

English as a Lingua Franca Approach: Implications and Limitations in Saudi English as a Foreign Language Classrooms

Samar Alharbi

School of Modern Languages & Linguistics, Southampton University
Southampton, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

English language considers a global language spoken by a majority of people around the world. It is a language used mainly for communication, trades and study purposes. This widespread of English language being widely spoken lead to different varieties of English as a lingua franca (ELF) means that non native speakers of English still be able to communicate with each other. Using ELF as a legitimate variety of English in language classrooms is questioned by some researchers. This paper will provide an overview of the concept of ELF. It will also present implications and limitations of using ELF in Saudi English as foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca, English as a Foreign Language, World Englishes.

INTRODUCTION

The current global proliferation of the English language is evident from the number of people who use it. English is a communication tool used around the world. Kachru (1992) suggested that English-speaking countries can be divided into three concentric circles based on how English is spoken in each of them. The inner circle contains countries where English is the population's first language (L1). The next circle, known as the outer circle, refers to countries where English is a second language but is still regarded as having an important role (for example, with a degree of official status). The last circle, the expanding circle, encompasses nations where the population acknowledges the importance of English as a foreign language (EFL). Crystal (2003) used these circles to suggest that approximately 1.5 billion people can communicate in English at a useful level.

According to Kachru and Nelson (1996), English is a language that is spoken all over the world. The language's popularity is due to the many purposes it serves. This wide use of English in many regions might be a way to allow for the establishment of positive relationships between countries both locally and globally. It has also had possible serious consequences of language, philosophy, sociocultural, governance and pedagogy and because of this, numerous varieties of English have emerged. The way that English has expanded in the outer circle countries is most apparent, and it has resulted in the development of numerous varieties of English, with each one linked to the individual cultures and local practices of that region. These varieties are associated with different regions where the practical use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) means that people for whom English is a second language (and who do not share the same L1) are still able to communicate with each other (Seidlhofer, 2011). This phenomenon is built on the principle of 'tolerance for diversity' (Seidlhofer, 2006, p. 44). Consequently, it is conceivable

that English may be used globally as an international language that is naturally evolved and contemporised by ELF speakers and has not been instituted upon them by people who are native speakers (NSs) of English themselves (Jenkins, 2006).

There are differences between the definitions of ELF and EFL. ELF comprises part of the world Englishes and positively acknowledges differences from the inner circle norm, whereas EFL is a part of modern foreign languages, where differences from the inner circle standard are classified as mistakes (Seidlhofer, 2004). ELF research has revealed that this for the last twenty years, it has been a growing field of research apart from a large number of publications bringing up a number of small and larger ELF corporations (Archibald, Cogo, & Jenkins, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, in academic books and at international conferences, researchers have discussed the important role of ELF in the world of English language teaching and the pedagogical implications of using it in education. Some of these areas of ELF include lexical words, pronunciation, pragmatics and grammar (Seidlhofer, 2004; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006). Jenkins (2006, p. 173) noted that the awareness of the essential role of ELF 'fits well with another area of broad agreement among the World Education Services (WES) and ELF researchers: the need for a pluricentric rather than monocentric approach to the teaching and use of English'. Consequently, this allows non-native speakers (NNSs) of English the chance to identify their close sociolinguistic situation instead of emphasising the gap between themselves and NSs.

The present great influence of the English language means that there is unprecedented activity around the globe regarding the teaching of English. Currently, there are more EFL learners than NSs, and Saudi Arabia is no exception. The extensive use of English to communicate in the countries in the expanding circle has allowed relationships to develop between a range of communities, which in turn has led to the phenomenon of ELF. This enables speakers to 'cooperate and use various strategies that ensure communicative success' (Cogo, 2009; 2010 cited in Cogo, Archibald, & Jenkins, 2011, p. 2). During the last two decades, a volume of ELF research has been conducted to establish the understanding of possible changes in mutual comprehension, internationalism and the view of accommodation for academic and social interactions in EFL settings. The aim of this essay is to explore the ELF approach to teaching English to EFL learners. This paper highlights the implications and limitations of teaching and learning ELF in Saudi Arabian higher education. This essay can pave the way to better learning by increasing teachers' and students' awareness of using ELF in the classroom.

