

Why are Variation and English as a Lingua Franca Important Tools within the EFL Class?

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Abstract This article focuses on the importance of variation and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within the EFL class, as this language shows a plurality of native and non-native varieties. Most of the interactions take place between speakers of different L1, where ELF works as a shared code. Concerning variation, this study highlights how its use allows learners to mirror the cultural identity of their interlocutors by developing extremely effective mutual understanding. Finally, examples of experience-based activities show how the use of communication strategies elicits important life skills, whose development is strongly recommended by Agenda 2030.

Keywords English as a Lingua Franca. Variation. English as a Foreign Language. Multilingualism. Translanguaging. English language teaching. Educational Linguistics. Sociolinguistics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Variation: Enrichment or Contamination? – 3 Example of Variation Awareness. – 4 What is English as a Lingua Franca? – 5 What to Do Within the EFL Class. – 6 Example of ELF Awareness with the Elicitation of Soft Skills. – 7 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

While teaching English it is important to focus on those sociolinguistic and geo-linguistic differences that characterise this language, as it is no longer monolithic (Vettorel 2010). It shows a set of variants learners can come into contact with, such as, different accents, terms, idioms and uses that can be learnt in order to obtain effective communication. According to Santipolo (2010), variation is an enriching element not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a social one, since it develops cultural awareness and respect towards diversity. Furthermore, languages, thanks to their unity and variety, allow the development of variation awareness as an essential part of the communicative competence.

The first hints to the social dimension of languages date back to 1937. J.R. Firth developed a philosophy of language that was based on the interdependence of language, culture and society and on the idea that language should be studied as a social phenomenon in its real context of use. In 1965 Chomsky introduced the difference between competence and performance. Then, in 1974, Hymes underlined the importance of a communicative approach in foreign language teaching and developed his S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model. He highlighted that speech acts should be analysed by taking into consideration some social variables affecting the use of language, such as time, place, participants, purposes, social rules and styles that characterize a speech act. According to Hymes, grammar and vocabulary are not sufficient to interact successfully because it is necessary to possess a wide range of complex skills that are interconnected and their development should be considered as the goal of language education (Santipolo 2010).

Sociolinguistic rules depend on dynamic and contextual factors that are very different from the rules of traditional grammar. The exclusion of variation from the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class, thus, compromises and strongly reduces the usefulness of teaching, since it does not mirror the real use of English. In light of this, it becomes important to develop, among learners, a sociolinguistic sensitivity that allows them to become independent in understanding and managing the social use of language, in relation to the context, the interlocutors and the goals of a communicative event (Santipolo 2010).

2 Variation: Enrichment or Contamination?

In 1747 Samuel Johnson announced his plan of a dictionary of the English language, where his main goal was to preserve it and, in particular, he aimed to:

preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom [...] put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. (in Nordquist 2020)

According to Johnson, English seemed to need some discipline, so his dictionary would help govern it by stabilising its rules. His words reveal that change was considered as something to erase, to fight against. Variation was perceived as a terrible pandemic that could seriously endanger the English language and its own life, since it was “copious without order and energetick without rules” (Johnson 1755, Preface). As a result, the best antidote against this contamination was to embalm the language inside a dictionary, which took over eight years to compile.

Nonetheless, Johnson, in his preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*, had to admit that language mutability was impossible to fix because of its constantly changing nature. He realised that his role was to chronicle the real language, even though “there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated”, wherever he turned his view:

those who have been persuaded to think well of my design require that it should fix our language. With this consequence I will confess that I flatter myself for awhile; but now begin to fear but I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change some sublinary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity and affectation. (Johnson 1755, Preface)

This example highlights how variation is an unavoidable phenomenon, a peculiar characteristic of any living language, which conveys different features as according to the context. Since the EFL class is multicultural and multilingual (MIUR 2019), learners constantly come into contact with linguistic variability, which affects pronunciation, lexis and morpho-syntax. It is an essential part of any language that teaching can no longer ignore.

3 Example of Variation Awareness

Within this scenario, how can variation become an enriching key element for learners? Teachers should let learners experience some varieties of English, ranging, for example, from British, American or Australian English to localisms and regionalisms. In this way, students can come into contact with those socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic elements (Santipolo 2006) that enable them to develop contextualised communication, which leads to successful understanding.

