

# All in a day's work ... or, ELF in a day's work: meeting the changing needs of learners and users of English in Higher Education

## Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been described as "... the fastest-growing and at the same time the least recognised function of English in the world." (Mauranen 2009). As a shared language used between speakers who do not have the same lingua cultural backgrounds, English has been the global language of business for some time (Charles 2008) and is increasingly used in academia, not only as the lingua franca of research, but also for teaching and administrative work. As a field of research, ELF focuses on language use in context, notably showing how flexible users of ELF are in negotiating meaning and achieving understanding, despite differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Firth 1996, 2008). Yet, using English as a lingua franca can present challenges, and the research findings have implications not only for users of English in a range of contexts, but also for teachers and learners of English.

The focus of this article is on the effect of change with regard to English on curriculum development and syllabus design at the University of Zurich and Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) Language Center. Drawing on Richards (2001), curriculum development refers here to an overall process of educational planning and implementation, comprising needs analysis, situation analysis, setting of aims and learning outcomes, course design, delivery and assessment. These elements are seen as a "network of interacting systems." (Richards 2001:41). Syllabus design, on the other hand, deals with the specific content covered in a given course.

## Context

Concerning the context and situation analysis, the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich Language Center is a central service unit that operates in the field of teaching, alongside a number of other similar units, for example, the Center for University Teaching and Learning. The role of the Language Center is to provide language support and training for all stakeholders: undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic, administrative and support staff. The University of Zurich is the largest university in Switzerland with 24,000 students and is a member of the League of European Research Universities. ETH Zurich has over 16,000 students from approximately 80 countries and is one of the leading international research universities for technology and natural sciences.

As a consequence of internationalisation in higher education and the Bologna Reform, the need for and role of English has grown and continues to grow in importance in this context. The Mission Statement of International Relations of the University of Zurich includes the following statement on language:

*Multi-lingual Switzerland lies at the very heart of Europe. The University of Zurich's identity as a German-speaking university is to be cultivated especially at the Bachelor degree level. Degree programmes are being promoted in English at the Master's and Doctoral level.*  
(Schaffner forthcoming)

The current language of instruction in Bachelor programmes is German at the University of Zurich, with only a few programmes being taught in German and English, or entirely in English, in the Faculties of Science, Economics and Law. Nevertheless, English is recognised as the lingua franca of research. At ETH Zurich, the situation is somewhat different, reflecting the longstanding use of English as a global lingua franca in science. Of a total of thirty-nine master programmes offered in 2009, the majority were taught in English with only two given in German and nine in both German and English. ETH Zurich's strategy is to recruit Bachelor students from Switzerland and German-speaking countries, but focus on recruiting international students at the master and doctoral level, notably from countries with which the institution has long-standing partnerships worldwide (Schaffner forthcoming).

## **Changing Needs**

Needs analyses carried out by the Language Center in the form of surveys, classroom questionnaires, monitoring of enrolments for standard courses, and analysis of requests for tailor-made training indicate considerable changes in terms of stakeholder needs over the last five years. Whereas students often chose English for pleasure in the past, they now express instrumental needs, for example, writing their theses in English at master's and doctoral level or reading papers effectively and taking part in discussions at all levels. Academic and administrative staff also increasingly face new needs and challenges. These can range from teaching in English to ensuring that safety and security regulations are respected in laboratories. Increasing numbers of international students and staff cannot be expected to become functional in German overnight and, indeed, some research groups may rarely need German in their work. Thus, whilst the Center encourages international staff and students to take advantage of courses in German as a foreign language, a pragmatic stance has to be adopted with regard to English and German in dealing with "daily business".

## **Curriculum Renewal and Syllabus Design**

In order to meet the changing needs of our course participants and users of English within the two institutions, the English curriculum has been almost entirely redesigned in the last few years. Moving away from a major focus on general English, courses for bachelor and master students now focus mainly on English for Academic and Specific Purposes and include courses on understanding lectures and participating in discussions, academic writing with different courses for humanities and natural sciences, and presentation skills. Courses in English for Specific Purposes include, for example, English for Law, which helps meet the needs of law students wishing to study for masters degrees abroad. For doctoral students and academic staff, courses are offered in writing for publication, conference presentations, and teaching in English. Tailor-made courses are also designed and delivered for "users" of English such as the ETHZ Safety, Security, Health and Environment Unit, who give advice on risk management to ensure the safety and security of persons, infrastructure and the environment within ETHZ. Their experts provide appropriate training to ETH members and support staff and students with safety manuals and information in both English and German. Another example of training provided to users is an interdisciplinary course given in collaboration with the Center for University Teaching and Learning entitled "Teaching in English in non-English speaking environments". This course focuses on the interface between ELF, pedagogy and culture(s) in higher education, and is thus not a language course per se.

