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Assessing English as a Lingua Franca in an Academic Context: An ELF-aware Approach

Yuji Nakamura

I. Introduction

English is a global language and at the same time is embedded in a great variety of social contexts as well as classroom contexts. We have noticed the phenomenal rise of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and as a medium of instruction (Newbold, 2017). We have also seen significant changes in the users and uses of English as a lingua franca. The changes of English language learners and users have posed many challenges to the assessment of English proficiency. English language assessment in academic contexts has changed with the growth in English medium instruction, and the need to communicate in English as a lingua franca.

Testing and assessment are a necessary part of the teaching and learning process, because they give information about the process. Assessment must be closely aligned with what is being taught (Kouvoudou & Tsagari, 2019; Newbold, 2019).

Language testing fulfils a variety of functions, and it can take many forms. At school, the purpose of a test might typically be to check what a student has learned at the end of a term. Universities select students on the basis of a test which provides evidence of an overall level of competence in the language. In an increasingly mobile, globalized society, governments may require immigrants to pass a ‘citizenship’ test, which will include an element of language competence (Newbold, 2017).

Jenkins (2009) says that English is used as a lingua franca, the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds. She claims, “ELF is thus a question, not of orientation to the norms of a particular group of English speakers, but of mutual negotiation involving efforts and adjustments from all parties” (pp. 200–201).

In any ELF context, it is important that multilingual users of ELF be mutually intelligible when communicating with other multilingual ELF users (Newbold, 2019).

What makes ELF any different from EFL, a term which has been in use for decades, and which refers to “English as a foreign language”? For MacKenzie (2015) it is an outlook or an attitude: while EFL learners make mistakes (or errors), ELF users are said to show a lot of variety: instead of restricting themselves to the realizations of native English speakers, they exploit unused latent possibilities of English morphology, syntax and phraseology.

If there is an ELF-aware approach to language teaching, there should be an ELF-aware approach to language assessment. Otherwise, the underlying philosophy of an ELF class which is awareness of the extraordinarily diverse contexts in which ELF is currently used worldwide and to develop multilinguals would collapse. The students are being assessed against native speaker (NS) norms and cultures, and the whole process from teaching to assessment is meaningless (Kirkpatrick, 2019).

However, what kind of tests should be used to assess ELF competences which include ‘traditional’ skills such as reading comprehension and the pragmatic competences needed for oral interaction between non-native speakers (NNS)?

Most classroom tests are rigorously native-speaker norm based; typically, they require test-takers to choose between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ forms, encouraging, or reinforcing, a behavior which has only limited use in real ELF interaction.

Seidlhofer (2011) defines 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.

EFL assessment tends to be just testing one’s knowledge and skills on the basis of SE (Standard English) norms and structure, although they claim EFL principles are taken into account. It would make sense to practice ELF-aware assessment rather than the assessment of ELF per se, since there is no clearly defined ELF construct (Kouvduu & Tsagari, 2019). However, the use of ELF is also a reality in our EFL pedagogy, so EFL teachers need to reconsider their views and adopt a more ELF-aware perspective in their assessment.

II. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to answer the question: “In an academic ELF context, what ELF-element should be taken into account for assessing academic ELF?” The paper discusses ELF-related issues by referring to mainly three aspects (errors, texts, and grids/rubrics) (Newbold, 2019). For this purpose, EFL class students and ELF students will be compared.

III. Principles of ELF-aware Assessment

By taking Kouvdou and Tsagari (2019) into consideration, the principles of ELF-aware assessment can be summarized as follows:

- ELF-aware assessment should not rely too much on the norms and structures of SE (Standard English).
- ELF-aware assessment should place “reduced emphasis on the linguistic code.”
- ELF-aware assessment should prioritize mutual intelligibility.
- ELF-aware assessment should focus on learners’ ability to negotiate meaning and use a variety of accommodation strategies.
- ELF-aware assessment should be primarily concerned with the successful fulfillment of the communication task (cf. Elder & Davies, 2006)

IV. An approach to an ELF-aware assessment

A perfect test would be reliable (i.e. it would always give the same results for candidates of equal abilities), valid (i.e. it would measure what it is intended to measure and not something else) and fair (it would not discriminate for the wrong reasons) (Newbold, 2019).

Some people such as Hughes (2003) suggest a good test have validity, reliability, practicality and beneficial backwash/impact.

Newbold (2019), though he picks up validity and impact as primary issues test developing, approaches an ELF-aware test by considering teaching and testing ELF class and deals with errors for productive skills, texts for receptive skills, and grids for productive skills. We will focus more on these three items (errors, texts, and grids) in the following discussion because they are crucial aspects to develop fair and useful assessments.

