



Teaching ELF as a motivation source for learners: An action research study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore if teaching ELF would help students change their beliefs about language and language learning. Firstly, students were interviewed in person, and they were found to have a lack of motivation and negative attitudes towards learning English with standard norms. It was also noticed that the students are not familiar with varieties of English spoken worldwide. Then, according to students' responses, a two-week ELF-based teaching was planned and applied based on Jenkins' and Seidlhoffer's suggestions on ELF core and teaching. The lessons were based on intelligibility of natural spontaneous communication, and students were guaranteed not to be judged by their mistakes. Hence, friendly classroom atmosphere was sustained utmost for two weeks. At the end of two-week period, the students were interviewed once more to get insight into their beliefs about language learning. The results revealed that students' perception changed to some extent, and they were observed to develop more affirmative attitudes towards English language learning. It was found that ELF teaching can be used as a starting point to engage students to learn a language by abandoning Standard English norms imposed by course books and teachers.

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Keywords: ELF; teaching ELF; learner attitude; motivation

1. Introduction

It is a fact that most students learning English at schools in Turkey will use English for communicative purposes, and their interlocutors will mostly be non-native speakers (NNSs) from all around the world. It implies that they need to learn English as a lingua franca to be able to communicate with their interlocutors whether they are native or non-native speakers, the latter are majority though. As cited in Leshem and Markovits (2013, p.212), "Beneke (1991) estimates that about 80 percent of verbal exchanges in which English is used as a second or foreign language do not involve any native speakers of English".

On the one hand, the role of English as a lingua franca has affected English language teaching programs. According to Alptekin, educators do not believe that the common idea of learning English only to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language is still valid. Alptekin adds that

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“the native speaker-based notion of communicative competence is described as utopian, unrealistic, and constraining” (Alptekin, 2005: 5-11). Parallel to Alptekin’s idea, Ur claims that most of the teachers teaching English in non-English speaking countries are not native speakers, so students do not have native role models, and under these conditions, targeting native-like competence is utopian for learners (Ur, 2010: 27).

On the other hand, when it comes to teaching, some common learner usages like “he drink or I was go” are still discussed. It is a big question whether teachers should accept these expressions believing that the student is able to express himself or they should correct them. Ur believes that “teachers, as a matter of professional ethics, are committed to teaching their students correct and acceptable English forms as used by [native] speakers” (Ur, 2010: 88). Moreover, learners expect to be taught such forms, and to be corrected if they get wrong. It is evident that teaching English as a lingua Franca has a long way to go.

1.1. Review of Literature

1.1.1. Description of ELF

Lingua Franca means “any lingual medium of communication between people of different mother tongue, for whom it is a second language” (Samarin, 1987: 371). This definition shows that native speakers are excluded from the definition of English as lingua franca. Firth and House support this definition, too. According to Firth, lingua franca 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). House states that “ELF interactions are defined as interactions between members of two or more different lingua culture in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue” (House, 1999, 73–89). However, the definition might be broadened to include native English speakers. It means that ELF communication may also take place between native speakers and nonnative speakers. It should be kept in mind that ELF interaction may include interlocutors from inner and outer circles, and take place in these contexts, too. Therefore, it is better to use ELF as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages, for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhoffer, 2011: 7). Recently, the number of nonnative speakers of English has outnumbered total native speakers of English. Although this case has aroused the issue of language ownership, ELF is accepted to meet the communicative needs of majority of English users.

