumulating body of work is leading to a better understanding of the nature of ELF, which in turn is a prerequisite for taking informed decisions, especially in language policy and language teaching (McKay 2002). Thus, the features of English which tend to be crucial for international intelligibility and therefore need to be taught for production and reception are being distinguished from the (‘non-native’) features that tend not to cause misunderstandings and thus do not need to constitute a focus for production teaching for those learners who intend to use English mainly in international settings. Acting on these insights can free up valuable teaching time for more general language awareness and communication strategies; these may have more ‘mileage’ for learners than striving for mastery of fine nuances of native-speaker language use that are communicatively redundant or even counter-productive in lingua franca settings, and which may anyway not be teachable in advance, but only learnable by subsequent experience of the language. It should be stressed, however, that linguistic descriptions alone cannot, of course, determine what needs to be taught and learnt for particular purposes and in particular settings—they provide necessary but not sufficient guidance for what will always be pedagogical decisions (Widdowson 2003).

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