

# English as a Lingua Franca: Towards Changing Practices

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The Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF), an initiative of a private university in Tokyo, was founded with serious consideration given to the pedagogical implications of the widespread use of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Such deliberation is not yet prevalent among academics and practitioners who should be most affected by ELF (Seidlhofer, 2011). Most ELF users have different first languages and do not usually interact with speakers of English as a first language, but rather with other ELF users. The transformation occurring in English as it is being used as a lingua franca need not be viewed as unusual but can be seen as part of the process of language evolution (Seidlhofer, 2011). In this paper we consider the implications of this process for teaching and learning in Japan, report on research in progress, and discuss how an ELF perspective may influence current pedagogical practices.

ELFセンター(English as a lingua franca:国際共通語として英語)は、ある東京の私立大学において、先駆的に設立された。背景には、国際共通語としての英語使用の普及があり、それを教育現場で実践的に取り入れることを目的としている。このような考え方は、ELFに最も影響があるべき研究者や教育者の間にまだ広まっていない(Seidlhofer, 2011)。ELF使用者のほとんどは、第一言語が異なり、英語を第一言語とする人との交流よりも他のELF使用者との接触の機会の方が多い。このようなELFとしての英語使用への移行は、特別なものと捉えられるというより、言語の進展と考えられる(Seidlhofer, 2011)。本稿では、日本での教育や学習におけるこの言語移行過程の在り方を探る。ELFが現在の教育実践の場でどのような影響を与えているのかについての中間報告である。

**I**N THE light of growing awareness of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in the field of ELT in Japan (Honna, 2012; Kato & Tanahashi, 2013; Suzuki, 2011; Yano, 2009), it is timely to consider how teaching practices might change. In this paper, we discuss the relevance of ELF globally and in

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Japan, give an account of how an ELF perspective may influence current pedagogical practices, and introduce our Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) program. Findings from internally conducted research on ELF-related student language awareness are also reported.

## Understanding ELF Globally

The migration of English around the world has its roots in the historical and political influence of colonization as reflected in Kachru's (1986) model of world Englishes with its inner, outer, and expanding concentric circles categorizing varieties of English in our contemporary world. Seidlhofer (2012) noted that by definition a lingua franca has no native speakers, but that all of its speakers have to learn to use it. In defining what ELF is, Firth (1996) characterizes it as a contact language between individuals who do not share either a common native language or a common national culture. A further evolution in the definition of ELF provided by Seidlhofer (2004) shows recognition of the use of ELF as a communicative tool between users of English from English native-speaker backgrounds and nonnative speakers of English in global business, politics, technology, and media discourse. Furthermore, Seidlhofer recognized that because of these interactions, ELF is being shaped by its users.

Research into ELF is not uncontentious and has been criticized for being conceptually and theoretically underdeveloped. Contrary to the claim by Baker and Jenkins (2015) of consensus over hypotheses concerning ELF as a use of English rather than a potential variety of English, Mortensen (2013) argued that ELF is "often implicitly conceptualized as a bounded object, a particular 'language system' with its own 'characteristic' lexicogrammatical and pragmatic features" (p. 35). Similarly, O'Regan (2014) commented that "despite repeated references to the observed hybridity, fluidity, and flexibility of the language forms being described, users of English(es) in multicultural settings are presented in 'ELF' literature as if they are speakers or users of a presupposed 'ELF' variety" (p. 129).

O'Regan further contended that in the field of ELF "poststructuralist perspectives, for example, on globalization and postcolonialism, are problematically meshed with positivist and empiricist perspectives on knowledge and truth, so that the result is a theoretical discourse and politics of knowledge which is in contradiction with itself" (p. 131).

Despite theoretical concerns, research into ELF has much to contribute to the study of language practices (Baird, 2013). English is a widely used language across international borders and is commonly incorporated into school curricula in many parts of the world (Yano, 2009). Seidlhofer (2005) noted that for the majority, English is a foreign language; among users of English the majority of communications do not involve any native speakers of English. Accordingly, in academic circles there have been calls for the systematic study of the nature of ELF to identify its implications for the teaching and learning of English (Seidlhofer, 2005).