1.1.2. ELF basics

ELF context may include both native and nonnative speakers, and it requires intercultural communication rather than over-deference to native speaker norms. Hence, the main concern of ELF context is to use the language and convey the intended messages effectively to someone whose first language is different. From this perspective, the most important issue in ELF is to have equal communicative rights for all the users regardless of their mother tongue or cultural background (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhoffer, 2008: 25-36). As Gnutzmann states, English is not the property of its native speakers when it is used as a lingua franca (Gnutzmann, 2000: 356-359). According to Widdowson, no nation has the right to intervene or pass judgement due to the fact that English is the international language. In fact, native speaker norms may constitute a restraint on themselves in international context, because native speakers’ use of idiomatic phrases may cause deficiency in communication when non-natives cannot sort out the intended messages. Moreover, when the number of nonnative speakers is taken into consideration, it is more feasible to develop ELF’s own norms without conformity with the established native speaker norms (Widdowson, 1994: 377-389).

1.1.3. ELF core

Jenkins suggested a list of items which are required for nonnative speakers to perform intelligible communication (Jenkins, 2000: 27-80). Actually, the main purpose was to identify two sets of features:

Steps which obstacle effective communication and must be disregarded by the teachers: For instance, some phonemes which are specific to English language and difficult to utter should not be taken into consideration when the main purpose is communication, as they are not necessary for international intelligibility. Therefore, according to Jenkins, ELF speakers can disregard native norms without any concern about the intelligibility for the listeners at least in these areas (Jenkins, 2000: 27-80):

- *Weak forms* are excluded from the core since they are not necessary for the intelligibility of the conversation, so utterance of full vowel sounds instead of some specific sounds like schwa is proposed,
- *Features of connected speech* are not necessary and can even deteriorate the effective communication,
- *Word stress* is not teachable and specific to native speakers,
- *Stress-Time rhythm* is not included in ELF since weak forms are also excluded,
- *Pitch movement* is claimed to enable the speakers to convey attitudes and grammatical meaning, but changing the meaning just by changing intonation is not applicable for ELF speakers.

Steps which utilize communication and teachers must prioritize in their lessons: Jenkins prescribed a list of effective steps for teachers to prioritize in their lessons. These are suggested so as to guarantee the intelligibility of communication, and basically include substitution of some sounds, aspiration after /p/ /t/ /k/, appropriate vowel length before some consonants, word-initial and word-medial consonant cluster, and maintenance of contrast between long and short vowels (Jenkins, 2000: 27-80).

1.1.4. Debate over standards

One of the most debated topics in terms of ELF is undoubtedly the term “standard”. Firstly, the question of “what is standard and according to whom?” is aroused to support the idea that there is no specific standard of English, but rather varieties such as British, American, Australian or New Zealand. Beneke stated that the number of ELF speakers has already outnumbered the native speakers (Beneke, 1991: 54-56). Therefore, it would be nonsense to make the whole world obey the norms and rules of the minority. Secondly, a person who has enough amount of language to communicate has the rights to protect his identity while having the chance to communicate in any varieties of English. Widdowson stated that the center of ownership shifted from native speakers (inner circle) to nonnative speakers (outer and extended circle), and native speakers do not have the right to impose their norms on nonnative speakers (Widdowson, 1994: 377-389). For this reason, learners are the ones to learn and shape their language environment without conforming to the norms of native speakers presented to them (Takatsuka, 2008: 79-90).

1.1.5. Teaching ELF and motivation

The growing awareness of the role of English has also some implications in English language teaching. It is known that languages tend to change in their forms and their uses. Therefore, it is expected that something in teaching will also change. Widdowson says that “linguistic description cannot automatically meet pedagogic requirements” (Widdowson, 2003: 106). It is understood that

language pedagogy should be descriptive, not prescriptive. However, “so far, the absence of sufficient descriptive work as a necessary precondition for ELF- focused curricula has been an obstacle to the adoption of ELF for teaching, even where this is perceived as appropriate” (Seidlhoffer, 2004: 225). As for actual teaching goals and approaches, McKay identified the following priorities:

Goals:

- Ensuring intelligibility rather than insisting on correctness
- Helping learners develop interaction strategies that will promote comity (friendly relations)
- Fostering textual competence (reading and writing skills for learner-selected purposes)

Approaches:

