ELF awareness in the task-based classroom: a way forward

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The article discusses ELF-aware pedagogy as a possible way to integrate English as a lingua franca (ELF) in English language classrooms and explores the extent to which task-based language teaching (TBLT) could contribute to this end. ELF-aware pedagogy involves enriching teaching practices with appropriate metalinguistic and reflective activities that help learners develop as competent ELF users. The article makes the case that, when viewed from an ELF-aware perspective, TBLT may provide a coherent methodological framework for creating an authentic communicative environment in the classroom, within which the learners may develop as ELF communicators. To provide an example of how this could be achieved in practice, the author presents an ELF-aware task she has designed and taught in her own classroom. The task integrates metalinguistic and reflective elements and focuses on promoting the learners' pragmatic competence and sense of themselves as true owners of English.

Introduction

The unprecedented spread of English around the world has led to a growing interest in the ways the language is employed as a lingua franca (ELF) among speakers from different linguacultural backgrounds. Corpus-based research has been highly informative. It has shown that, as a means of global communication, English has distanced itself from the linguistic authority of the native speaker to an extent that 'it has been de-foreignized to become common property' (Widdowson 2013: 192–93). In addition, it has highlighted that a skilled communicator in international contexts is 'no longer someone who has "mastered" the forms of a particular native variety', but 'someone who has acquired the pragmatic skills' needed in ELF interactions (Jenkins 2011: 931–32).

These arguments have serious pedagogical implications, especially in so-called EFL contexts (Sifakis and Tsantila 2018). As has been argued, when English learners primarily need to become competent ELF users, teachers should be encouraged to change their teaching, by challenging the deeply rooted EFL ideology that effective learning is equated with conformity to NS norms (Seidlhofer 2011). Undoubtedly, such an endeavour is anything but straightforward. It involves questioning the normative way that English as a subject has been commonly viewed in well-established ELT methods and approaches (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018). This, however, does not necessarily mean that new methods or approaches must

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be invented before ELF can be brought in the classroom. The significance of ELF-aware pedagogy (Sifakis and Bayyurt 2018; Sifakis 2019) lies precisely in the fact that it promotes a fresh and innovative way of perceiving current teaching practices with a view to integrating ELF in them.

As a case in point, this paper explores how ELF-aware pedagogy could be implemented through task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is usually criticized in the ELF literature for reflecting a conformist view of teaching and learning (Dewey, in Sifakis et al 2018; Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018). First the fundamental aspects of ELF-aware pedagogy are presented, highlighting how ELF can be integrated in the classroom. Afterwards, the discussion focuses on the ways in which, from an ELF-aware perspective, TBLT could provide a framework for the development of communicative capability in ELF, as envisaged by Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2018). Then, an original ELF-aware task-based lesson is presented. The task aimed at promoting the learners' pragmatic competence and sense of ownership of English, in accordance with current thinking about the profile of a competent ELF user.

ELF-aware pedagogy

Definition

The concept of ELF awareness (Sifakis 2019) has been recently developed as a possible framework for integrating ELF in all areas surrounding ELT, including curriculum and syllabus design, materials development, language assessment, and teacher education. With regard to the teaching practice, Sifakis and Bayyurt (2018) highlight that this concept involves trying to view everything that occurs in the classroom from a perspective that is more attentive to what the learners need in relation to ELF and more critical to what one, as a teacher, does to address their needs. They define ELF-aware pedagogy as:

> the process of engaging with ELF research and developing one's own understanding of the ways in which it can be integrated in one's classroom context, through a continuous process of critical reflection, design, implementation and evaluation of instructional activities that reflect and localize one's interpretation of the ELF construct. (Sifakis and Bayyurt ibid.: 459)

The process of critical reflection that Sifakis and Bayyurt mention is indeed extremely important. It empowers one first to embrace the fact that ELF is not 'teachable' the way, at least, typical bounded varieties are, and, second, to make informed decisions about the kind of changes that may be necessary in view of ELF. Such decisions may in fact refer (a) to the content of instructional activities that could help the learners develop as ELF users, and (b) to the methodology that could be used to this end. ELF awareness has the potential to serve as a great source of inspiration and guidance regarding both of these areas.