This work aims at highlighting that variants act as a cornerstone of the communicative approach: they are expressive potentials conveying different semantic nuances that produce a different social impact, in relation to the context of their use. Furthermore, this study underlines that the use of variation allows learners to choose the most appropriate language options, according to the situation. As a result, learners can take responsibility both for their choice and, thus, for the impact it can have in a specific context, by triggering a relevant improvement in the quality of the oral interaction.

The following activity aims at introducing variation in English and promoting its awareness within the EFL class. It mainly focuses on the diatopic dimension of some lexical variants for 'bread roll' all over the United Kingdom. A contrastive translanguaging activity involved learners, at an Italian high school, to make them draw on their personal experience and direct knowledge about bread, by recalling possible variants in their own L1.

Thanks to this exercise, they shared some Italian and foreign terms, such as *michetta* from Milan, *puccia* from Apulia, *panuozzo* from Naples, *mianbao ciué* from China, *rolou de péine* from Romania, *duub rootige* from Somalia etc. These terms stemmed from the personal experience of learners, according to their origins. This kind of experience-based activity made them aware of the fact that variation is not a peculiarity that only concerns the foreign language they study, but it is a living and strong feature of their own language as well. Then, learners were given some images of bakeries/ sandwich shops [fig. 1] and an article [fig. 2] to help focus on the fact that the generic term 'bread roll' (loaf, lump of bread) can be different, depending on where you are in the United Kingdom. As soon as they saw the pictures, they could not understand what 'bun', 'barm', 'cob' and 'bap' exactly meant, but they could relate them to bread thanks to the previous exercise. Therefore, this activity acted as a bridge to lead learners towards some British regional variants, which embody the identity, the history and the culture of different places and people.



Figure 1 Examples of different British bakery signs. Pictures taken with permission from a) <https://nearer.com/>; b) <http://www.thecrustycob.com>; c) <http://letstourengland.com/>; d) <https://random-times.com>

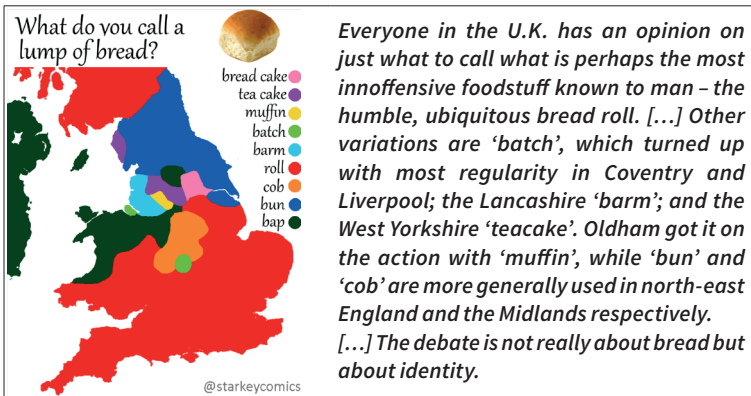


Figure 2 Article about variants for breadroll: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20180717-why-the-uk-has-so-many-words-for-bread>. Figure taken with permission from <https://starkeycomics.com/2018/12/10/nine-names-for-british-bread-lumps/>

Interestingly, this activity shows that the use of linguistic variation allows learners to mirror the cultural identity and the *Weltanschauung* of their interlocutors. As a result, this ability enables learners to build empathy by improving mutual understanding. Variation, therefore, let them become similar to their interlocutors by knocking down socio-cultural barriers and fostering extremely effective communication.

4 What is English as a Lingua Franca?

The use of English, all over the world, has been affected by the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) phenomenon which challenges natives speakers' (NSs) norms in English communication (Jenkins 2006) by requiring intercultural awareness rather than native-like language competence. According to the British Council,¹ today English is estimated to be spoken by two billion people around the world, so the panorama of this language is no longer homogeneous: it is characterised by a plurality of expressions that include native and non-native varieties. This means that the contexts, where interactions normally take place, result from the meeting of different languages and cultures, within which at least three linguistic codes come into play: the L1 of the interlocutors and the English language as a shared medium of communication (Vettorel 2010).