- Sensitivity in the choice of cultural content in materials
- Reflexivity in pedagogical procedures
- Respect for the local culture of learning

(cited in Seidlhoffer, 2004: 226)

It seems that some basic innovations in English teaching should take place in pedagogy, curriculum and materials. It may not be easy to provide pedagogical suggestions for ELF teaching; however, raising language awareness, abandoning native speaker norms, and aiming intelligibility in international communications may be important key points in ELF teaching settings. It is inevitable that innovations in teaching will bring together some dramatic changes in assessment. For instance, in terms of pronunciation, Jenkins comes to the conclusion that “an overhaul of pronunciation testing will be necessary” (Jenkins, 2000: 27-80). We can conclude from Jenkins’ statement that, as opposed to traditional pronunciation testing which focuses on approximation to a native speaker accent, a fresh new ELF testing, which does not exist yet, may provide the acceptance of variety by increasing the learners’ motivation through success.

1.1.6. ELF and motivation

It is a fact that the numbers of non-native speakers outnumber the native speakers, so communications in English usually take place without a native speaker present. This fact fosters learners’ motivation whose ultimate aim is not a native-like accent. Learners are aware that they need language to communicate rather than mastering the rules of that language. Focusing on ELF considering learners’ beliefs is a great source for motivation. Learners’ main aim is not to communicate with native speakers any more. Therefore, the idea that native speaker of English being the model for correct language use is not valid any longer.

Aliakbari and Monfared (2014) investigated the attitudes of Iranian students toward English as an international language, its significance in the country, and their motivations to learn it. The findings indicated that participants recognized English as the international language of the world which can help development of the country, and that they appeared to have instrumental motives to use it.

Stephen (2011) claimed that the role of English in the world is as a lingua franca, but it is ignored by current educational practice in Japan. Therefore, he focused on the use of English as a global lingua franca and language learning motivation. Stephen (2011) proposed four concrete steps for educators and researchers that may facilitate the integration of English as a lingua franca perspective into English education in Japan and foster learners’ motivation to learn English:

1) Research needs to be conducted to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of learners, teachers and administrators connected with English education in Japan.

2) At a macro level, efforts need to be made to promote models of English that emphasise Japanese speakers of English rather than ‘native speaker’ models, thus reinforcing English as a part of the self-concept of Japanese learners.

3) At a micro level, teachers and those involved in curriculum design need to exploit the findings of a substantial body of research into ELF use in the design and construction of teaching materials.

4) Both at a macro- and a micro- level, assessment and testing must pay greater attention to ELF variation.

2. Method

The steps of doing an action research described by Nunan are followed in this study. As cited in Özcan (2010, p.22), “according to Nunan (1992: 18-23), any research which is initiated by a question, supported by both data and interpretation, and is carried out by a practitioner investigating aspects of his or her own context and situation is called action research”. Özcan (2010, p.22) also cited that “the cycle of action research includes four stages: the initial reflection to identify an issue or problem, planning an action to solve the problem, implementation of the planned action, observation of the action, and reflection on the observation (Richards & Lockhart, 1996: 12-14)”.

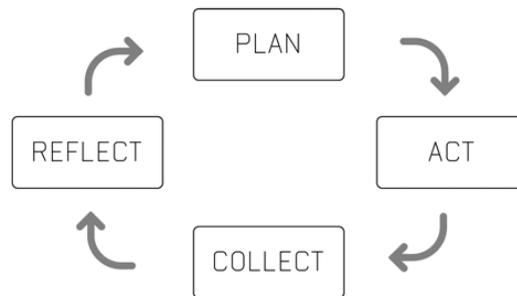


Figure 1. “Reflective cycle of action research” as cited in Özcan (2010, p.22)

The reason for an action research being chosen for this study was to collect data on our own practice, and analyze it to come up with some decisions about what our future practice should be in terms of teaching ELF.

