

ENL or ELF? Do learners know what they want or what is best for them?

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Abstract

Various estimates put the number of non-native speakers of English in the world at between three and four times the number of native speakers. Since many young people currently studying English will go on to use the language primarily as a lingua franca to communicate with other non-native speakers, questions are raised as to what kind of English should represent a realistic target for such learners and whether those youngsters are aware of what is in their best interests. This article considers the issue of learners' expectations and reports on a brief survey of the attitudes of Italian students of English at university level.

1. Biting the hand that has fed me?

Most speakers of English as a Native Language (ENL) live in countries with stable population levels and reliable statistics-gathering agencies. We therefore have a pretty good idea of how many speakers of ENL there are: "around 400 million" (Durham 2014:1) and not growing at an enormous rate. It is much more difficult to estimate the number of speakers of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), in part because many of them are in countries that do not have sophisticated means to collect such information from their rapidly growing populations. Furthermore, ELF users comprise both speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL) – in multilingual states where English is either an official language or has an institutional role, such as in Britain's former colonies – and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), in nations in which English has no institutional role but its widely acknowledged importance has generated considerable demand in state and/or private education. Another problem concerns the question of when a person possesses a sufficient level of competence to be considered an actual rather than a wannabe speaker of ELF. Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that estimates of the number of ELF users range from one to two billion, and the general consensus is that greater precision is neither possible nor particularly necessary. The key fact is that non-

native speakers (NNSs) greatly outnumber native speakers (NSs) of English and the gulf is widening all the time. While the percentage of the world's population who can speak English has grown enormously, Graddol (cited by Crystal 2003:69-79) notes that NSs represented more than 8% of the world's population in 1950, but that figure is projected to drop to below 5% by 2050.

The ELF-ENL imbalance forces us to face uncomfortable questions about the ownership of English since it is becoming increasingly untenable for the NS minority to dictate to the NNS majority regarding the norms of the language. Any living language evolves as neologisms are coined and both grammar and pronunciation are subject to modifications over time. For the specific case of English the key question centres on whether NNSs have the same right to introduce innovations that NSs enjoy. The conventional wisdom states that NSs propose innovations based on conscious flouting of outdated norms, while NNSs make mistakes based on ignorance of those norms, and, as Bamgbose (1998:2) notes, "If innovations are seen as errors, a non-native variety can never receive any recognition". Jennifer Jenkins (2007: 21) feels that to dismiss ELF innovations as errors is to miss the point: "The root of the problem is the difficulty many people have in grasping the point that errors in ELF are not determined by reference to ENL norms, and therefore that ELF proficiency should not be judged in relation to the English of its NSs". If ELF is seen as a legitimate variety of English in its own right, it follows that to try to deny ELF users the right to modify one of *their* languages is as futile as to claim that British English is "superior" to American English or *vice versa*.

So where does that leave those of us who work in the English-teaching business? Alan Maley (2010:35) is in no doubt that we should carry on teaching an appropriate NS model of English since "[ELF] is a fledgling ugly duckling with dubious public support among learners, teachers or sponsors". Maley is a highly respected teacher trainer and materials writer, and his words carry weight. If I choose to recognise the legitimacy of ELF, am I biting the hand of ENL that has fed me over more than three decades? After all, it was my status as a native speaker of English with a teaching certificate that enabled me to escape the grey skies of Britain and seek sunnier climes to teach English according to the norms of British English. More to the point perhaps, it could be argued that acceptance of ELF involves a lowering of standards and means, in effect, doing a disservice to learners who want and expect to have ENL as a target. Let us now consider some typical features of ELF in the light of the "errors vs innovations" debate.

2. Different English or just bad English?

There is no single ENL but a series of varieties (American, Australian etc.) and ELF is even less homogeneous. While the different varieties of ENL possess common elements that are well codified, the recurrent features in the various types of ELF have only been identified in recent years, and thanks mainly to the VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) Project. Before the Project began, its director described the chief aim as follows: “The objective will be to find out what (if anything), notwithstanding all the diversity, emerges as common features of EIL¹ use, irrespective of speakers’ first languages and level of proficiency” (Seidlhofer 2003:18). We will consider just three typical characteristics that have come to light:

- Converting uncountable nouns into countable nouns, e.g. We need to buy some new furnitures.
- Insertion of redundant prepositions, e.g. We’re going to discuss about the budget.
- Exaggerated explicitness, e.g. How long time have you known Bob?

