Current Conceptualization of English as Lingua Franca

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Abstract

English has emerged as the unprecedented Lingua Franca that has taken the world over by a storm. Sustaining in this multicultural, digital world is next to impossible without a good command over English. Hence, English as Lingua Franca (ELF) requires an in-depth scrutiny, both as a construct and as a reality. This paper analyses the use and employment of English for varied purposes and its implications and results. The native – non-native speaker dichotomy and ways to resolve the situation are brought into consideration. The emergence of a World Standard English is the latest phenomenon and endeavours to bring in the most apt answers to the questions raised by the English speakers all over the world.

Keywords: English, Lingua Franca, multiculturalism, native vis a vis non-native speakers, World Standard English

Introduction

The term Lingua Franca is commonly employed for a language that is used by speakers of different languages as a common means of communication. English as a lingua franca, however we define the term, has become a communicative tool of immense political, ideological, and economic power. (Kachru 910)

It can be defined in the following words:

A lingua franca, also known as a bridge language, common language, trade language or vehicular language, is a language or dialect systematically (as opposed to occasionally, or casually) used to make communication possible between persons not sharing a native language or dialect, in particular when it is a third language, distinct from both native languages. (Chirikba 2008)

Literature review

English is the most prominent lingua franca in today’s world. Globalization has brought the people of the world together and the universe is like an ageing orange that is shrinking at a very rapid rate. As people of varied nationalities, cultures, religions and languages come together, there is the most urgent need of a channel of communication that is intelligible to all. And here comes in the English language that is spoken and understood all over the world irrespective of all factors.

While lingua francas have been used for centuries, what makes English as Lingua Franca (ELF) a novel phenomenon is the extent to which it is used — both functionally and geographically. It has crossed all boundaries and become a global matter. It is the language of international relations, the language of science, the language of international business, the language of tourism, the language of popular culture. Hence, it represents enormous functional flexibility. An essential reason for its expansion is the role of non-native speakers of English and their ready acceptance of the language. In fact, the overall majority of English speakers worldwide are non-native speakers, and their number is growing rapidly. Firth aptly comments:

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 240).

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This phenomenon has given rise to a variety of ‘Englishes’. Experts and teachers of English language who appreciate this linguistic diversity accept the variation in accent, rhythm and pronunciation; and focus on intelligibility and conversation flow. And hence, English as Lingua Franca focuses more on function than on form. Here, communicative efficiency i.e. getting the message across to the audience is a priority rather than correctness. Consequently, ELF interactions are very hybrid.

Within the WE paradigm, a strongly argued new role for English is that of a reconfigurer of multiple cultures and identities, leading to world Englishes, each of which potentially carries an emergent status as a global language (Pakir 1997). Endeavours have been made to study English as a Lingua Franca in the fields of phonology ((Jenkins 2000), pragmatics (Meierkord 1996), and lexicogrammar (Seidlhofer 2004). Jenkins (2000) has pointed out that being able to pronounce some sounds that are often regarded as ‘particularly English’ but also particularly difficult, namely the ‘th’ sounds /u/ and /D/ and the ‘dark l’ allophone [l], is not necessary for international intelligibility through ELF.

The question now raised is that does this entire occurrence make English culture free? The most appropriate response to this could be that the interactants’ cultural and linguistic performances do influence language. Hence, English would surely be a hotchpotch of a myriad cultures. Therefore, English could be termed ‘multi-cultural’, rather than ‘acultural’ or ‘culture-free’.

The concept of English as Lingua Franca (ELF) applies in two fields:

SLA (Second Language Acquisition)
ELT (English Language Teaching)

All non-native speakers of English use English as a Second Language for various purposes. And ELT is applied by the teachers and professionals who use English for work. This is:

the variety of the English language which is normally employed in writing and normally spoken by ‘educated’ speakers of the language.
It is also, of course [my italics], the variety of English that students as Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) are taught when receiving formal instruction. (Trudgill & Hannah)

All these people contribute to multi-lingualism and hybridity. Currently, non-nativeness is being seen as an advantage and a source of confidence rather than as insecurity. The attitude is towards getting rid of native - non-native dichotomy and seeing English as a language that belongs to all national, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

ELF manifests itself primarily in spoken language. Therefore, accent is an inevitable aspect of this diversity. The word ‘accent’ means ‘a loose bundle of prosodic and segmental features’. Prosodic features include intonation, pitch, stress and tempo; and segmental features consist of the phonological structures of vowels and consonants. But simply put, accent is a way of speaking, and every single speaker of language has it.

Accent is the prime feature that very categorically differentiates the native from the non-native speaker. Children are born with the inherent ability to produce all sets of sounds but as they grow up, they restrict themselves to the ones that they hear and come across most frequently. As a result, there is a sensitive period in learning the second language sounds. In order to attain a native-like accent, the exposure to those sounds has to commence early, often before the age of six. Thus, it is very difficult for adult learners to acquire the original accent of the second language.

The ELF ideology puts the accented speech into a proper and broad perspective. It indicates that accent can be reduced, but not completely removed. Hence, there is no sense in striving for a perfect accent. A native like accent is not the focal point in ELF communications, but intelligibility is. Consequently, the whole issue of native vis a vis non-native English is irrelevant. The person should be a competent and fluent speaker of World Standard English (WSE). And a good teacher of English should be familiar with the learners’ culture and accent and should guide them accordingly.

Widdowson rightly points out 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).

Conclusion

English today has two functions mainly. It is a means of communication for its native speakers within a core English speaking country. And it is the means of international and intercultural communication as the ‘Lingua Franca’. The phenom-
Phenomenon of the rise of a World Standard English (WSE) has its base in internationally accepted lexis and commonly followed grammatical rules. Pronunciation, to a smaller or even larger extent shall always remain variable, but it has to be comprehensible.

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