2.1. Sample / Participants

The sample consisted of 42 preparatory class students from different majors at the School of Foreign Languages, Erciyes University, Kayseri. The students were general EFL learners at preparatory classes who were supposed to study at various departments after one-year of compulsory English language education. The age of the participants varied from 18 to 26. The number of female participants was 22 while the number of male students was 20.

2.2. Limitations of the study

There is not a curriculum which describes ELF teaching. Therefore, this study does not prescribe how ELF curriculum should be developed. Similarly, there is not an ELF testing method available, so we did not apply any assessment instrument to determine if the students would be more successful in ELF context.

3. Problem identification

When English is used as a lingua franca between speakers of other languages, native-speaker (NS) norms and usages may not be relevant in such a context (Jenkins, 2006: 157-181). Therefore, the target model for English learners in non-English-speaking countries should start to shift from NSs to bilingual or multilingual speakers (Pakir, 2009: 224-235). Not a long time ago, it was very common to hear scholars believing learning American/British culture would help learners learn the language. As cited in Ke and Cahyani (2014, p.28 – 38), “the cultural contents in English courses should be expanded to include international cultures, world cultures, and local cultures so that they can encompass the hybrid and dynamic nature of ELF at individual, discursive, and community levels”.

A shift from traditional language teaching to ELF is widely supported in literature. However, it fails when it comes to apply theory into practice. Many of the course books which are available are mostly based on American/British English. They do not show any varieties related to language use. In terms of culture, they generally impose American or British culture. Many teachers believe that American/British English is the best, and they stick to American/British English. Students are not aware of the ELF concept which is getting more and more attention all around the world. They try to speak English, and they feel failure when they cannot reach the American/ British English standard exposed by course books, teachers and testing.

As the starting point of this study, we encountered the following problems:

- Excessive de-motivation to learn language
- Repetitive failure in English proficiency exams because of testing norms
- Being uncomfortable to speak in English because of feeling incapable of meeting the standards of native speakers
- Teachers’ demanding expectations
- Lack of needs analysis

4. Planning and action

Firstly, in order to explore students’ beliefs towards language learning, we conducted a pre-semi-structured interview, which included six questions. 42 preparatory class students from different majors were interviewed in person, and their responses were tape-recorded (see Appendix for interview questions).

Findings of Q1 (Do you think English is a difficult language to learn?): Regarding the first question, 37 of the students who constitute 88% of the total number said that they find English as a difficult language to learn. When they were asked to give some reasons for this belief, 67% complained about the rules of English language and pronunciation.

Findings of Q2 (Do you want to speak English as your mother tongue?): 86% of the students answered this question by stating that they want to speak English as their mother tongue, but they believe that it is almost impossible to reach native like competence because of the educational system which is mostly based on grammar teaching.

Findings of Q3 (Why are you studying English?): 97% of the students stated that it is compulsory to study English preparatory program to be able to continue their education in their own departments. 60% also stated that English will be necessary for their future careers. 78% implied that they learn English to communicate with foreigners.

Findings of Q4 (Do you think that speaking English with a Turkish accent is bad?): Most of the students (92%) claimed that Turkish people do not sound natural when they speak English. Following this question, students were asked to rate the best accents.

Findings of Q5 (Which is the best English accent: American, British, or any other?): 57% of the students said that American English is the best while 43% rated British English as the best accent. Surprisingly, none of the students claimed any other accents as superior to American or British English. The main reason for this might be the fact that they are not familiar with any other accents of English. When they were asked what they thought of Indian or Chinese accents, they were not sure if such accents existed.

Findings of Q6 (Do you try a lot to learn English?): 65% of the students responded that they try to do their best to learn English; however, they claimed that there is always something missing. They explained that even if they know the words, their pronunciation is always problematic or even if they know the grammar, they do not have enough vocabulary to express their ideas and feelings. Most of the students stated that they are fed up with failure in the exams although they study really hard, and this fact de-motivates them to learn.