V. Concerning Errors

Teachers like errors. Some teachers love errors. Testers like errors, too. At least, audible and visible errors are easy to recognize and thus provide evidence of distance from a target level of performance. In these cases, errors are perceived as negative, as examples of linguistic behavior which should be corrected.

Yet, errors play an essential part in learning a language, and as such they also need to be seen

in a positive light. As Newbold (2019) maintains, in real life communication lexical invention, grammatical variation and modification of pronunciation to produce non-native forms might be seen as strategies promoting comprehension, although they have been treated as errors in a traditional test.

Teachers are in a dilemma between an ELF-aware test and a traditional EFL test. The former tends not to include Native Speaker (NS)-like behavior in the test construct while the latter clings to a standard variety of the language with a yardstick for assessment purpose.

As Newbold (2019) claims, an ELF-test looks for the highest common factor in communication interaction. An ELF-aware test, premised on interaction, is a skill-based test. Therefore, teachers and tester should set tasks which involve comprehension and production in an ELF context, and to produce the instruments which can assess this performance.

In an ELF class, students already have this kind of attitude in their group discussion, while in an EFL class, teachers should foster this lenient attitude towards local errors which do not impede communication.

VI. Testing the receptive skills (Texts for reading)

About texts for reading, teachers need to improve EFL students' reading comprehension ability first, while ELF students have at least basic reading competence so teachers in ELF classes pay attention to the consistency between what they read and what they write using discourse synthesis.

A receptive skills ELF-aware test is one which makes use of Non-Native Speaker (NNS) input, and the input might be any text spoken or written by an NNS (Newbold, 2019). Listening seems to be conceptually less problematic, because a listening test which uses non-native texts simply acknowledge the phenomenon of NNS input, and it acquires authenticity as a consequence (Newbold, 2019).

However, there is always a potential problem of fairness. As a result, it is essential that test takers are fully informed about what they will be expected to do, and in the case of a listening test, the range of accents they are exposed to (Newbold, 2019).

What sort of texts should be chosen for a receptive skills (reading for example) test? Any text generated by a teacher-tester is likely to look towards NS norms, whereas the norms of ELF are flexible and need to be negotiable (cf. Newbold, 2019).

In an ELF-aware test of reading, both carefully mediated texts and informal texting might be justified. For example, in a school which has set up a link with a school in another country, it might be appropriate to use online communication forms from the partner school for test purposes

(Newbold, 2019).

Depending on how the texts are exploited, the test taker might not be required to produce ELF in reading tests, so the assessment is made through objective items in a psychometric format.

VII. Testing productive and interactive skills

The big challenging issue for ELF testing is the productive skills test. For speaking and writing assessment, in an EFL class the traditional instrument can be used to measure students' essential productive performance, while teachers in an ELF class need to establish an advanced grid reflecting the discourse synthesis mentioned above and the advanced students interaction ability.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) makes the useful distinction between spoken interaction and spoken production. The former reflects the multiplicity of communication purposes in human interaction, and the latter refers to monologue, such as narrating or making a presentation.

A typical ELF-aware test would involve interaction between NNSs. To assess performance in interaction, some sort of grid is needed. To assess ELF performance, this grid needs to take into account features of ELF interaction, such as accommodation and repair strategies, and phonological features and lexical creativity (Newbold, 2019).

As Newbold (2019) mentions, it might be more feasible to start with existing grids for assessing spoken interaction, which measure language proficiency features such as fluency, coherence and range, as well as interaction.

It could be argued whether only two levels (success or failure) are needed or a three-point scale (basic, good and excellent) is more appropriate for feedback.

Assessing spoken production may be slightly less problematic, since it involves only one person.

A grid for spoken production will need to recognize features of spoken production which enhance intelligibility for listeners. These features include speed of delivery, voice control, ways in which the speaker relates to the audience (Newbold, 2019).

Written production, assessed as part of an ELF-aware test, will require a similar approach, and a grid which is non-native reader-friendly rather than one for a critical native eye standard.

VIII. A Case Study: Comparing an EFL (Japanese Students-JS) class with an ELF (International Students-IS)

- 1) EFL(JS) and ELF(IS) are compared in terms of the difference of their awareness towards English as an International Language (EIL)/ELF.

There are EFL teachers who are aware of the importance of the role of EIL/ELF in today's globalized world and are therefore interested in implementing teaching and assessment methods that reflect ELF principles and promote learners' intercultural competence and skills (Kouvduou & Tsagari, 2019). Before mentioning ELF, we will discuss the awareness difference towards ELF/EIL between EFL(JS) students and ELF(IS) students.

First in EFL it is necessary to reduce the difference between the two groups, which means in an EFL class, raising awareness toward the varieties of English is necessary. EFL classes need traditional basic linguistic essential tests according to the NS standard as well as an awareness-raising questionnaire. For ELF awareness, teachers need to have high level of ELF-awareness.