Components of ELF awareness

Sifakis (2019: 291) clarifies that ELF awareness has three major components, which may take different forms depending on the ELT stakeholder:

1. *Awareness of language and language use*, referring to awareness of 'ELF discourse, of the elements that differentiate it from native-speaker English and of the reasons underlying this differentiation'.

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2. *Awareness of instructional practice*, referring to awareness of all parameters related to classroom teaching, including teachers' own understanding of their practices, the perceptions underlying their practices, and the sources and consequences of these perceptions.
3. *Awareness of learning*, referring to awareness of 'the major impact ELF use has for learning', including the ways in which the learners' own experiences and attitudes related to ELF may influence their development.

These components are very useful regarding the content of activities that could enrich English language teaching, so as to guide the learners in the development of their 'communicative capability' in ELF (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018: 29). ELF-aware activities could focus on:

- Raising the learners' *metalinguistic knowledge*, namely their 'explicit knowledge about the syntactic, morphological, lexical, phonological, and pragmatic features' (Roehr 2007: 179) in interactions involving mainly non-native speakers. In essence, these activities engage the learners in noticing particular features of ELF discourse, such as the use of accommodation strategies (Cogo and Dewey 2012) and translanguaging (Li 2019).
- Encouraging the learners' *reflection* on their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes as regards ELF. Such activities seek to turn their own attention to 'how they actually do use their English as learners' (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018), how they perceive various ELF-related concerns, such as the notion of 'linguistic error', and how their in-class and out-of-class experiences, including the teachers' possibly norm-oriented practices (Sifakis et al 2018), may have influenced their thinking and acting as users of English, which is crucial in terms of gaining a sense of ownership of ELF.

What about methodology though? What kind of changes may be made in this respect? This is mainly a matter of raising one's *awareness of instructional practice*, in that it involves critically reflecting on the way established methodologies could contribute to the development of the learners as competent ELF users. The following section focuses on this highly important issue, using TBLT as a powerful example.

Reflecting on the task-based approach

Task-based language teaching

The task-based approach has been increasingly discussed since its development in the late 1970s. As illustrated in the recent reviews of TBLT research by Ellis (2017) and Ellis and Shintani (2014), it emerged out of communicative language teaching (CLT), with a view to rendering ELT more meaningful than what it was through the lens of methods such as presentation–practice–production (PPP). Indeed, TBLT has shifted the emphasis from learning the structural properties of English and from 'learning-to-communicate' towards 'learning-through-communication' (Ellis 2017: 109), while, at the same time, providing a coherent framework for implementation in the classroom.

The central construct in that framework is the task, which is typically performed along three phases: the pre-task, the main-task, and the post-task phase. In order for an activity to qualify as a task, it must satisfy four criteria (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 135–36):

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1 The ‘primary focus should be on meaning’, not on linguistic form.
2 There should be ‘some kind of “gap”’, that is a need for the learners, for instance, to convey information.
3 The learners ‘should rely on their own resources’ to perform the task.
4 There should be a ‘clearly defined outcome other than the use of language’.

These criteria are certainly important in making ‘English more real for the learners’ (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018: 21). The ‘problem’ with TBLT, according to ELF scholars, is that the normative premises of CLT and earlier grammar-based approaches remain unaffected: while TBLT prioritizes the communicative use of the language, it still views effective communication, and therefore the aim of teaching and learning, in terms of conformity to NS norms (Dewey, in Sifakis et al 2018; Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018). Let us explore some fundamental principles of TBLT and how they could possibly be perceived from an ELF-aware perspective.

The classroom environment

A key principle of TBLT is that, by placing primary emphasis on meaning, tasks seek to create communicative contexts in the classroom where ‘authentic use of language’ is encouraged (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 136). By associating ‘authenticity’ with the extent to which the classroom context mirrors real-life NS contexts of use (Widdowson 2013), tasks, in this sense, aim to ‘replicate the natural learning that takes place during first language acquisition’ (Ellis 2017: 110) while engaging learners in reproducing a language that is ‘natural’ to NSs yet still ‘foreign’ to them.