As a result of the pre-interview, we found that some of the reasons for lack of motivation stem from the belief that students will never be able to show native-like competence. Secondly, they are not aware of varieties in English accents. They think that only American or British English exists, which increases the expectation of learners towards language learning and causes lack of motivation. Thirdly, due to the endless (students' belief) rules of English language, students feel desperate to learn it although they want and try a lot.

Based on the feedback from the interview, we decided to plan a two-week program which aimed to show different varieties of accents, welcoming to mistakes, focusing on intelligibility, raising awareness on ELF issue, and sustaining communication despite of mistakes or errors in international communication contexts. Firstly, we wanted students to get aware of ELF issue in the world. To achieve this aim, we prepared a mini presentation to inform our students about ELF. In this presentation, basic definitions of ELF and some examples were provided to increase awareness. Regarding Jenkins' ELF teaching items, we conducted our lesson by disregarding standard norms imposed by text books and curriculum. Some discussion topics which were elicited from students' interests (social networking sites, dating, smart phones and applications, computer and video games, shopping, sports, TV programs etc.), some videos and listening texts were brought to classes in two-week period only to the sample classes. The students were guaranteed that they would not be judged by their mistakes or pronunciation during the lessons, and the only criteria was stated to be the intelligibility of their speech.

5. Observation

As we planned in advance, we conducted our lessons based on the combination of McKay and Jenkins' ELF teaching suggestions. We ensured intelligibility rather than insisting on correctness, and created a friendly atmosphere in class to lower students' affective filter. We did not only focus on American or British culture, but we also enabled students to be familiar with other cultures such as Indian and Chinese.

We observed that students' beliefs changed to a favourable extent. For example, students were eager to participate in the activities, and at the beginning of each lesson, they asked questions like "What kind of English are we going to study today?" Such questions were valuable for us, because they gave the impression of getting familiar with various English accents. Surprisingly, their

motivation was much higher than previous classes. Even the students with low grades were interested in lessons, and they tried to participate actively. As the students were aware of our expectation in advance, they were comfortable to express their feelings and ideas in an intelligible way. The friendly atmosphere of classroom also helped students to be more engaged in lessons. It needs to be clarified that we did not change our classroom atmosphere in a day from unfriendly to friendly atmosphere. Rather, we adhered to classroom and school rules; however, we were more tolerant to mistakes especially during speaking sessions of the lessons.

In order to see if we were right with our observation, we decided to interview students in person at the end of the two-week period. We asked the same questions which were asked during the pre-interview (see Appendix). The students' responses in the post-interview were notably different from the pre-interview. For the first question in the post-interview, 68% (which was 88% in pre-interview) of the students stated that learning English is difficult. However, most of them stated that the varieties in English comforted them by giving the impression that many people do not speak proper English. One of the students uttered that "If we do not need to abide by rules, of course we can learn English."

For the fourth question which is "Do you think speaking English with Turkish accent is bad?" 60% of the students were found to have a more moderate attitude towards Turkish English accent, which was quite the opposite during the pre-interview. After seeing varieties of English, they were more welcoming to Turkish accent, as well. This might encourage them to speak at every occasion which is the main goal of language teaching. When they were asked to rate the best English accents, they mostly rated British or American English as the best ones during the pre-interview. However, 20% of the students, after the two-week period- rated Turkish English as superior to other English accents. And, when they were asked why they changed their ideas, their reaction was surprising since they all stated that if intelligibility is the most important component of speaking a language, they can understand their Turkish interlocutors easier than the others, as they share a common culture. They gave an example to support their claim by stating "open TV" instead of "turn on the TV".