UNDERSTANDING ELF CONCEPTS

Historically, the communicative language teaching approach has been used to motivate learners to communicate with other speakers, particularly NSs. This approach has emphasised the sociocultural and linguistic knowledge needed for this interaction. Most learners use their English skills to interact with other EFL speakers. There are more NNSs than NSs in the world; consequently, English is the chosen means of communication in most interactions amongst NNSs with different L1s (Graddol, 2006). House (2002) agreed that ELF is employed as a common means of communication in communities where a number of different languages are spoken. ELF is an example of a world language that is utilised by individuals in any situation where the speakers possess varying linguistic backgrounds.

Highlighting the use of English to allow different communities to communicate, Firth (1996, p. 240) described ELF as 'a contact language between persons who neither share a common native tongue nor a common national culture and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication'. The lack of common knowledge and background among EFL speakers of different cultural and linguistic resources can lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication. However, Cogo and Dewey (2012, p. 4) suggested that ELF speakers 'routinely exploit the language to fit the immediate communicative environment, adapting and blending English innovatively and resourcefully in order to achieve a jointly constructed means of conveying and interpreting meaning'.

According to Jenkins (2009), a lingua franca is a language used by speakers of different linguistic backgrounds. This indicates that ELF is a language used by NNSs for the purpose of communication. Although NSs are included in this communication, NNSs do not use NS varieties as a model for what is correct or incorrect. In the same vein, House (1999, p. 74) defined ELF interactions as 'interactions between members of two or more different linguistic cultures in English'.

ELF communication is viewed in a wider perspective by most ELF researchers. They understand that speakers from the three circles are also able to take part in intercultural communication. As a consequence, ELF speakers will have different standards for the command of English, which creates the circumstance of pragmatic fluency. This concept was expanded by House (2002, pp.262-263) as follows:

1. The employment of suitable strategies for discourse.
2. The ability to commence and switch the subject of the conversation.
3. The ability to 'carry weight' in substantive 'turn-talking'.
4. The ability to show appropriate taking-up and response behaviour, by latching-on and overlapping.
5. The appropriate rate of speech, types of filled and unfilled pauses, frequency and function of repairs.

Jenkins (2009) further amplified this definition of ELF as the accepted language for use by individuals with differing cultural and language origins.

STATUS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is located in the expanding ring of Kachru's concentric circle concept. In the kingdom, English is considered a foreign rather than a second language. Graddol (2006) considered English to be the preferred language in academic circles. This was endorsed by Mauranen (2007), who observed that there has been an unparalleled increase in academic university programmes adopting English in non-native English-speaking countries. This trend has led to English becoming the global lingua franca. A product of this development has been that English has become the sole language of knowledge for many scientific and technical subjects worldwide.

This expansion has resulted in the global development of English being used in correspondence between different nationalities. This is apparent in Saudi Arabia, where to accommodate this trend, English has become of increasing importance among NNSs. There is intense competition among students wishing to study abroad and seeking scholarships, which ultimately will

improve their chances of employment. English as a medium of instruction used in most Saudi higher education has intensified to meet this requirement. This is exemplified by the Preparatory Year Programme introduced at University in Saudi Arabia, which focuses on providing additional English language instruction where English is used as a means for explaining a variety of courses.

To quote Larsen-Freeman (2001, p. 167), 'no one outside of the local educational context can really answer the question of which English should be taught in a particular place at a particular time'. The dominance of English is increasingly evident in that it is now the language of many Bachelor of Arts programmes in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Alasmari and Khan (2014) noted that competency in the language has become a precondition for entering professions such as medicine and some business sectors as well as for studying at higher degree levels.

The English language is well-grounded in Saudi Arabia, especially in the education system, where it is commonly used for international communication and is taught as a foreign language. In the kingdom, English has notable presence, and EFL is used as the first choice in many disciplines such as communication, tourism, diplomacy and trade. The exponential growth of the country has led to the employment of many doctors, teachers and technicians who are long-term residents but do not speak Arabic as their L1. The mix of nationalities working in medicine and hospitals, education and business include Asians, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka, which has necessitated Saudi Arabians being able to communicate with NNSs of English (Alshumaimeri, 1999).

As stated, proficiency in English is a prerequisite for entrance and advancement in professions such as dentistry and medicine and for those wishing to study for advanced academic qualifications. This has led to the anomalous situation whereby native students, together with most foreign teachers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sudan, endeavour to copy British or American accents, which is what they consider to be Standard English (as they have no knowledge of World Englishes). This situation is further complicated as Saudi students consider Standard English to be the acceptable standard to strive for and, consequently, consider the English of foreign teachers to be deficient or fall short of a NS's skills, which inevitably leads to an undermining of confidence.