The culturally diverse backgrounds of English-speaking communities are producing linguistic varieties that Burt (2005) described as having cross-cultural functional range. Seidlhofer (2011) also noted the functional aspects of ELF, explaining that it is defined by its function in intercultural and international communication rather than by its form with reference to native norms. Seidlhofer viewed nonnative Englishes in any local community as being functionally appropriate and different rather than deficient. In contrast, EFL teaching targets native English norms and attaches importance to cultural practices connected with native English varieties (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhofer, 2008). Seidlhofer (2011) observed that due to historically established influences, English as a native language (ENL) has been viewed as holding a position of legitimacy in conventional and academic contexts. However, Cogo and Jenkins (2010) contended that the evolution of English on a global scale has seen it reach the status of *de facto* lingua franca in the European Union. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick (2012) pointed to the phenomenon of English serving a major role as a lingua franca in the Associa-

tion of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3, which includes China, Japan, and South Korea. ELF can be expected to evolve further as a medium for intercultural and international communication among its users.

Each ELF user produces language that both reflects their linguistic experiences and suits the communicative moment, so as to realize an outcome that is mutually intelligible. Seidlhofer (2012) suggested that in many respects, ELF communication functions as does communication among speakers of any language, in the sense that meaning is negotiated and co-constructed, and communicative dysfunction occasionally occurs. ELF users, whether they are bilingual or multilingual, hold multiple linguistic identities as a consequence of situational communicative contexts.

## ELF in Japan

According to Llurda (2004), historical influences on Japanese ELT have led to a native speaker-dominated framework and a strong attachment to two traditionally highly regarded language varieties, identified by Suzuki (2011) as standard American and standard British English. As a consequence of this orientation towards language learning, the goal for Japanese learners is often to speak in the same way as an American or British speaker (Harris, 2012). However, there is a growing awareness within the Japanese ELT field that a native speaker model might often be unattainable, unrealistic, and undesirable (Honma, 2012). Harris (2012) suggested that ELF provides a framework that can be utilized to reflect critically upon ingrained approaches in Japanese ELT. In support of a potential reorientation, Kato and Tanahashi (2013) noted that Japanese English teachers are beginning to recognize the need to accept ELF. Furthermore, this view is supported at the national government level through the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT, 2011) as evidenced in its paper titled *Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication*, wherein MEXT promoted the

suitability of ELF in Japan in the introductory section of the paper subtitled “Society-Wide Efforts Toward Developing Japanese Proficiency in English as a Lingua Franca.” McKenzie (2013) argued that with the ever increasing exposure in Japan to different varieties of English, exemplified in part by the growing number of teachers and tertiary-level students from outer and expanding circles (Kachru, 1992), it may be presumptuous for education officials to restrict language models used in classrooms in Japan to just one or two of the inner-circle varieties. Instead, it may be more beneficial to familiarize students with the different global varieties and worthwhile to promote discussions among teachers and students of the kinds of English used around the world (McKenzie, 2013). Some educators in Japan have proposed target models of English—Japanese English models—which allow the expression of Japanese values rather than solely those of native speakers, while remaining internationally intelligible (Hino, 2009). Support found at the Japanese governmental level and in some academic circles in Japan demonstrates a growing awareness of ELF and its implications for English language education in Japan.

## Measures for Teachers to Consider

There is a growing body of research exploring ELF in different contexts using corpus linguistics, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis (Pullin Stark, 2009). In her study on the form and the communicative effectiveness of ELF usage in an international academic setting, Bjorkman (2013) identified a range of pedagogical implications for the classroom. First, teachers should consider the current needs and expectations of learners, moving beyond dated descriptions of English. Second, comprehensibility should be prioritized in language teaching, especially for those who will be using ELF. Third, learners should be exposed to a wide range of English and provided with a broader, more modern view of language. Fourth, modification of course materials is also important; there is a need for authentic recordings and realistic resources that include a variety of