For this reason Kachru's model, which explains the spread of the English language around the world, does not seem to describe today's scenario anymore. In fact, it considers non-native speakers (NNSs), the Expanding circle, as simple rule-users; ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers from the former British colonies, the Outer circle, as rule-modifiers; and NSs, the Inner circle, as the only possible rule-makers who can affect the structure of English, thus, providing its norms. As the situation has deeply changed, the Outer circle and the Expanding circle will act as rule-makers as well (Santipolo 2016). This is a consequence of the paradox of internationalisation: the more a language is used worldwide, the less it can convey the worldview of its NSs, who can no longer be considered as the unique owners of its correctness (Santipolo 2006).

In light of this, how can ELF be defined? The original term 'lingua franca' comes from the Arabic *lisan-al-farang*, which referred to an intermediary language used by speakers of Arabic with travellers from Western Europe (House 2003). According to Jenkins, the term ELF was first reported by two German scholars, Hüllen and Knapp, in mid-1980s, who mainly focused on its importance as an objective

¹ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/english-effect-report-v2.pdf>.

for language teaching. She underlines that English behaved as a lingua franca in the past:

and continues to do so nowadays, in many of the countries that were colonised by the British from the late 16th century on. (Jenkins 2013, 22)

Although other languages, such as Arabic, Greek, Latin, Portuguese and Sanskrit, performed this function in the past (Knapp, Meierkord 2002; House 2003; Seidlhofer 2011), what is new and impressive about ELF is the extent of its reach, since it goes well beyond the narrow geographical spreads of other lingua francas (Jenkins 2013). Defining ELF has been quite difficult and controversial, as scholars have expressed different points of view. Jenkins, for example, first defines it as:

the world's most extensive contemporary use of English, in essence, English when it is used as a contact language between people from different first languages, including native English speakers (NESs) [...] Empirical research into ELF [...] has demonstrated numerous ways in which English is used effectively by its (majority) non-native lingua franca speakers but often differently from ways in which it is used among native speakers. (2013, 2)

Then, she refers to ELF as a “multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (2015, 73), by highlighting its feature of multilingua franca. Other scholars have not included NESs in their definition of ELF. A. Firth, for example, describes it as the contact language “between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common culture” (1996, 240). According to House, ELF interactions take place “between members of two or more different lingua-cultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue” (1999, 74). McKay (2009) prefers using the term EIL (English as an International Language) to include NESs and considers ELF for NNSs-NNSs communication. Then, Seidlhofer points out that ELF should be considered 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. (2011, 7)

According to Mauranen (2012), it shows the characteristics of a simlect since ELF is spoken by individual speakers rather than a cohesive group, who transfer features of their L1 to it.

As languages are shaped by their majority users (Brumfit 2001), NESs seem to contribute for less than NNSs to the ways in which ELF evolves over time (Jenkins 2013).

5 What to Do Within the EFL Class

An example of pluricultural and multilingual interaction is given by the class group itself because more and more learners come from different backgrounds, cultures and languages (MIUR 2019). Since this is the context that teachers face every single day, this work highlights the fact that it is compelling and urgent to practice activities within the EFL class that: (i) sensitise students to the real use of the English language by promoting the classroom as a multilingual and multicultural contact place; (ii) make students aware of the fact that they represent a real ELF microcosm, since they embody a non-native context; (iii) promote knowledge and accessibility to different pronunciations and accents of the English language depending on the origins of the speakers. How can all this take place within the EFL class? To answer this question, it becomes fundamental to raise awareness of the real use of English, among teachers, to make them promote and develop the knowledge of ELF. Sifakis (2017) suggests that teachers should realise how they normally act, within their class, in order to meet their learners' real communicative needs. He highlights that ELF should be integrated with EFL since its main features are hybridity, fluidity and variability. ELF, therefore, becomes interesting to teachers, who can add an extra dimension to EFL practices, which enable learners to communicate better and to become more critical and open-minded. In light of this, Sifakis and Bayyurt define ELF awareness 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. (2017, 459)

From this perspective, teachers should integrate authentic tasks with realistic communicational goals through experience-based activities that lead learners towards a spontaneous metalinguistic reflection, which can really make a difference in their learning and, therefore, in their interactions.

6 Example of ELF Awareness with the Elicitation of Soft Skills

In ELF contexts, communication strategies, such as compensating and accommodation, normally occur to overcome linguistic gaps (Vettorel 2010) by fostering collaboration and comity (Aston 1993) that go beyond the boundaries of formal correctness, as interactions focus on the effectiveness of the messages both interlocutors want to convey. Since ELF is function-oriented rather than form-oriented, intelligibility plays a very important role (Sifakis 2017). Therefore, this work aims at showing that exposure to this kind of interactions is essential for learners to become aware of communication strategies. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe 2018), these tools not only should be considered as a way to compensate for linguistic gaps, but also as a means to activate those resources that meet the communication needs.