What could differentiate ELF-aware tasks is the emphasis placed on two considerations: first, that ELF discourse is ‘just as authentic as communication’ (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018: 26), and, second, that the learners’ experiences as users play a major role in learning a language which, to say the least, may feel less ‘foreign’ to them than other languages (Sifakis 2019). Such tasks would then seek to create contexts that integrate the unpredictability and variability of ELF communication (Cogo and Dewey 2012) and help the learners develop their interactional skills. This includes encouraging them to exploit whatever linguistic resources they have available so as to ‘bridge the gap’ that the task generates.

Another key principle of TBLT is that, in order for the learners to achieve the task outcome, they are urged to treat the language as a ‘tool’ for communication rather than as an ‘object to be studied, analysed and displayed’ as, for instance, in PPP (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 136). This, of course, does not mean that tasks as perceived in TBLT place no emphasis on form.

The focus on form

The crucial difference with respect to ELF-aware tasks would lie in how one may view the role of linguistic form in communication. That is, forms that may diverge from NS norms do not need to be regarded a priori as ‘erroneous output’ (Ellis and Shintani ibid: 145) that the learners must be pushed to modify only by virtue of their non-conformity status and regardless of the communicative context in which they appeared. Rather, they could be seen as evidence of the ‘development of a capability to put

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linguistic resources to pragmatic use' the way that ELF users do in real life (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018: 28). Corpus-based research is highly informative to that end, illustrating what is communicatively significant and, therefore, what is worth focusing on in teaching and, consequently, in assessing English.

In this sense, ELF-aware tasks would not 'ignore' linguistic form altogether (which is admittedly unrealistic) or even attempt to substitute the form, as it has been perceived so far, with a different, 'newly discovered' kind of form. They would aim at helping learners learn how to use accommodation strategies to exploit and even 'transform' the form appropriately, according to the pragmatic demands of each particular interaction, as is the case in effective ELF communication (Cogo and Dewey 2012). They would still focus on form, in other words, but only to the extent that it serves the acquisition of strategies that are crucial for establishing mutual understanding. This includes learning how to creatively and intentionally use 'erroneous output' to accommodate the needs of one's interlocutors (e.g. by modifying a NS idiomatic expression to make it more meaningful to them) if this is what the specific communicative exchange requires. Integrating metalinguistic and reflective questions in a task is very important in this respect: by raising the learners' awareness, on the one hand, of their and others' language use and, on the other, of their own attitudes towards issues such as the notion of 'error', such questions create an alert and favourable learning environment for developing the learners' interactional skills. On this basis, classroom-based ELF-aware assessment would not prioritize approximation to NS norms, as has traditionally been the case in high-stakes formal testing, but, rather, pragmatic competence and communicative effectiveness, possibly through the use of alternative assessment methods, such as observation-based assessment (Kouvdou and Tsagari 2018).

The learners' reality

In light of the above, ELF-aware pedagogy and TBLT do share some fundamental values as regards teaching and learning. They both view language classes as 'social events' and language learners as communicators and 'active agents of their learning' (Ellis and Shintani 2014: 143). That said, TBLT in the ELF-aware sense would be particularly suited to the English classroom not because 'learners have few opportunities to communicate outside the classroom' and therefore need their teacher to create a NS-oriented context for them (Ellis 2017: 115). It would be appropriate exactly because it may offer a structured framework for bringing the complex realities of ELF into the classroom.

The crucial question that may arise at this point is how an ELF-aware task could look in practice. The following section provides a possibly useful example from the author's own experience as a teacher in an EFL context.

An ELF-aware task-based lesson

This task-based lesson is the second of a series of original ELF-aware lessons devised in 2013 as part of a professional development programme ('ELF-TEd'; Bayyurt, in Sifakis et al 2018).

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The teaching context

The lessons were taught at a state primary school in a small town in Crete, Greece. The class consisted of twenty-two 12-year-old learners attending the sixth grade and the majority of them had been learning English for approximately four years. Their level of competence ranged from A1+ to A2+, according to the CEFR. All of them had also been learning French and/or German, while seven of them were bilinguals in Greek and Albanian or Greek and Serbian.