For awareness, we could use the following EIL Awareness Measurement Scale for classroom use (Nakamura et al. 2019).

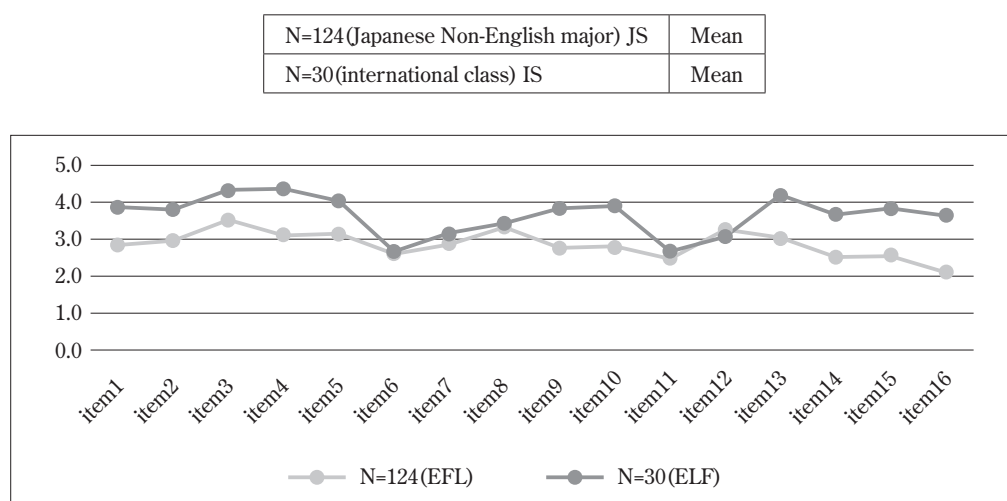


Figure 1 Comparison between ELF(IS) and EFL(JS)

Figure 1 shows that IS students have higher scores than JS students (Out of the 16 items, only five items have similar scores).

1. Open-minded attitudes toward varieties of English accent (OMVE)

In Factor 1 (OMVE), IS students are more open-minded or more aware of the variety of English.

| | item1 | item2 | item3 | item4 |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| EFL(JS) | 2.8 | 3.0 | 3.5 | 3.1 |
| ELF(IS) | 3.9 | 3.8 | 4.3 | 4.4 |

- (1) Hong Kong English and Indian English are acceptable today.
- (2) Korean English and Chinese English are acceptable today.
- (3) It is important to understand diverse English accents such as Indian English, French English, and Chinese English.
- (4) I am open-minded about different varieties of English accents such as Hong Kong English and Korean English.

2. Self-confidence for students' own English accents (SCEA)

Factor 2 show that two groups have similar self-confidence pattern towards their English accents.

| | item5 | item6 | item7 | item8 |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| EFL(JS) | 3.2 | 2.6 | 2.9 | 3.3 |
| ELF(IS) | 4.0 | 2.7 | 3.2 | 3.4 |

- (5) It is okay for me to have a local English accent.
- (6) It is okay if people laugh at my English accent because it is my own English.
- (7) Speaking with a local English accent is a great way to express myself.
- (8) I don't need to speak like American or British English-speakers as long as people understand my English.

3. Generosity towards non-native-centered teaching (GNNCT)

This factor (GNNCT) indicate an overall tendency of IS students' leniency towards non-native speakers as teachers. JS students have a strong native-speakerism for a teacher. In other words, Japanese students want to have a native speaker as a teacher. However, neither group has a strong desire to be like a native speaker in their accents or pronunciation.

| | item9 | item10 | item11 | item12 | item13 |
|---------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| EFL(JS) | 2.8 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 3.3 | 3.0 |
| ELF(IS) | 3.8 | 3.9 | 2.7 | 3.1 | 4.2 |

- (9) It is okay for teachers to use listening materials that contain different English accents.
- (10) It is okay for teachers to include the interaction between non-native English speakers (e.g., Korean-Chinese speakers) in listening materials.
- (11) Teachers shouldn't teach American or British pronunciation as a model.
- (12) Teachers shouldn't push me to speak like a "native" English speaker.
- (13) English teachers don't necessarily need to be native speakers of American or British English.

4. Cross-cultural Communication Strategies (CCS)

| | item14 | item15 | item16 |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| EFL(JS) | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.1 |
| ELF(IS) | 3.7 | 3.8 | 3.6 |

The fourth factor (CCS) indicates the linguistic and communication strategies differences between the two groups. IS students have higher proficiency and JS students know they have to improve their skills. EFL teachers need to take into account this discrepancy and enhance students basic linguistic and communication skills.

