Research on the Need to Describe English as a Lingua Franca - A Reading Response to Seidlhofer (2001)

Si Li[1,*]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, Liaoning 116023, China
*Corresponding author. Email: lisi@neusoft.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

As English is used widely in the world, an increasing number of individuals pay attention to describing the phenomenon and the status of English. This paper summarizes critically Seidlhofer's article on the case for a description of English as a lingua franca. It first introduces Seidlhofer's major arguments briefly, and then proceeds to analyze the feasibility of describing English as a lingua Franca and establishing an ELF corpus. Finally, relevant research results of other researchers and concluding remarks are given.

Keywords: Lingua Franca, corpus, English teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization, communication between different countries is increasing at all levels such as overseas tourism and education. For instance, a Chinese student may have a group discussion with a Korean student in an American classroom using English. In this context, English becomes a shared language of communication used by two speakers whose first language is not English. In other words, English works as a lingua franca. Whether English can be defined as a lingua franca, and how to do relevant research aroused Seidlhofer's attention.

In 2001, Seidlhofer wrote an article to call for more descriptive research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) [1]. She states that an ELF corpus needs to be established and points out the constructive impact of ELF research on English pedagogy and teacher education. Her paper is comprised of four major arguments, to be specific, a conceptual gap, conflicting tendencies, the need for description of ELF, and establishing an ELF corpus. She finds that till now the studies on English teaching and learning have mainly concentrated on speakers of English as a native language (ENL), however, based on a fact that among English users individuals who are non-native using English account for the majority, it is necessary to pay more attention to them. She also states that although studies on ELF may be pioneering and likely to make a contribution to English teaching and learning, the current situation is paradoxical that the acknowledgement of the need has not been given, and accordingly few relevant studies are undertaken to date.

2. THE MAJOR ARGUMENT OF SEIDLHOFER

2.1. The Feasibility of Describing English as a Lingua Franca

Seidlhofer illustrates the feasibility of her research from several perspectives. First, she argues that technological innovations help create some good corpora, for instance, ICE and ICLE, so it provides a good model to create the ELF corpus [1]. In addition, the research studies by Jenkins [2] on the EIL phonology and by House [3] on ELF pragmatics provide a theoretical foundation for further study on ELF. In terms of the potential advantages of her research, she illustrates that the conceptualization of ELF helps make clear terminological distinctions in linguistics. What's more, once an ELF corpus which is an empirically based description of ELF is available, it is easy to explain to learners in English teaching, and learners can choose their own learning in ELF or ENL directions. Besides, ELF for pedagogical purpose is likely to result in "reappraisal about every issue and tenet in language teaching which the profession has been traditionally concerned with" [1]. Last but not least, ENL speakers argue as people from different cultural backgrounds speak English according to their distinctive grammar or thinking patterns, English has been named an instance of English use, say, 'Chinese English' and 'English English'. Therefore, more descriptive research on ELF can make up the conceptual gap.

2.2. The Establishment of an ELF Corpus

In the section of Towards an ELF Corpus, Seidlhofer provides her research methods and research questions. Her

first target is to establish a corpus of ELF in the field of speaking since the target of the research is to grasp a wide range of variation, and spoken communication is overly reciprocal. The research instrument is unstructured observation by transcribing some speech events like dialogues, group discussions, presentation, and conversations among fairly fluent non-native adult speakers. Seidlhofer makes deep and detailed analysis of her collected data, as showed in her paper the transcription of the conversation between Reto and Stephanie. However, what the limitation is that the elicited data in her research may be quite restricted. Speaking is only one part of ELF, and it is common that some native speakers make some grammatical errors like data is…she think…, so it may not represent ELF speakers in some senses.

The research questions show her main concerns as follows:(1) the most relied-upon and successfully employed grammatical constructions and lexical choices (2) aspects which contribute especially to smooth communication (3) factors which lead to misinterpretation (4) the relationship between the degree of resemblance to a variety of L1 English and communicative success (5) constructions, lexical items and sound patterns which are ungrammatical in standard L1 language but appropriate in ELF communication (6) whether it is conceivable to simplify L1 English which could constitute systematic features of ELF. The questions raised by Seidlhofer provide some areas for further research.

3. RELEVANT RESEARCH ON ELF

3.1. Overseas ELF Findings and Research

Seidlhofer does connect her paper with alternative studies in the ELF field. Sinchair [4] writes in his book that the development of information technology makes it possible to set up an ENL corpus, from which Seidlhofer argues the feasibility of ELF corpus. Malmkjar [5] defines the term lingua franca in terms of pidginization, while Seidlhofer argues its restriction that although a pidgin language is a lingua franca, the latter does not need to be reduced to a pidgin language. The observation of the communication between Reto and Stephanie also confirms Jenkins' finding that successful communication is feasible through a small-sized phonological repertoire. Seidlhofer's research concentrates on lexico-grammar and discourse aiming to complement the work already done by Jenkins on ELF phonology and by House on EFL pragmatics.