Regarding the first feature, we should note that NSs have never hesitated to introduce this innovation when the need arose. Until recently the word *English* was an uncountable noun, but when linguists found this rule excessively restrictive they had no qualms about coining the expression “World Englishes”. Similarly, the plural *accommodations* has emerged as an acceptable variant. In an international test of English, however, *furnitures* would be penalised as an error, not accepted as an innovation.

The preposition *about* after the verb *discuss* is redundant according to the norms of ENL but not those of ELF. It is actually a perfectly rational regularisation of the grammar: since we talk, speak, chat and argue about, why not discuss about?

The explicitness in expressions like “how long time” and “green colour” is, once again, exaggerated according to the norms of ENL but to ELF users it is a strategy to reduce the risk of misinterpretation (“how long” refers to both temporal duration and physical length, while “green” can be a synonym for immature or environmental).

The VOICE Project is mainly concerned with lexicogrammatical characteristics; the phonological features of ELF have been investigated by Jenkins (2000), who distinguishes between “core” and “non-core” aspects of English pronunciation. Core features are those that are essential to intelligibility since to distort them would

impede comprehension, while non-core features are normally not vital to the interlocutor's understanding. At the suprasegmental level, the fact that many NNSs speak English with syllable-timed rhythm rather than the stress-timed rhythm used by most NSs is a non-core feature; it may create some strain for the listener but is unlikely to represent a significant impediment to comprehensibility. At the level of individual sounds, all but two English consonants are core features; the exceptions are /θ/ and /ð/, which many NNSs simply cannot pronounce and therefore replace with other consonants (as do a lot of Londoners who fink Cockney is their muvver tongue). In practically all cases the context enables the interlocutor to understand perfectly. We may smile at the Berlitz advertisement in which a German coastguard receives the emergency call "Mayday! We are sinking!"² and responds with the question "What are you sinking about?". That we understand the source of the humour immediately is proof that the context eliminates all risk of misinterpretation.

What these lexicogrammatical and phonological departures from ENL have in common is that they do not impair communication. But are they errors? No ELF user would ever correct any of these features produced by another ELF user, and it is unlikely that a native speaker would want to interrupt the flow of conversation except in the context of formal instruction or testing. Ay, there's the rub. If highly effective ELF users want an international certificate of their language skills, they have to take tests based on an ENL model (or in the case of IELTS, both American and British English with a mix of NS pronunciation models). The "errors vs innovations" issue is therefore perfectly clear: if the ELF features described above appeared in an international test of English, they would be penalised as errors because they do not comply with the norms of any of the main ENL models.

This brings us back to the "[...] ugly duckling with dubious public support among learners, teachers or sponsors", since Maley is not alone in claiming that ENL is what the customers want. The biggest market for English language instruction is, of course, China – Kirkpatrick (2006:78) notes that "recent estimates of the numbers of people learning English in China alone vary from between 200 and 350 million", which should be compared with the figure of 400 million for the number of NSs in the entire world – and China has recruited huge numbers of NS teachers from anglophone countries who teach ENL using materials designed by NSs. In a market that is tiny by comparison – that of Italian universities – general English is similarly taught by NS *lettori* or who use materials produced by the major ELT (English Language Teaching)

publishers. In both cases one wonders whether ENL is a realistic target, or even an appropriate goal given that the two sets of learners are more likely to use English to communicate with other NNSs in the Far East or Europe respectively than with NSs.

To investigate the views of Italian undergraduates, a brief questionnaire consisting of four closed-ended items was administered to 118 students of English at the University of Cagliari. The questionnaire was kept short to ensure rapid completion with minimum risk of respondents consulting one another. Although the questions and responses are reported here in English, the respondents received an Italian version of the questionnaire since some were not even at B1 level. The survey was anonymous and it was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers, but just honest answers. Responses to each of the four questions are shown in tables below.