6. Reflection

In our study, we did not apply an assessment test to evaluate students' level of English since there is no such assessment tool developed for ELF context. Rather, we could observe the affirmative changes in students' attitudes, motivation and beliefs related to learning English. Regarding that motivation is a key factor in learning in all fields, we can claim that our action reached its goals. We proved that ELF can be used as a starting point to make the students realize that English is achievable. ELF can also foster students' initial motivation by providing them enough space to play with the language. Raising awareness in terms of varieties in English lets students be more comfortable in speaking English. This study helped students gain confidence and self-respect by displaying that many people speak English by abandoning the standard norms established by native speakers and course books. All these findings comply with the ELF description of Jenkins', Seidlhoffer's and Ur. Parallel to our study, Seidlhoffer argues that ELF cannot be based on a single form of the language (Seidlhoffer, 2011: 7).

Similarly, Prodromou claimed:

'Rather than set up a core which all users of ELF have to follow, it is surely time that we recognized the diversity among users and the multiplicity of users to which English is put worldwide and think in terms of varied processes of interaction rather than a single prescriptive.' (cited in Ur, 2010: 88).

7. Implications

This study was a small scale research, but still some suggestions may be presented for teachers of English:

- ELF can be used as a starting point of motivation,
- Pluralism and diversity can be provoked through ELF involvement,
- Introducing other cultures except American and British may help students learn English easier,
- ELF should be introduced to teachers, and intelligibility vs. standard norms should have a priority especially in speaking courses.

Acknowledgements

These and the Reference headings are in bold but have no numbers. Text below continues as normal. Collate acknowledgements in a separate section at the end of the article before the references and do not, therefore, include them on the title page, as a footnote to the title or otherwise. List here those individuals who provided help during the research (e.g., providing language help, writing assistance or proof reading the article, etc.).

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İngiliz dilinin ‘Lingua Franca’ olarak öğretilmesinin öğrenci motivasyonuna etkisi: Bir eylem araştırması

Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı; İngiliz dilinin standart kural ve kaynaklarına bağlı kalmadan ‘Lingua Franca’ olarak öğretilmesinin, öğrencilerin dile ve dil öğrenmeye karşı tutumlarını nasıl etkilediğini gözlemlemektir. Çalışmanın ilk aşaması olarak, öğrencilerin bireysel olarak mülakat sorularıyla fikirleri toplanmış ve İngiliz dilini standart norm ve kurallara bağlı kalarak öğrenmeye karşı olumsuz tutum içinde oldukları ve dil öğrenme isteklerinin oldukça düşük olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Öğrencilerin ayrıca, İngiliz dilinin dünya çapında kullanılan çeşitlerini bilmedikleri de gözlemlenmiştir. Daha sonra, öğrencilerin mülakat sorularına verdikleri cevaplar dikkate alınarak, Jenkins ve Seidlhoffer’in İngiliz dilinin ‘Lingua Franca’ olarak öğretilmesi ilkelerine göre 2 haftalık dil öğretim modeli planlanmış ve uygulanmıştır. Dil öğretim modeli anlık doğal iletişimin algılanması üzerine kurgulanmış ve öğrencilerin hata yapma konusunda rahat olmaları, iletişim kurmak için rahat hissetmeleri sağlanmıştır. Bu yüzden, rahat ve stressiz bir sınıf ortamı iki hafta boyunca sürdürülmüştür. İki hafta sonunda, öğrenciler, uygulanan model ile ilgili düşünceleri almak amacıyla tekrar mülakata alınmıştır. Sonuçlar göstermiştir ki öğrencilerin dil öğrenme algı ve istekleri bu iki haftalık süreçte olumlu yönde değişmiştir ve İngilizce öğrenmeye karşı olumlu tutum geliştirdiklerini ifade etmişlerdir. İngiliz dilinin ‘Lingua Franca’ olarak öğretilmesi ve öğrencilerin kaynaklar ve öğretmenler tarafından dilin standart kurallarını öğrenmeye zorlanmaması, dil öğrenmeye karşı olumlu tutum geliştirmede önemli bir rol oynayabilmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: lingua franca; ortak dil; öğretim; öğrenci; tutum

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