- (14) I can adjust my conversational style according to partner's cultural backgrounds.
- (15) I can behave appropriately according to English users I speak with.
- (16) I can explain my own culture clearly in English to people from other cultures.

IX. Concerning IS students' ELF class assessment system

With the teaching component in mind, the present author proposes the following categories for assessment of ELF with content validity in mind.

For linguistic competence:

- a) term-end paper (evaluation of writing ability, logical writing persuasiveness)
- b) student-led oral presentation (evaluation of speaking ability, oral persuasion ability)
- c) questions and answers (interaction ability)

- d) the teacher's observation of students' group interactions

For content aspects (awareness raising towards English variety and subject matter mastery)

- e) the course evaluation (official)
- f) the questionnaire (self-assessment)

The order of classroom activities is as follows:

1. Reading comprehension
2. Selecting sources (citations)
3. Connecting information (logicality)
4. Organizing ideas (creativity)
5. Reading and discussion
6. Oral presentation (3 minutes) followed by Question and Answer session
7. End-of-term Paper (3000 words)

And the scoring criteria is as follows:

1. For the End-of-term Paper

| Component | Evaluation Criteria |
|-----------------------|---|
| Reflection on reading | The response appropriately conveys the relevant information required by the task prompt, as well as shows recognition of the source text and comprehension of the contents of the passage. (1–5 points) |
| Rhetorical features | Ideas are clear, complete and well-developed. Writing is well-organized and logic is sequential. (Content, Organization, Cohesion) (1–5 points) |
| Grammar & Usage | Language use is excellent with a tolerable margin of errors in grammar (tense, number, word order/ function article, pronouns, prepositions) and in usage. (1–5 points) |

When evaluating the students, the process (reading comprehension, selecting, connecting, and organizing) is included.

2. For the Oral Presentation (evaluation of speaking ability, presentation ability)

| |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speech Organization (1–5 points) 2. Flow of Speech (1–5 points) |
|---|

3. For the Question and Answer session following the oral presentation (interaction ability)

In oral presentation and interaction, the spoken form of the logicity which should be revealed in the written form can be verified.

X. Results and Conclusions

Some suggestions can be drawn as follows:

In the ELF classroom context, more focus should be placed on awareness assessment, as well as linguistic and strategic competence, since assessment has a washback effect on the objectives of many language classes. We need to rethink English language assessment to reflect the needs and profiles of users of English as a lingua franca, in which the dynamics of interaction are rather different from that of communication with native speakers.

The priority for teachers, and students, should be to become ELF-aware, rather than to teach or learn ELF. The new approach to ELF assessment is not a test of ELF, but it is certainly an ELF-aware test in its attention to local needs (cf. Newbold, 2017).

The most fundamental principle underlying an ELF-approach to language teaching is its sensitivity to context. In an ELF context of assessment, teachers would like ELF-aware assessment to be open, inclusive and flexible (Kirkpatrick, 2019).

In conclusion, as Newbold (2019) claims, for teachers of EFL who want to develop tests in the EFL context which reflect the way in which English is actually used in the world, particularly in interaction between NNSs, they need such a test as an “ELF-aware test” rather than a “test of ELF”. It should be noted that this test would differ from traditional tests in its approach to errors, in the kinds of texts it uses, and in the grid it would need teachers to develop and use.

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Appendix (EIL Awareness Measurement Scale)

Factor 1: Open-minded attitudes toward varieties of English accent (OMVE)

- (1) Hong Kong English and Indian English are acceptable today.
- (2) Korean English and Chinese English are acceptable today.
- (3) It is important to understand diverse English accents such as Indian English, French English, and Chinese English.
- (4) I am open-minded about different varieties of English accents such as Hong Kong English and Korean English.

Factor 2: Self-confidence for students' own English accents (SCEA)

- (5) It is okay for me to have a local English accent.
- (6) It is okay if people laugh at my English accent because it is my own English.
- (7) Speaking with a local English accent is a great way to express myself.
- (8) I don't need to speak like American or British English-speakers as long as people understand my English.

Factor 3: Generosity towards non-native-centered teaching (GNNCT)

- (9) It is okay for teachers to use listening materials that contain different English accents.
- (10) It is okay for teachers to include the interaction between non-native English speakers (e.g., Korean-Chinese speakers) in listening materials.
- (11) Teachers shouldn't teach American or British pronunciation as a model.
- (12) Teachers shouldn't push me to speak like a "native" English speaker.
- (13) English teachers don't necessarily need to be native speakers of American or British English.

Factor 4: Cross-cultural Communication Strategies (CCS)

- (14) I can adjust my conversational style according to partner's cultural backgrounds.
- (15) I can behave appropriately according to English users I speak with.
- (16) I can explain my own culture clearly in English to people from other cultures.