3. The questionnaire

TABLE 1 – Q1: In your view the pronunciation models given in teaching materials used in English language courses in Italian universities should be:

	RESPONSES
A. models from all over the anglophone world	60/118
B. models from all over the anglophone world + some examples from non-native speakers	31/118
C. mostly Received Pronunciation (RP), the prestige pronunciation of the United Kingdom	25/118
D. mostly Standard American, the non-regional pronunciation of the United States	1/118
Invalid responses	1/118

Twenty-five respondents opted for RP, the model they were most familiar with thanks to their British *lettori* and the audio materials used during lessons, while slightly over half favoured greater diversity but only models from anglophone countries. This confirms the claim that learners want ENL. However, 26% said they would also appreciate some examples of NNS pronunciation and this is actually a high percentage given

that for many of them it was probably the first time they had considered the question. They had never been offered the prospect of exposure to greater phonological diversity because the great majority of ELT materials used in Europe only give NS pronunciation models and many offer little other than RP even though this prestige variety is spoken by a very small minority of British people. (Buckledee:2010). That 31 answered as they did actually represents a realistic approach from young people who know that their limited employment prospects in their native Sardinia are in the field of tourism, with a far higher likelihood of encountering English spoken with Russian or German accents than with RP.

TABLE 2 – Q2: Indicate the sentence that more accurately represents your personal goal.

	RESPONSES
A. It's no problem if I never lose my Italian accent when I speak English. It's part of my identity.	21/118
B. My dream is to be able to speak the language like a native speaker of English and I want to get as close as possible to that objective.	97/118

The responses to question 2 were much less realistic. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), the idea that there is a certain span of years during a child's early life during which s/he can pick up a second language as effortlessly and successfully as s/he had acquired the first, has been investigated from biological, cognitive and social/psychological points of view. Researchers who have found evidence for the existence of the CPH do not always agree as to the duration of that period, although many consider puberty as a likely cut-off point after which L2 acquisition becomes much more difficult. Some believe that for the acquisition of nativelike pronunciation, the critical period is much shorter. Long (1990:280), for instance, believes that to acquire a nativelike accent children need to begin learning the L2 no later than the age of six, while the critical age is twelve for other aspects. However, it is unlikely that many (if any) of the respondents in question had started acquiring English at a very early age, and the majority began learning English at middle school with a teacher who had an Italian accent. The word "dream" was chosen deliberately in option B; given these

learners' previous experience, nativelike pronunciation is unlikely to become anything other than a dream, and they would be well advised to accept that speaking L2 English with an L1 accent is normal for between one and two billion people.

TABLE 3 – Q3: Indicate the sentence that best represents your opinion.

	RESPONSES
A. I think it's best to have a teacher who is a native speaker of English.	71/118
B. It doesn't matter if the teacher is a native speaker or not as long as s/he does a good job.	34/118
C. I prefer to have an Italian teacher who understands the specific difficulties of Italian students.	11/118
Invalid responses	2/118

The responses to question 3 confirm the claim that most learners not only want ENL, but also prefer to be taught by a native speaker. NSs provide the pronunciation models learners want and are often seen as linguistic oracles whose judgements can never be questioned. In reality it is not difficult to cast doubt upon the alleged superiority of NSs who have strong regional accents and in many cases do not have a good track record of L2 learning themselves. The most vigorous attack on the “native speaker fallacy” can be found in Phillipson’s provocatively entitled *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992). Phillipson overstates his case, just as those who take the opposing view often have a somewhat touching faith in the infallibility of NS teachers. NSs have more reliable intuition regarding acceptable language use, while NNSs have great sensitivity to learners’ specific difficulties because they have been through them themselves, but the more important distinction to make is obviously between competent and less competent teachers regardless of their L1. 29% of the respondents appear to have grasped that point, which is again symptomatic of commendable independence of thought given that the belief that it is better whenever possible to have NS teachers is so deeply rooted.

TABLE 4 – Q4: Non-native speakers of English in the world greatly outnumber native speakers. In your opinion:

	RESPONSES
A. non-native speakers have a right to change the English language, for example by substituting other consonants for those written with “th”.	23/118
B. it will always be native speakers who decide what is acceptable or unacceptable in the English language.	95/118

For the respondents this questionnaire was almost certainly the first time they had been asked to consider the outrageous suggestion that anyone other than NSs should have a say in the codification of the English language, so it is small wonder that 80% could not envisage a situation in which NSs are no longer the custodians of a language used most of all by NNSs.

It could be argued that the learners in question were right to vote so overwhelmingly for ENL as a target since they were not students of engineering or medicine needing English as a tool to help them study their chosen discipline, but undergraduates enrolled on degree courses in modern languages, i.e. people who ought to set themselves ambitious linguistic goals. This argument can be countered if you have inside knowledge of the institutional circumstances: the level of competence required to complete the degree courses is not particularly high (the final-year exam in English is not even at full C1 level) and few graduates subsequently enrol on a higher level degree. Practical communicative competence rather than syntactic or phonological proximity to ENL represents a more realistic goal.

