ELT: Competence Training or Education in Capability?

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The generally accepted objective of ELT is to get learners to achieve communicative competence, defined in reference to native speaker norms of usage. Success is then measured by how far learners conform to these norms. We argue that this is essentially a training activity which directs learners to satisfy a predictable goal specified in advance. But if ELT is to serve an educational purpose it needs to prepare learners to deal with the unpredictable communicative demands they will encounter when they become users of English 'for real' so to speak, beyond the end of their course and its assessment. It will need to educate them by investing in a capability to adapt to these demands. Such an educational perspective would involve integrating English with the learners' previous language experience, thereby extending the range of their existing capability. English would then not be, as it currently tends to be, represented as dissociated from their familiar experience, but an additional linguistic resource which their capability can continue to exploit and develop as they learn by using language as a lingua franca in the communicative contexts of the real world.

Key words: competence, capability, teaching, learning, training, education

1. Introduction

The stated aim of this Special Issue of RPLTL is to consider how ELF 'could potentially impact all areas surrounding ELT'. The acronyms will, of course, be familiar to the readers of this Journal, and it can be assumed that they will agree on what words the letters signify. But it does not follow that there is agreement about what the words refer to. The E is the only letter in both acronyms that stands for the same word, English, but what does that word refer to, and does it refer to the same thing when the E combines with LT as when it combines with LF? As with any other use of acronyms as convenient labels, ELT and ELF often have a way of disguising quite fundamental differences in what the words refer to. So it seems worthwhile to engage in a little acronym deconstruction, to explore what underlying significance they might have. As we seek to show, this process leads to a critical consideration of conceptual issues that have a crucial bearing on how ELT is to be defined and designed as a subject – issues concerning the corresponding relationships between ELT and ELF, competence and capability, training and education, and learning and teaching.

2. What's in a name?

The T of ELT marks it as something taught – a pedagogic subject. The EL, in accordance with common practice, is intended to refer to English as a second language, an L2, an additional language other than the familiar one that learners have already acquired as a first language. ELT in this respect can be taken to be a shorthand equivalent to another familiar acronym, TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, and this is indeed used as a synonymous alternative in the description of the general aims of the RPLTL Journal: "This peer-reviewed electronic journal is dedicated to publishing research in the domains of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Applied Linguistics" (https://rpltl.eap.gr/, last accessed May 18, 2023).

There are other acronymic variants in common use: one is TESL – Teaching English as a Second Language, and another, TEFL – Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and these too seem to be similarly used in free variation. 'What's in a name?' one might ask. The terms are diverse, but they all are used to refer to one and the same subject on the curriculum.

Or do they? Are they all just alternative labels for a general consensus about how English as a subject should be conceptualised? Or does the choice of term signal some kind of conceptual difference - one that it would seem, for example, prompted the TEFL Department in the University of London Institute of Education to officially change its name to the TESOL Department?

The ELT acronym can be said to represent the subject as a teaching activity, the straightforward unilateral process of teaching English as an already established language on the assumption that this will necessarily result in learning. The TE of TESOL also signifies that the subject is concerned with the teaching of an established English language, but with the SOL learners now make an appearance. This, we can say, acknowledges that the teaching has to take learners into account and since they are speakers of other languages, the subject can no longer be represented as exclusively concerned with English. It is involved not only with the EL to be taught but also with the OL of the learners. English then itself becomes an other, a second language to be added to the first language they already have, so the EL becomes ESL as in the acronym TESL. And it is this otherness of English that makes it foreign, as explicitly signified in the acronym TEFL.

This little exercise in acronym deconstruction might seem to be trivially pedantic, but it raises issues about the conceptualization of English as a pedagogic subject which are far from trivial (cf. Widdowson, 2013). One has to do with E as the teaching objective. Reference is frequently made to English as the target language, but how is that target to be defined? Does the otherness or foreignness of English make it essentially different from the other languages that learners speak? Is English as L2 to be categorized as a different kind of language from the one that native speakers speak as L1? Is secondness the same as foreignness?

3. The foreignness of English

Although languages can be readily categorized as second by virtue of their chronological sequence of acquisition, they cannot be categorized as foreign in the same simple way. On the contrary, since foreignness can only be defined with reference to what is familiar, it follows that a language –any language– is foreign in diverse ways in relation to other languages (Widdowson, 2003: Ch. 11). This diversity is not only a matter of so-called language distance, overtly manifested in the differences between lexical and grammatical properties

which have long been the subject of contrastive analysis. The diversity is also crucially a matter of the various attitudes that are adopted to the other language. These may have to do with degree and/or kind of social contact between communities of speakers. The attitude to a neighbour language, whether linguistically close or not, is likely to be quite different from the attitude to one which is more remote. Attitudes can take the form of persistent prejudices historically rooted in negative or positive associations with the community of its speakers. Or they can be informed, in Bourdieu's terms, by what kind of cultural, economic and/or social capital the other language is thought to represent – what socio-cultural or economic advantage is to be gained by acquiring it (cf. Bourdieu, 1986 [1983]; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). It is not enough to simply describe the differences between languages in linguistic relativity terms, as distinct cognitive encodings. Any communal language is intricately bound up in its own ecological complex of socio-cultural, religious, economic values.