Alshumaimeri (1999) maintained that British and American English are the constraints that control the teaching of EFL at the academic university level in Saudi Arabia. At academic institutions, schools and universities, the EFL programme is highly stereotyped. EFL teachers are required to adapt teaching strategies for classroom use and evaluation and are tasked with adhering to a strictly formulated curriculum. There is an adoption of the inculcation of the educational methodologies of students and scholars who have studied in the US or European countries as part of the Saudi University Scholarship Program.

As a consequence, within Saudi academia, there is almost no awareness of the many forms of English, including Filipino, Malaysian, Indian and Singaporean. This gives very little opportunity for students to become proficient in English and gives rise to the disapproval of the manner in which local people, including teachers and students, use the language. Bolton (2012, p. 6) stated that this negative impact engenders a 'culture of complaint' instead of one of confidence. It needs to be understood that English has a large number of uses and users, and

according to Kachru and Nelson (1996), it is crucial that teaching professionals accept this situation. This paper focuses on the implications of using ELF as a method of classroom teaching and identifies the possible limitations of its use.

IMPLICATION OF ELF IN SAUDI EFL

It is acknowledged that British and American Englishes are the basis for English language teaching in Saudi Arabia, to the extent that no consideration or encouragement is given to any other form. Learning documents emphasise the Saudis' reliance upon British and American Englishes. Mahboob and Elyas (2014) indicated the use of these norms in Saudi Arabia. As a country categorised in the expanding circle of Kachru's concept, this results in the situation where any use of English that differs from the varieties employed in the inner circle are considered to be errors rather than local adaptations. This indicates a refusal to acknowledge local and regional varieties of English in the expanding circle countries; rather, discrepancies between the language used in the inner and expanding circles are judged to be mistakes (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

This is in contrast to the opinion of Jenkins (2006), who stated that following the standardised norm is pointless, and users in the outer and expanding circles should be free to evolve their own adaptations. From this reasoning, it can be derived that Saudi English speakers should not be curtailed into speaking and using English in the same way as monolingual NSs, and the range of varieties of English used by Saudi EFL students should be accepted. Limited research has been conducted on this topic; however, a study by Mahboob and Elyas (2014) focused on the variety of English employed in Saudi Arabia by examining secondary school textbooks. Their findings resulted in uncovering grammatical features that did not conform to the norms of Standard English. Analysis of these anomalies by Saudi experts led to the deduction that these were not errors as such but what could be termed as rule-governed insertions of an emerging Saudi English. This indicated that Saudi Arabia should generate its own local identity, best referred to as Saudi English, rather than follow a Westernised path.

In recent years, the most notable trend has been the spread of English use (defined by the number of speakers) in the countries in the expanding circle (Jenkins, 2009). Most of these nations consider English to be a foreign language, and it is employed as a means of communication with inner circle countries, thus relying on inner circle norms.

However, some countries in the expanding circle have a different purpose for their use of English. They use English not because they wish to communicate with NSs, but because they wish to communicate with speakers whose L1 is not English, but for whom English is the common link between them. This has led to the additional realisation that English based on the inner circle norms is no longer adequate for this purpose. Jenkins (2009) observed that expanding circle speakers need to extend their international communication needs. This means that learners should use a different variety of English or lingua franca from that of inner circle speakers so that they can communicate effectively with speakers from different linguistic backgrounds.

According to Seidlhofer (2005, p.339), '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'. Additionally, Seidlhofer (2011, p. 2) stated that 'any user of English, be they from an

L1 English country, a post-colonial English country, or a country where English is neither L1 nor official language, can be a user of ELF'. It can be asserted that NNSs are the most common users of ELF communications. Those who do not share a common native language or culture are generally speakers from expanding circle countries who choose English as their preferred foreign language.

The traditional method of English language learning in expanding circle countries is EFL which is not the official language. Jenkins (2009) identified ELF as being positive, whereby speakers are able to utilise their multilingual identities, whereas EFL considers using English as a lingua franca is to be a negative aspect employed as a means of overcoming a problem arising from a lack of English knowledge.

The ELF approach for English learners in the expanding circle countries is more advantageous to those employing its features compared to the EFL approach. They have the advantage of being able to incorporate adjustments in their communication with others who possess different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This accommodating strategy, projecting the identity and solidarity of the speaker, allows them to adapt their language to conform to that of those with whom they are conversing to engender geniality and understanding (Jenkins, 2002).