A high level of professionalism is, of course, necessary in delivering such courses and meeting stakeholders' needs. The approach to teaching is research based (Hyland 2006) in that syllabus design and development are based on careful analysis of "end products", e.g. sample documents such as theses and research articles that the course participants need to produce, or activities staff need to undertake such as training or teaching in English, which are analysed in terms of genre and linguistic features. Syllabus design and course development require the ability to identify and transform learners' needs into concrete learning aims and outcomes, and develop appropriate materials and methodologies to achieve the aims. A professional development programme within the English unit supports the teachers in keeping up to date not only with research on language learning and teaching, but also on research in applied linguistics concerning subjects such as genre theory, pragmatics and discourse analysis.

## **The Relevance of ELF Research**

An awareness of change in relation to English and its nature and use as a lingua franca are also of key importance with regard to curriculum development and is also included in the teacher development programme. It is important for teachers, users and learners of English not only to accept the wide range of "Englishes" that exist globally, but also be aware of the fact that that unlike Australian or Indian English, ELF displays considerable variation in the way it is used both by individual speakers and within groups of users. As such, it cannot provide a model of standard language for teaching in the way a codified variety of English can. However, what ELF research shows is the way language is used in authentic contexts and, interestingly, the fact that "non-native-like mastery" (sic) of the linguistic code in itself does not impede successful communication.

In delivering English courses not only to traditional "learners" of English, but also to "users" of English, often with urgent needs and little time, focus on appropriate and effective communication mainly amongst ELF users is of key importance. It is no longer either necessary or relevant to aim for so-

called native speaker competence, but more appropriate to achieve a balance between competence in terms of the language and effective communication in specific contexts and for specific purposes (Seidlhofer 2004, 2008). ELF research shows that ELF is often misconceived as simplified English, which promotes low standards and removes learners' choice regarding how and what they learn (Jenkins, 2007). Yet raising awareness of the nature of ELF and what is entailed in language learning and language use offers both learners and learner/users of English more choice. Some learners and users may favour accuracy more than others, and the level of mastery of the linguistic code needed also depends to a large extent on what the learner/user needs to do with the language and in which context. Thus, whilst ELF can be situated on a continuum from "basic" to "expert" users, this does not mean "anything goes". Indeed, research on teaching assistants has shown that a threshold level in terms of mastery of the linguistic code is needed to teach effectively in English, although "good grammar" is not necessarily equated with excellence in teaching! (Rounds 1987).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what we can learn from ELF research that is relevant to learners, users and teachers of English is, as Mauranen et al (2010:7) have pointed out that:

*The successful use of ELF demands new skills from its speakers, native or non-native, compared to those which traditional language education has prepared people for.*

This is very much the case where English is being learnt for use in non-English speaking contexts and where ELF is embedded in multilingual contexts and typified by diversity in language proficiency and in speakers' linguacultural backgrounds. There is now a clear need for increased awareness of and ability to deal with diversity in terms of tolerance towards difference in English(es) and use of English, the ability to adapt and accommodate to others, and the ability to detect potential communication problems and negotiate meaning. Comprehensibility is of particular importance, without needing to sound like a native speaker. Teachers need, on the one hand, to prepare "learners", such as the undergraduates we train, for use of English in a range of settings and with a range of speakers, and, on the other hand support "users", who have little time and very specific needs, in performing the tasks they have to undertake adequately and appropriately, be they teaching in English, dealing with security matters or answering student enquiries at the counter in service units.

In conclusion, it can be seen that whilst the use of ELF continues to spread, ELF research has broadened the paradigm of teaching and learning in increasing the awareness of real use of a lingua franca in diverse and authentic contexts. In practical terms, within our context, this has been and continues to be applied in terms of curriculum renewal to meet changing needs and on-going teacher development activities to deal with the new challenges of teaching English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ELF is, indeed, present in every day's work.

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