accents, examples of negotiation of meaning, the use of communicative and pragmatic strategies, and the use of syntactic structures that increase explicitness in speaking. Fifth, testing criteria should include acceptance of different accents as long as intelligibility is achieved, acceptance of morphosyntactic features that show reduction of redundancy or create extra explicitness, and the acceptance of different types of repetition. In addition, teachers should use not only monologic speech testing but also dialogic speech testing, which assesses a learner's ability to negotiate meaning and to communicate effectively through the use of appropriate strategies. Bjorkman acknowledged the importance of accuracy in language production but suggested that communication is more important and that teachers would serve the interests of their students by raising their awareness of English usage in the world today and by providing them with useful and pertinent models as well as attainable goals.

In her study of possible sources of misunderstanding in ELF communication, Kaur (2011) found that ambiguity in speaker's utterances contributed to many instances of misunderstanding. Kaur (2014) advised teachers to help their students avert communication problems from the outset by teaching them to be more explicit. Students might be taught, for example, to replace general terms with more specific ones and replace pronouns with their referents. Kaur also suggested that teachers encourage students to pursue understanding through the use of communication strategies such as paraphrasing, reformulation, and repetition and to clarify their talk by utilizing keyword, combined, and repaired repetition.

Through studies of ELF usage, researchers have noted important implications to consider. They call for raising awareness among teachers and students of the reality of English language varieties and their use in the world today. In the following sections, we introduce our new program, which seeks to incorporate ELF-oriented practices.

## Local Context: A Campus-Wide ELF Program

The Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) was created to administer a campus-wide ELF program at a private university in Tokyo. The ELF program consists of academic and general English studies and focuses on five components, each weighted at 20%: reading; listening and speaking; process writing; TOEIC; and classwork, participation, and homework. In ELF classes, students are encouraged to use functionally appropriate English oriented towards effective communication and to develop their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills with a view to using English for international communication.

The hiring of teachers for the ELF program is based on two criteria: teaching experience and academic achievements. There is no requirement for our teachers to be native speakers of English. As a result, many of our teachers are multilingual and from various cultural backgrounds. CELF teachers build language awareness concepts into their lessons and are encouraged to participate in language awareness workshops and seminars. Teacher and student questionnaires are administered at the end of each semester to ascertain ELF-related beliefs and understandings. In what follows, we analyze data from questionnaires completed by our CELF students to understand their perceptions of ELF and the ELF program, which may help to provide direction in how to improve the language curriculum and refine pedagogical practices.

## ELF Student Perceptions

Results from the student questionnaire conducted in the spring semester of 2014 were collated via SurveyMonkey (2015). The response rate was 76% ( $N = 1,361$ ). The questionnaire was written in both English and Japanese, and any student comments included in this paper that were written in Japanese have been translated into English.

Feedback from students reveals some insight into their perceptions as ELF users. A large majority (88%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the practical focus of the classes. A further 42% (535) agreed that the ELF classes had enabled them to initiate conversations and continue them in English. Moreover, a deeper investigation of this specific group of 535 respondents revealed some interesting patterns when their answers to other questions relating to ELF were investigated. Of this group, 88% were in agreement or strong agreement that English is not only a language that native speakers use. Additionally, 85% agreed or strongly agreed that English is not only a language that belongs to native speakers and that it can be their language as well. Although a much more detailed study is required to provide a definitive conclusion, this result may suggest that some students in the ELF program feel emboldened to initiate and continue English conversations when they know that they can modify the language for their communicative purposes and when they identify with being speakers or users of English. Reflecting on the program, a student wrote, “I found I am now able to start conversations in English and this is not limited to situations when I’m talking to native speakers, in class or other specific contexts.” Another student wrote, “This class created many opportunities to speak for myself in English, and I think it has enabled me to communicate more aggressively than before.” A student also acknowledged a benefit to being able to modify the language, stating, “I learned that it is not only about solving a problem, I found I could make a sentence however I liked, and this enabled me to use English more enjoyably.”

