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English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) at Universities of Applied Sciences

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English is no doubt one of the most spoken languages worldwide; it is commonly used in higher education and many multi-national companies use it as a working language, irrespective of the geographical location. Since English is spoken widely by non-native speakers, the traditional standards set for language learning can be rethought. English plays a significant role in the education at TAMK as it is taught as a foreign language or used as a language of instruction. TAMK also admits several foreign students annually who study in English, which presents a perfect setting for ELF. This article looks at the ELF aspect in general, its role at universities of applied sciences and more specifically at TAMK. The focus is on teaching English as a lingua franca, and its implementation in the degree programmes where instruction is given in English.

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English as a lingua franca

There are two major factors that make English special among the different languages of the world: it has spread uniquely around the globe and there are more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. As a result, English has become a non-local lingua franca, a means of global communication between people. (Mauranen 2018, 7.) Because of the special status of English, the norms in teaching and use of it should be reconsidered. As English is nowadays learnt for international communication, the target community should no longer be that of the native speakers. In international communication, the speakers are allowed to have their accents affected by their mother tongue, if the intelligibility is conserved. (Jenkins 2002, 85.) Further, in the learning context, it is also essential that students develop “a tolerance of difference” by being exposed to several non-native accents (Jenkins 2000, 183).

There are various communication situations in the ELF domain, one of those being BELF (English as a lingua franca in business contexts). A study made on BELF suggests that English used in the global business environment is “simply work” and its use is contextual. Instead of knowing the language perfectly, it is essential to master the business-related issues and terminology to succeed in communication. (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010.) For example, in sales, there are specific vocabulary related to different fields that reflect the knowledge of the subject matter to enable mutual understanding between the parties. In other words, the point is to get the message across, not to emulate the discourse of native speakers (Charles 2007, 266).

Most foreign language teachers may have the ELF aspect in their teaching without consciously mentioning it to the students. Especially, teachers in the applied sciences emphasise the communication and language for specific purposes i.e., to be understood by the other party. Based on this idea, the teachers view the learners as competent non-native speakers of English (Sifakis & Bayyurt 2018, 456-464). In other words, accepting “rally

English”, as it is called in Finnish, encourages the students to speak to more freely, using the Finnish accent.

Being ELF-aware facilitates acknowledging the relevant contents, different pronunciations, and accents in today’s language learning.

Teaching materials play a significant role in fostering English as a lingua franca and should therefore be taken into consideration in the selection, preparation, and delivery. However, most ELT publishers marginalise ELF speakers in the teaching materials, even if it would be beneficial for the learners to be exposed to non-native varieties of English (Jenkins 2004, 66). The reason for this might be that the publishers are not ELF-aware to some extent. Therefore, there is a mismatch between the language presented in the English course books and the reality of teaching English as a lingua franca (Galloway 2018, 478). A study made of Finnish textbooks of upper secondary school suggests that the audio materials mostly include native accents (Kopperoinen 2011, 71). To improve the situation, the course books should include ELF aspect that could help them to become aware of the flexibility of ELF communication (Galloway 2018, 476).

ELF communication and culture

Does culture play a role in ELF? There are several classifications of different culture types. One of the traditional classifications is Edward Hall’s model (1983), where he explains High and Low context communication to differentiate between groups of communicators. High context cultures tend to communicate in a more formal way but with less details, while Low context cultures embrace details in a more relaxed and unambiguous language. In his view, it is helpful to know whether the culture of a particular country falls on either high or low side of the scale (Hall 1983, 63-77). As for the ELF setting, users integrate their mother tongue communicative norms into their speaking because of the “habitat factor” (Pözl and Seidlhofer 2006, 172). For example, in teaching Business English, cross-cultural communication skills are essential to create the awareness and to succeed in communication. Thus, it can be said that teaching in English or English as a lingua franca require some understanding of different cultures to be able to interpret the nuances and non-verbal communication that exist, and it makes the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds easier.

On the other hand, because ELF communication takes place in multilingual and multicultural contexts, there is no clear language-culture-nation relationship (Baker 2009, 567). Instead of knowing British and American cultures in relation to language, it is thus more important for the interlocutors to interpret, negotiate and accommodate each other in ELF communication (Baker 2009, 585). This means that ELF communication is dynamic; new culture related practices and interpretations appear all the time (Baker 2018, 30). ELF can also be semantically richer than the varieties of native English, because speakers of ELF expand idiomatic expressions of their mother tongue to English (Xu & Dinh 2013, 384). Evidently, it is more important that the language learners become aware of the flexibility needed in spoken interaction. Hence, instead of providing the traditional language-culture relationship, teachers could concentrate on giving the students the right tools to develop their language skills.

ELF at universities of applied sciences

The goal of language teaching at universities of applied sciences is to prepare the students to use English as a means of communication in the future. Here the emphasis is on English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In other words, the use of the language is related to specific fields of study, i.e., Technical English for Engineers or Professional English for Nurses. However, there are also preparatory courses that offer general language teaching, as optional to those students who need it. Materials used are related to working life situations, and this gives the teacher a freedom to select the appropriate material.

At the universities of applied sciences, ready-made materials and course books for teaching English are limited. This gives the teacher a possibility to introduce materials that include different non-native accents to students. Whether one is teaching a homogenic class of Finnish students or a heterogenic multinational classroom created by mixed classes of foreign students, underlining the ELF aspect is essential. One could argue that it is the teacher's responsibility to bring ELF to the classroom, by emphasising the unique status of English and offering the students enough examples of English with non-native accents using videos or audio material of different accents. On the other hand, multi-national groups present a unique situation. Here, encouraging student interaction in a series of spoken activities could provide the students with exposure to different accents that create the tolerance of difference.

Students could also be made aware of the different requirements in different communication situations. In spoken communication, teachers can encourage students to focus on successful communication and concentrate on the grammar and pronunciation only to ensure intelligibility. For example, when practising a client interview, the focus is clearly on the message. On the other hand, it can be said that academic writing requires more focus on the grammar, even if the communication is the key there, too.

The curricula of English courses at TAMK include the idea of preparing the students to acknowledge cultural differences, and when working with multinational groups, the effect of cultural differences can be felt too. The goal of reaching the native speaker competence is not overemphasised. While the understanding of different accents of English has been mentioned, intelligible pronunciation of key terminology in the field of study is deemed important. However, the teacher-student interaction or student-student interactions take place in an ELF dominium, and if the teacher introduces the idea of ELF to students, it may encourage students to speak more freely in English.

Towards ELF Thinking

Undeniably, English is one of the main languages widely spoken around the world and the number of non-native speakers outnumber native speakers. Thus, English is nowadays a lingua franca used widely among non-native speakers; that is why it is essential to consider how it is taught at universities of applied sciences.

English courses taught at universities of applied sciences include general language and ESP courses in the degree programmes and in some cases, it is used as the language of instruction. A cluster of students could either be a homogeneous or heterogeneous group, and therefore understanding different non-native accents and diverse cultures facilitates the communication in an ELF group. The aim is to achieve mutual understanding in the group, and thus teaching at universities of applied sciences should be ELF-aware to ensure flexibility and focus on the message. Being aware of one's own cultural "habitat factor", the communication skills needed in the ELF setting become apparent. However, instead of focusing on the language-

culture relationship, negotiating and interpreting skills should be highlighted in teaching. Although ELF elements are seen in the curriculum of TAMK, it is important to create ELF awareness among teachers and students.

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