So languages are foreign in all kinds of different ways and there is no general category of foreignness. How then is the English language foreign? And for that matter, to what degree is English foreign at all? It has, after all, now become familiar as a pervasive lingua franca used internationally, across communities, as a global means of communication. In this crucial respect its otherness is of a different order from that of languages more confined in their communal scope. So what implications does ELF have for defining the *objective* of English *teaching*?

Or for the *process* of English *learning*? Since EFL learners are speakers of other languages, these other languages will inevitably be a presence in the ELT classroom. This presence is generally seen as an unwelcome intrusion in orthodox ELT, discouraged as an unwarranted interference in the learning process. The fact that learners are speakers of other languages is thus taken to be a negative factor, an obstacle to be countered. This isolation of English from the learners' own familiar experience has the alienating effect of making it all the more foreign. One might say that the possibilities of learning involvement implied by the SOL of TESOL are rejected so that in effect teaching does indeed focus on foreignness. TEFL is then indeed an apt name for the subject. How then can, or should, the fact that learners are speakers of other languages be taken into positive pedagogic account?

Again, this brings up the question of how ELF might "potentially impact" how ELT is to be conceptualized as a subject – using this acronym here and henceforth in its general shorthand sense. ELF is the *use* of English by speakers of other languages. If ELT is the *teaching* of English to speakers of other languages, then it seems reasonable to suppose that there should be some relationship between the two. And this relationship has indeed been argued in principle elsewhere (Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2015a) and explored in practice in proposals for an ELF-informed pedagogy (e.g. Dewey, 2012; Kohn, 2015, 2018; Lopriore and Vettorel, 2015; Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2020; Sifakis et al. 2018; Sifakis and Tsantila, 2019; Vettorel, 2015). This paper takes up and reformulates matters arising from this previous work.

4. The teaching of competence conformity

Whichever other acronyms are used to label it, ELT, to use the shorthand term, like any other second or foreign language subject on the school curriculum, is generally taken to mean the teaching of *a* particular named language, identified as the property of the community of its native speakers. In the case of English, it is assumed as self-evident that this (owner) community is one belonging to Kachru's Inner Circle, which is said to provide the norm which all manifestations of the language can be referred to. And it is this norm - referenced, normal English, typically BrE or AmE, that is routinely described in standard works of reference and

assumed therefore to be what is to be prescribed as the objective of learning. All other manifestations of the language are by definition characterized as 'ab-normal', or 'non-normal'[1].

Where 'non-normalities' are manifested by learners in the classroom, it is seen to be the teacher's task to remedy them by persuading learners into norm conformity so that they meet the institutionalized conditions of assessment that define learning success. These non-normalities, however, tend to persist beyond the confines of the classroom, when learners become users of the language for real, so to say, in the wider world, when they need to put it to expedient use as ELF, a lingua franca means of communication. Although therefore ELF resembles Learner English (Granger, 1998; Granger et al., 2015; Swan and Smith, 2010) in this respect, its linguistic non-normality cannot simply be equated with deficiency. On the contrary, as is well attested, ELF users are capable of effective communication without such norm conformity.

It has, of course, been long recognized that acquiring linguistic competence in English, or in any other language, does not equate with the ability to communicate in the language. Hence the prescription of communicative competence as the learning objective. But the basic principle of norm-conformity remains in that the communication is defined exclusively with reference to the particular usage conventions of Inner Circle native speaker communities. The objective of communicative language teaching, CLT, as usually practised, is not to develop a general communicative capability in English but a particular competence by getting learners to conform to the conventional ways a specific community communicates. This is typically done by correlating certain normal forms of language with their conventional communicative functions, and requiring learners to learn the correlations (Wilkins, 1976; Ek and Trim, 1998) In other words, normal rules of linguistic usage are paired up and put into correspondence with normal conventions of communicative use as if each was integrally dependent on the other. So although it is recognized that conforming to linguistic norms is not sufficient for achieving a communicative learning objective, it still seems to be assumed as self-evident that it is a necessary requirement. In the currently promoted CLT approach, Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), for example, tasks are designed to develop communicative fluency only in tandem with accuracy and complexity, both of which are defined in reference to established linguistic norms. Communicative competence is thus taken to be the integrated combination of Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency (CAF; cf. Housen et al., 2012). Although the common claim of communicative language teaching is that it is radically different from the previously favoured form-focused structural approach, in its retention of a NS norm-referenced competence as its pedagogic objective, there is no difference at all.