A total of 80% of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were likely to use English in the future with nonnative speakers of English. After listening to a short lecture on language awareness in one of the ELF classes, student reflections in the class’ blog presented some examples of how student opinions may have developed. A student wrote,

I was surprised to hear that nonnative speakers were 85%. I thought that it was so many. English became the common language of the world, but almost all English speakers are not native speakers. It is wonder. Also, when we talk with people, the people are not native speakers in all probability, so I think we don’t have to study the pronunciation of native speakers.

Other student reflections in the aforementioned blogging task reinforce the notion that a flexible approach to the use of English could be encouraging students to communicate. A student reflected,

Almost all Japanese are worrying their English pronunciation, and grammar when they talk to foreigners. They do not understand English as a lingua franca. As we learned today, there are many [more] people who are not natives than natives. We do not have to speak like natives.

Another student wrote, “Japanese always feel excessive weak points about English, but we do not need such a thing anymore. There is no existence of an English barrier. All I need is enthusiasm about English.” These results illustrate a development in student perceptions as ELF users.

Although survey results generally appear to show that students have embraced ELF approaches, responses to a question about native-like English proficiency reveal what seems to be a contrast. Respondents either strongly agreed (38%) or agreed (40%) with the statement, “When learning English, I want to aim towards a native speaker model of English.” Such learner perceptions are likely to have been influenced by previous educational experiences (Suzuki, 2011) or by prevailing ideologies in Japan (Harris, 2012). There is a long-held assumption that native speaker competence should be a primary teaching and learning objective in English language education (McKay, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2011; Tanaka & Ogane, 2011; Widdowson, 2012a). However, as Widdowson (2012b) noted, non-native users of ELF can be, and often are, characterized as incompe-

tent when their performance does not conform to standard native speaker norms. It appears that further investigation and resources need to be dedicated to this issue through a careful and ongoing review of the learning support materials, including the reconfiguration of speaking assessments, used in the ELF program.

One important theme to emerge from student comments about the program was that they seek more opportunities for practical engagement using English. The following remarks provide a sample of the 52 responses classified as being related to this theme: (a) “I would like more opportunities to speak in English,” and (b) “I would like more opportunities to study abroad and to interact with native speakers.” During the spring semester, some classes were visited by students from the University of Guam. One Japanese student noted, “When the Guam students came to class, it was the best learning experience for me. I would like to have experiences like this at least once a week.” Because there are no exchange students studying at the university, opportunities for students to communicate with other English speakers outside class time tend to be limited. A student noted, “There are many teachers from other country in this university, so I want to talk [to] many teachers from many country.” This comment may demonstrate a need for the CELF to consider how to encourage more interaction between its diverse teaching faculty and its students. One existing example of such engagement is the ELF tutor service. The majority of the ELF teaching staff act for 2 hours a week as language tutors in addition to teaching classes. Students are able to make 15- or 30-minute reservations 4 days a week to meet an ELF tutor. It is expected that results from future student questionnaires will provide opportunities for comparative data analysis and greater clarity about student perceptions of the ELF program and ELF-related issues.

## Concluding Remarks

Questionnaire data have enabled us to ascertain that students appear to perceive that English is not only a language that native

speakers use, but also a language that they may construct or modify for communicative purposes. We have also learned that, paradoxically, students appear to want to aim towards a native speaker model of English. As the ELF program evolves it will be important to continue to determine and meet the needs of our teachers and students. Professional development opportunities for teachers are expected to help deepen ELF language awareness and provide improved coordination of pedagogical practice in our program. Access to engagement in the CELF Forum, the *Center for English as a Lingua Franca Journal*, workshops, and end-of-semester teacher questionnaires are intended to assist teachers in becoming increasingly well-informed, ELF-aware practitioners. A study of teacher perceptions in regard to ELF is now in progress along with a study on teaching practices for the effective use of ELF. Support for students will continue in the form of opportunities for tutor visits 5 days a week. Finally, a review of the five components of assessment is ongoing. A stronger alignment with ELF principles of listening and speaking assessment in particular is a key focus at this stage of the ELF program's development.

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