As is the case with most instructional materials (Sifakis et al 2018), the textbook employed in that classroom (*English 6th Grade*, published by the Greek state), although not directly aiming at preparing the learners for high-stakes proficiency exams, reflected a normative view of language teaching and learning, placing emphasis mostly on British English norms. The learners, on the contrary, seemed to have a quite positive attitude towards ELF-related issues. As a small-scale study in the classroom showed (Kordia 2018), the ability, for instance, to "express oneself successfully" was to most of them far more important than using the language as a NS (which often made them feel 'anxious' and 'stressed'). What is more, despite their young age, they reported using English in their personal lives to a large extent, while, for example, playing games with other NNSs online. They often faced difficulties, however, while communicating with them, since, as they argued, they were still 'just learners'.

The ELF-aware lessons were therefore designed according to two important observations: first, this was a multilingual class already employing ELF for real-life communicative purposes; and, second, although still quite young, the learners needed to develop their pragmatic competence and sense of themselves as ELF users.

To this end, the first ELF-aware lesson (Kordia 2018) included a range of metalinguistic and reflective activities based on two videos of ELF interactions retrieved from the BACKBONE website (http://projects.ael.uni-tuebingen.de/backbone/moodle/). These aimed at helping the learners, on the one hand, notice the use of accommodation strategies and translanguaging (namely the creative interweaving of languages in communication among multilinguals; Li 2019); and, on the other, reflect upon their experience and attitudes. They were asked, for instance, first, to spot what strategy (e.g. repetition) a speaker employed at a particular point, and then to determine the reason why he or she did so (e.g. to ask for clarification) and the role that strategy may have played (e.g. whether and how it facilitated communication). The discussion afterwards became progressively more demanding, focusing on: (a) how the learners used accommodation strategies and translanguaging in their own interactions in ELF; (b) what the use of ELF made them think and feel each time, especially in relation to 'errors' (e.g. embarrassed when someone repeated a phrase to 'correct' them); and (c) to the extent that it was possible, the sources of those thoughts and feelings (e.g. a negative experience in class), the consequences in using English (e.g. refraining from using repetition for fear of being perceived as 'incompetent') and the possible ways to develop oneself as a non-native user (e.g. by employing repetition as the speakers in the videos).

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Description of the task

The second ELF-aware lesson (about 80 minutes long) aimed at helping the learners put the knowledge gained through the first video-based lesson into practice and see how they could employ accommodation strategies and translanguaging in communication, this time with each other. For this reason, I modified a particular textbook activity which, according to the official syllabus, the learners had to work on at that time. That activity simply urged the learners to use the present perfect tense 'correctly' to convey information. Instead, it was transformed into an information-gap task similar to the popular board game *Guess Who?*.

The pre-task phase was divided in two steps. The first step aimed at reminding the learners of ELF-related issues discussed during the previous ELF-aware lesson, through metalinguistic and reflective questions such as:

- What could someone do when the other person does not understand what he/she is saying?
- Why would someone use his/her mother tongue or another language while communicating in English?
- What role could an 'error' play in communication?

The second step aimed at explaining what the task required them to do. Copies of a large poster were presented to them, containing pictures of various people and information about each of them regarding their nationality, job, hobbies, and past experiences and achievements. Then, the learners were informed they would work in groups of four or five. One of them would be the 'Observer' and the rest of them would be the 'Players'. Afterwards, the groups were given a pack of cards. Each card contained the picture of a person in the poster and the information related to him/her. A 'Player' had to pick a card and the rest of the 'Players' had to ask questions to find out 'who he/she was' each time, much like in the board game. To facilitate their interaction, specific pieces of advice were also included in their cards, such as:

- If you do not understand what your classmate is saying, do something about it. You can repeat a specific phrase, for example.
- Do whatever you can to help your classmates understand who you are. Using, for example, a different accent or a different language may be helpful.

The 'Observer' had a somewhat difficult yet very interesting job in the task. He/she had to focus on the way the 'Players' interacted with each other and take notes. The guidelines in the 'Observer card' included, for instance, the following:

- Is the communication between the 'Players' facilitated or hindered by any 'errors' you may be noticing (e.g. in grammar)? If so, how exactly?
- Are they helping each other understand 'who is who'? If so, what strategies are they using?