In ELF speech, code-switching is a method whereby speakers revert to their own language in order to express solidarity and give evidence of their multilingual skills. ELF speakers can revert to code-switching to overcome communication difficulties, alternating to their L1 vocabulary. Inevitably, if used randomly, this can lead to communication failure. Nevertheless, this could cause confusion and misunderstanding in the dialogue should the other parties involved have no knowledge of the speaker's L1 or if the speaker chooses not to better explain the terminology they have used.

International language that does not follow NS norms leads to teacher awareness in a climate where there is growing multiculturalism in Saudi society and more demand for English-medium teaching. Teachers and students in the expanding circle countries will benefit from lingua franca teaching, as will those who must communicate with individuals from different cultures who speak a different mother tongue.

Lingua franca is beneficial in that it instils in users the belief that their own language can be used for the purpose of voicing their thoughts about their identities and cultures. They are not subjected to the idea the language they are learning is not their own (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Furthermore, Kirkpatrick (2006) observed that the use of lingua franca leads to learning more about other cultures where English might be used. This is an important aspect of the study, as a wider understanding of other cultures will allow students to expand their accommodation skills.

The need for communication between non-native English speakers has led to the development of ELF. However, supporters of the traditional EFL approach have a negative attitude toward the ELF approach. It has been hypothesised that 'in the near future, those who occupy the top of the English language hierarchy will no longer be native speakers of English, but bilingual speakers of English who have the skills to function comfortably in multilingual communication'

(Jenkins, 2009). This situation will be the result of NNSs feeling less constrained in how they employ English in comparison to NSs, who are likely to be more influenced by the rules of the language and thereby more assertive during multilingual communication.

LIMITATIONS OF USING ELF

There is a distinct disadvantage for learners in ELF classes, which is that they are learning to develop their language skills in the midst of others from their own country and with the same L1. As observed by Jenkins (2002), this curtails the opportunity for students to practice and increase their accommodation skills. There will be no opportunity to communicate with other NNSs, even though they gain a certain amount of knowledge of those other cultures. Depending on the reason for learning English, the lingua franca model may not be the best choice. It is not the right medium if the intention is to teach English or to communicate with NSs. but, as Kirkpatrick (2006) observed, it allows some freedom for teachers and students. According to Seidlhofer (2005), evaluating the differing standards of ELF for linguistic description does not allow the creation of clear teaching decisions. Furthermore, the NS model is not appropriate for students and teachers, as they may find it challenging to come to terms with such a model, and in addition, it runs the risk of not being culturally relevant. Without the pressure to achieve the same level of competence as with standard English, there is greater opportunity for students to concentrate on communication rather than achieving standardised norms. The concept of ELF is intended for individuals in the expanding circle countries to use to promote their identities. It is conceivable that this method could lead to either wider generalisation or possibly greater variance, which could create difficulties applying it for practical application in the classroom.

However, in the English language classroom, ELF could be possible and limited in teaching the productive skill of speaking only. When English language learners aim to achieve native speakers' models, this goal might establish conflict and struggle between native and non-native speakers when they were in contact. In other terms, non-native speakers may struggle to achieve the expectations of native speakers to suit their linguistic ability. Therefore, EFL learners are reluctant to speak freely and spontaneously, which is one of the main objectives of speaking classrooms. Pointing out errors in students' oral production may hinder their willingness to talk. Teachers should, therefore, raise awareness among students of the importance of using English as a lingua France for effective accommodation and communication, rather than relying on the standard English model. As Saudi Arabia's English Language Policy prioritises accuracy over fluency and descriptive over imperative knowledge, many students can gain their qualifications without being able to use the language they are learning effectively.

However, when it comes to teaching other language skills such as writing and reading, Standard English British or American are preferable varieties for both teachers and learners. As pointed out earlier, most learners in higher education learn English for specific goals such as pursuing their studying or get a job. Therefore, ELF is not practical nor applicable in teaching these skills in the Saudi context as the main requirements are to read standard English academic texts and write formally. Many teachers have experienced such a scenario where their students tend to and show their desire to sound like native when they practice reading and writing skills. On the other hand, in speaking activities, students get frustrated when their teachers correct their errors and sometimes, they lose fluency in their speaking. As a result, legitimizing and using different varieties of English by teachers and students in speaking classroom could enhance the