The research of ELF can be traced back to the 1980s, while at first few researchers focused on it, and acknowledgement of the need was not given. Since the end of last century and the beginning of the 21st century, academic achievements by Jenkins [6], Seidlhofer [1], and Mauranen [7] paved way for the new field. Mauranen made the outlines of a project, in which one variety of lingua franca English, namely academic speaking was investigated. Moreover, she raised three scholarly interests

of ELF as theory, description and application. From the theoretical perspective, she states that it is of great significance to set up a large database, that is, a corpus to study the ELF language, which is accordance with Seidlhofer's viewpoint. The second interest in lingua franca English is descriptive, which she points out that the descriptive work of ELF might serve as a bridge between theory and application, and such research requires international collaboration with scholars. The above two interests are based on Seidlhofer's research. As to applicational aspects, Mauranen argues that the objective of learning could be thought of from two viewpoints: one is that speakers' identities should be guaranteed, the other is efficiency. As a consequence, the empirical study of successfully-used ELF communication should be carried out.

3.2. ELF Developments in China

As the most-populated country in the world, China has been paying close attention to English teaching and learning since its reform and opening up. The research and developments of ELF also arouse attention of Chinese scholars. Wen [8] points out that ELF has become a field of enquiry during the past 20 years. The main achievements can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the Journal of English as a Lingua Franca was published in 2012 establishing an academic platform for ELF researchers, scholars and students to present and share their findings and research results. Secondly, some Master and Doctorate candidates have passed the defense examination, while more Master and PhD candidates are doing relevant research in the ELF field. Thirdly, the international conference of ELF has been held once a year since 2008 with the 8th conference held in Beijing, China and the 9th one in University of Lleida, Spain, which demonstrates that a research team of ELF has been founded. Lastly, three huge corpora have been established including VOICE, ELFA, and ACE. Until March, 2020, merely in China, 209 research papers have emerged from the search engine CNKI (China National Knowledge Internet) with the keyword ELF.

A multi-entity ELF is proposed by Wen [9] which considers ELF as a system comprising various ELFs, within which she provides the methods of describing each ELF. According to Wen, the consensus of the definition of ELF has still not been reached in this field. Nevertheless, she defines what ELF is and constructs nELF from the perspective of multi-entity, in which nELF is a system consisting of respective ELF called xELF, namely European ELF, Asian ELF, African ELF, American ELF, Latin American ELF and Oceanian ELF. Under each ELF, there could be further classification. For instance, Asian ELF can be divided into East Asian ELF, South Asian ELF, Southeast Asian ELF, West Asian ELF, North Asian ELF and Middle Asian ELF. Furthermore, East Asian ELF can still be classified into Chinese ELF, Japanese ELF, South Korean ELF, North Korean ELF and Mongolian ELF. Additionally, Chinese ELF can be categorized as education,

news, science, technology etc. Through this multi-entity view, ELF can be described at all levels.

She further provides the static and dynamic framework of xELF, in which the former includes triangular language organization, language form and language content, while the latter consists of triangular cultural strategy, communicative attitude, and interactive model [9]. Her critical summary of two contradictory perspectives, i.e. essentialist versus non-essentialist, and mono-entity view versus multi-entity view presents a clear research area of ELF. The above research findings by Wen are also based on Seidlhofer's perspective.

4. CONCLUSION

Research on ELF, including what ELF is and from which perspectives to study ELF, has been a topic of controversy. In this context, Seidlhofer called for more empirical research in the context of establishing corpora. In the final section, Seidlhofer states the difficulties of ELF research that it is a hard, labor-consuming and time-costing task which needs to be implemented with great caution. Little expectation should be given and early commercial exploitation should be forbidden. Moreover, in order to make a contribution to linguistics, there must be some practical problems, prejudice, cultural conflicts, etc. However, she still holds positive attitudes towards her research due to the potential advantages it may bring to ENL and language teaching. Nevertheless, some of Seidlhofer's arguments seem to be illogical. Her research concentrates on ELF speakers who are mainly non-native speakers, and the entire project springs from the assertions that: (1) there are native speaker norms and these are fundamentally distinct from non-native speaker norms; and (2) in a world where the latter group of speakers outnumber the former, the former will have to abide by the norms of the latter. As Park and Wee [10] put it, these assertions unnecessarily polarize the native/non-native speaker dichotomy. Furthermore, the research questions in her paper focus only on the internal coherence and mutual intelligibility among the participants, it may ignore "the problem of the logic of capital conversion within and across linguistic markets". In the future research, more descriptive or empirical studies of ELF can be carried out from different genres such as Korean ELF, Spanish ELF or Chinese ELF, which may consist of not only speaking but also writing.

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