Here is an example of an ELF awareness activity that took place at an Italian high school. Learners were first introduced to some audio recordings of conversations in English among Italian, Polish and Spanish students (NNs), which had been recorded at a welcome meeting within an exchange programme, in Italy.

During the first part of this exercise learners were invited to focus on the different accents they could perceive and on the fact that understanding was absolutely not compromised, despite the form used was not appropriate. Subsequently, they were asked to paraphrase the interlocutors' messages in order to make hypotheses and assumptions. This exercise aimed at making learners develop some strategies for the co-construction of a syntonic interaction that triggers greater understanding. It becomes, thus, extremely important for teachers to make their students use these tools, as they have the chance to learn directly how to cooperate in a conversation and how to find alternative ways. As a result, learners are encouraged to solve communication problems rather than to abandon any attempt at resolution (Vettorel 2010). From this point of view, interactions can turn into real labs where learners can develop awareness of the use of these tools, which build empathic relationships (Gallo 2021). During this activity it was observed that while learners were using communication strategies, they could elicit not only their linguistic competences but also some skills which enable them to acquire personal and social attitudes that can be spent in professional and social contexts [fig. 3]. For example, when learners paraphrased the meaning, used approximation or looked for synonyms, they, unconsciously, activated life skills such as problem solving, creativity and critical thinking. Furthermore, when they asked for/gave help or repaired communication breakdown, they could elicit negotiation, collaboration and team working. Then, when learners checked reactions, modulated in-

tonation/volume, used eye contact/gestures, they could experience adaptation and flexibility. As soon as students opened/closed the conversation, took the floor, gained time or encouraged their interlocutor to construct a new meaning, they could develop leadership and self-confidence. However, it is quite difficult to define clear boundaries between soft skills, as most of them take place simultaneously during the whole conversation.

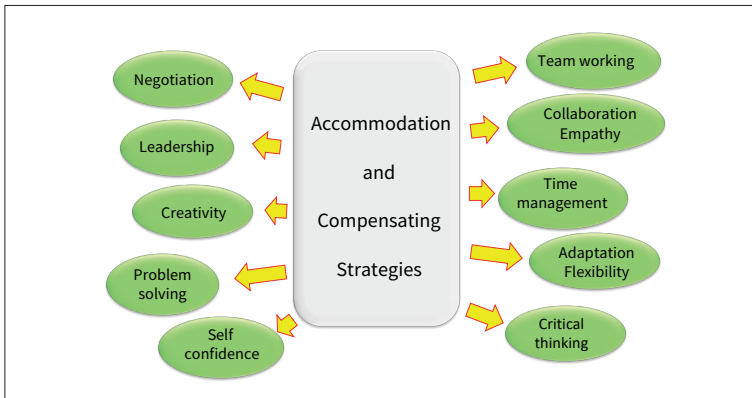


Figure 3 ELF communication strategies eliciting soft skills

Another reason why it is important to make learners develop these skills is that they meet the indications contained in the Sustainability Education Plan - Agenda 2030.² In general, the Agenda revolves around the fulfilment of seventeen goals that concern equality, health, innovation, quality education, climate action, growth, peace and justice. In particular, the fourth goal deals with ensuring inclusive and quality education to promote lifelong learning opportunities to everybody. This means that school is urged to focus on the development of communication strategies and on the elicitation of soft skills as an important part of learning.

7 Conclusions

What emerges is that English keeps evolving towards different directions which embody its contextualised uses. Since language changes to new social needs, it serves as an important means of cultural understanding (Crystal 2003). In light of this, it becomes fundamental

² <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.

to raise awareness of the real use of English, thanks to experience-based activities that lead learners towards a spontaneous metalinguistic reflection, by triggering effective learning.

From this perspective, teaching should adopt a pluralist approach (Di Scala 2018) by making ELF and variation awareness come into play and by integrating elements that can act on qualitative aspects. This point of view is strongly supported by the Sustainability Education Plan – Agenda 2030, suggesting that learners should acquire competences and life skills in order to face social/professional contexts and to grow up as global citizens of the world.

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