students' oral fluency and later develop the accuracy when the anxiety level is low. Therefore, English language teachers should focus and do a lot of practices in pronunciation aspects that are important for international communication. The majority of EFL learners cannot follow native speakers' norms as their accent and pronunciation are culturally oriented, which affected by their identity and personality. Most non- native teachers believe that 'native speaker competence is the benchmark of perfection and therefore it is axiomatic that this should be the long- term goal.' (Timmis, 2002.p.243) Students need to think about the context in which they are going to use English which is the primary factor for their choice of English. However, the use of ELF model in English language classrooms is a long process. It could not happen soon as it needs careful consideration from policymaker in the education system before it is accepted.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the use of English in the world today and deduced that Saudi Arabia, as a country in the expanding circle, can embrace ELF and accept its usage, especially in education. It is recommended that ELF be accepted in an objective manner, allowing the introduction of other varieties of English. In Saudi Arabia, ELF can be taught in classrooms by teachers from various cultural backgrounds. The exponential development of world communications through the Internet, the media, migration and overseas travel has expanded the linguistic and English verities around the world. Bolton (2012) observed that there is a growing diversity in the linguistic scope of young learners.

One dynamic area of research into the English language deals with the events within particular linguistic communities. This is where English is used alongside other international, national, regional and local languages. This has led to an unclear delineation between the countries in the outer and expanding circles, primarily for reasons of social and historical blending. The process of English negotiation will continue, with speakers from countries in the outer and expanding circles negotiating the English language. This will lead to the ongoing development of the language in the future. The great number of English uses and approaches signifies the current worldwide importance of the language.

References

- Alasmari, A. M., & Khan, S. R. (2014). World Englishes in the EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia. *Arab World English Journal*, 5, 316–325.
- Alshumaimeri, Y. A. N. (1999). *Saudi students' perceptions of their textbook: English for Saudi Arabia, (EFSA), secondary year one* (Unpublished master dissertation). University of Leeds, Leeds.
- Archibald, A., Cogo, A., & Jenkins, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Latest trends in ELF research*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bolton K. (2012). World Englishes and linguistics landscape. *World Englishes*, 31(1), 30–33.
- Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2012). *Analysing English as a lingua franca: A corpus-driven investigation*. London, England: Continuum.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Firth, A. (1996). The discursive accomplishment of normality: On 'lingua franca' English and conversation analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26, 237–260.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English next*. Plymouth, England: British Council.

- House, J. (1999). Misunderstanding in intercultural communication: Interactions in English as a lingua franca and the myth of mutual intelligibility. In C. Gnutzmann (Ed.), *Teaching and learning English as a global language* (pp. 73–89). Tübingen, Germany: Stauffenburg.
- House, J. (2002). Communicating in English as a lingua franca. In S. Foster-Cohen (Ed.), *EUROSLA Yearbook 2* (pp. 243–261). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Benjamins.
- Jenkins, J. (2002). A sociolinguistically based, empirically researched pronunciation syllabus for English as an international language. *Applied Linguistics*, 23(1), 83–103.
- Jenkins, J. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching world Englishes and English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 168–180.
- Jenkins, J. (2009). *English as a lingua franca: Interpretations and attitudes*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). Models for non-native Englishes. *Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*, 2, 48–74.
- Kachru, B., & Nelson, C. (1996). World Englishes. In S. McKay, & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language teaching* (pp. 71–102). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2006). Which model of English: Native-speaker, nativized or lingua franca? In R. Rubdi, & M. Saraceni (Eds.), *English in the world: Global rules, global roles* (pp. 71–84). London, England: Continuum.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2001). Individual cognitive/affective learner contributions and differential success in second language acquisition. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning* (pp. 12–24). London, England: Longman.
- Mahboob, A., & Elyas, T. (2014). English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *World Englishes*, 33, 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12073>
- Mauranen, A. (2007). Hybrid voices: English as the lingua franca of academics. In K. Flottum, T. Dahl, & T. Kinn (Eds.), *Language and discipline perspectives on academic discourse* (pp. 243–259). Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2004). Research perspectives on teaching English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 209–239.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2005). English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal*, 59, 339–340.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2006). English as a lingua franca in the expanding circle: What it isn't. In R. Rudby, & M. Saraceni (Eds.), *English in the world* (pp. 40–50). London, England: Continuum.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2011). *Understanding English as a lingua franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seidlhofer, B., Breiteneder A., & Pitzl, M. (2006). English as a lingua franca in Europe. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 1–34.
- Timmis, I. (2002). Native-speaker norms and International English: a classroom view. *ELT journal*, 56(3), 240–249.