4. Are learners really given a choice?

An online advertisement for language schools in the UK³ claims that: “The UK is a world leader in English language teaching. Over 600,000 people every year come to the UK to learn the language in its natural home”. If we estimate the average sum a student spends on tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses

during a study-holiday, then multiply that figure by 600,000, it is not difficult to see how the marketing of English makes a vital contribution to the British economy, while other anglophone nations compete vigorously with the “natural home” of the language. For schools, publishers, examination boards and anyone directly or indirectly profiting from the ELT industry, there are sound financial reasons for maintaining the status quo. No one has any incentive to produce materials that promote the use of ELF or to design tests that accept ELF forms as valid alternatives, so the ENL hegemony goes unchallenged. In some cases we can talk of consciously applied gatekeeping practices to prevent contamination of pure ENL, such as the requirement in job advertisements that teachers be native speakers; in other cases it is simply a case of inertia on the part of institutions and individuals.

EFL users are sometimes better communicators than NSs, particularly when it comes to the cooperative strategy of “accommodation”, i.e. adapting one’s speed of delivery and lexicogrammatical range to take account of the interlocutor’s level of competence. Most of the verbal exchanges in English that take place in the world are conducted between NNSs with no NS present and accommodation comes naturally to people who are primarily concerned with language use that achieves its communicative goal. That goal may, however, contrast with what language testers think of as proficiency. Assessment tends to be based on the extent to which a candidate’s English converges on ENL norms, but McNamara (2000:85) raises an important question: “Is proficiency best understood as something that individuals carry around in their heads with them, or does it only exist in actual performances, which are never solo?” In actual performances ELF users routinely “dumb down” their English to help their interlocutors, but in a collaborative task in a test of spoken English a candidate would be penalised for using this admirably unselfish accommodation strategy. The gap between what actually happens and what decision-makers require is explored at university level in Jenkins’ most recent book (2014), a study of ELFA (Academic English as a Lingua Franca). She sees a contrast between the “grassroots interconnectedness” of the community of international students using English among themselves, and the “homogenizing from above” tendency of academic institutions in anglophone countries. Her typically forthright view is that those hoping to impose a single linguistic variety for all are somewhat divorced from reality: “[...] ELF represents how the majority of English speakers actually *use* the language in their daily lives (and ELFA how many use it in their academic lives), while a

homogenizing approach represents how the linguistic homogenizers *wish them* to use it” (2014:8, Jenkins’ italics).

The continued ENL hegemony despite what is happening in the real world of communication is partly due to the linguistic insecurity of NNSs, including those who teach English in state schools. Self-consciousness about having a patently non-native accent, for instance, may induce highly effective communicators to go along with “native speaker is best” presumption; this is a form of self-abasement since, as Lippi-Green (cited by Jenkins 2007:240) notes, “no one can make you feel inferior without your consent”, but it is indicative of the ELF majority’s psychological subordination to the ENL minority.

So where do we go from here if there is little real pressure either from above or below to change attitudes and develop new practices in language education? As the numerical gap between ELF and ENL speakers continues to widen inexorably over the coming years, the complacent maintenance of the status quo is going to look increasingly untenable. One possible scenario is that demographic factors will eventually lead us to a tipping point after which all attempts at “homogenizing from above” will become futile. The expression “tipping point” implies loss of control, even descent into chaos, and a sensible language policy should seek to prepare for a more orderly transition to a situation that accepts the polymorphous nature of English in the 21st century and evaluates communicative efficacy more highly than similarity to the norms of a minority ENL variety. Of course, there will always be learners who aspire to emulate speakers of RP or Standard American, but for the overwhelming majority such a goal is neither feasible nor particularly appropriate. Realism is the key: learners should be realistic about what they can hope to achieve and what they really need; the ENL gatekeepers must accept that change is going to come whether they like it or not. With realism and planning that change could see Maley’s “fledgling ugly duckling” transformed into the beautiful swan of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale.

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Sitology

VOICE Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English
<http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/> (last accessed: 21.09.2014)

¹ EIL (English as an International Language) has largely been replaced by ELF.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmOTpIVxji8>

³ http://www.studyabroadinternational.com/file/schools_UK.html