The main-task phase, of course, involved actually playing the game. I was monitoring and facilitating the process when necessary (e.g. by helping 'Players' to form appropriate clarification requests), while the

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learners took turns in performing the role of 'Player' and 'Observer', as they wished.

The post-task phase was devoted to discussing and evaluating the learners' performance during the game, based on what I had gathered and, more importantly, what the 'Observers' had noticed. In fact, not only did the learners enjoy the task very much but also they negotiated the meaning quite effectively, to the extent that their young age and proficiency level made possible. As the 'Observers' reported, they had used, for instance, a range of accommodation strategies to establish mutual understanding (e.g. repetition, paraphrasing, and clarifications), as well as body language (e.g. gestures) and, even, translanguaging (through phrases like 'No, *mon ami*, I am not Spanish ...'), to give hints about the identity of the person on their cards.

With these observations in mind, the post-task discussion focused on promoting the learners' metalinguistic knowledge and reflection even further, through questions, such as:

- How did you feel when you noticed an 'error' and why? What role did that 'error' play in communication?
- What obstacles did you face during your interactions? How did you try to overcome them depending on who you were communicating with each time (e.g. by simplifying syntax or creating a 'new' idiom on the spot)? What could you have done better?
- In what ways do you think this lesson helped you develop? How do you view yourself as a learner and a user of English? Why?

Their responses to the last question in particular were very important. As they argued, the task helped them, for instance:

- Understand that 'speaking is not that hard', especially 'when you feel that people don't correct or judge you all the time'.
- See in practice 'how you can use lots of ways [e.g. repetition] and even other languages to show what you want to say', provided that 'you pay attention to what the other person needs'.
- Feel 'somehow more mature' as learners and 'more confident' and 'flexible' as users.

Evaluation

Let us see how the ELF-aware task briefly described above relates to the arguments made in the first two sections about ELF-aware pedagogy and TBLT.

With respect to the components of ELF awareness (Sifakis 2019), raising the learners' *awareness of language and language use* as regards pragmatics in particular, as well as their *awareness of learning*, was prioritized in the task. Drawing on their own experience as users of ELF and on the knowledge acquired through the first ELF-aware lesson, they were prompted to discuss and reflect upon the use of accommodation practices, translanguaging, and other significant ELF-related issues, such as the role of 'errors', through metalinguistic and reflective questions integrated in the pre-task and post-task phases. More importantly, in the main-task phase, they were urged to employ such features intentionally during their interactions with their classmates when they were 'Players' (e.g. to actually ask for repetition when they needed it, while also exploiting their

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'translanguaging instinct'; Li 2019) and to provide constructive feedback about their effectiveness when they became 'Observers'.

In this regard, the task that was employed seemed to offer a very useful framework for implementing ELF-aware pedagogy. The learners were engaged in trying to use English in a pragmatically appropriate way, while, at the same time, raising their awareness of 'how they *actually do* use their English as learners' (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2018: 29; emphasis in the original) and of what this implies for their development as confident *and* self-aware users (Sifakis 2019).

That said, a communicative context was created in the classroom mirroring real-life interactions in ELF within which the learners could, on the one hand, focus on the negotiation of meaning in a language that can indeed become—or already is—'their own', and, on the other, rely on their linguistic resources so as to 'bridge the gap' that the task generated. The desired task outcome in this sense was clearly defined and, by all accounts, eventually achieved: find out 'who is who' through a fun game and, in doing so, gain a clearer picture of 'who you are' and 'how you can develop' as a learner and user of English.

Conclusion

The ELF-aware task presented here has shown that TBLT may provide a useful methodological framework for helping learners develop as competent ELF users. This primarily involves enhancing the skills needed to employ a variety of strategies that facilitate communication in ELF, including the ability to accommodate one's linguistic performance to the purposes of each particular interaction.

Undoubtedly, this goal may require a lot of time and energy on the part of both the learners and the teacher. Establishing a classroom environment which contributes to that direction, however, may not be so demanding. In this regard, ELF-aware task-based teaching would, above all, entail integrating a metalinguistic and a reflective component, most importantly in the pre-task and post-task phases, and providing, in the main-task phase, opportunities for experiencing the unpredictability and variability of authentic ELF communication.

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