Here then we have a curious contradiction. From the orthodox ELT perspective, English that is not standard usage, or even if it is does not conform to the idiomatic conventions of NS communicative use, is assumed to be deficient and needs to be remedied if learners are to achieve their communicative objective. But when learners become ELF users they have been shown to manage to communicate in spite of their non-conformity. And though their non-normalities may from an ELT perspective be seen as evidence of incompetence, this does not make them incapable of communicating. Clearly the NS norm-referenced communicative *competence* set as the objective of orthodox ELT is very different from the communicative *capability* that is exercised by ELF users.

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[1] Although we find the literal meaning of the term 'ab-normal' appropriate for present purposes, we decided to use 'non-normal' / 'non-normality' because of the negative connotations that 'ab-normal' has in general language use.

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5. Two conceptualisations of English

This disparity between competence and capability relates to two radically different ways of conceiving of English, or any other language if it comes to that. On the one hand, it can be conceptualized as an *état de langue* - set of current encoding rules and usage conventions assumed to represent the canonical competence of a community of native speakers. This we will refer to as English as a normal language, and the encoding rules and usage conventions that define its normality are what are generally described in dictionaries and grammars and prescribed in textbooks as *the* English language and what learners need to be taught to conform to. But it is obvious from the very non-normal non-conformities that are produced by learners and ELF users alike, that English also represents something else: a communicative resource, a potential for meaning making that can be expediently realized unconfined by convention.

These two different ways of conceiving of language are referred to by Halliday (2003 [1977]) as developmental stages in first language acquisition as the linguistic experience of up-bringing changes when the child goes to school:

> Up till now, language has been seen as a resource, a potential for thinking and doing; […]. From now on, language will be not a set of resources but a set of rules. (Halliday, 2003 [1977], p. 94)

But although schooling might be seen as an inhibiting imposition of rules, it is only one factor in the natural socialization process in which, to use the title of Halliday's 1975 book, 'learning how to mean' is a matter of learning the conventions of meaning-making that obtain in a particular community, knowledge of which represents the credentials of membership. Thinking of language as necessarily normative, a set of rules or conventions to conform to, is integral in the very process of communal socialization. So it is not surprising that this concept of language is so deeply embedded and has been granted special status as the authorized version of the language. But the fact that this resource has become conventionalized in a particular community does not of course exhaust its potential as resource. And as resource, the language is available for anybody to realize its potential in whatever way it is communicatively expedient to do so. When this results, as it often does in ELF communication, in a non-normal expression, the usual reaction is to apply conventional criteria and say that this is *not English*. But it is nevertheless recogniseably *in* English. Whereas knowing how to mean in L1 acquisition involves the conventionalization of resource, knowing how to mean in using ELF involves the reverse process of restoring the privileging of resource over convention. In the non-normalities of ELF communication, the language is uncoupled from the conventions that define it as the property of a particular community, and gets appropriated as a generally available resource for meaning making. In reference to the earlier discussion, the language gets de-foreignised. And to go back again to acronyms, the FL in EFL becomes the LF in ELF and as these two letters change their meaning, so does the E in relation to them.

6. Language training vs. language education

What bearing, then, does this fundamental difference have on the theme of this Special Issue 'Integrating English as a lingua franca in education'? The adherence of orthodox ELT to the conventional concept of English as *a* normal language, and accordingly to the belief that learning can only be defined as competence conformity, cannot accommodate the concept of English as language more generally, as communicative resource, and so precludes the

integration of ELF. But this does not mean that ELF cannot be integrated into language *education*. And here we need to consider two other terms that are frequently used as free variants, namely education and training. Do they too mean the same thing? If not, what different meanings can we assign to them?

In orthodox ELT, courses are typically designed to achieve a predictable competence objective, graded into interim stages of approximation to native speaker norms, each measurable by assessment. A course therefore specifies in advance what is to be taught and tested, and learning is deemed successful to the extent that it meets these specifications. So in effect teaching competence is a *training* in conformity to established convention. Learning then is taken to be the reflex of teaching, and as such comes to a closure at the end of the course. What is then assessed is actually the success of teachers in training learners to conform.

But this success, as every teacher knows, is far from unqualified. Learners have a marked tendency – marked in two senses of the word - to resist conformity, learn less than they are taught and stubbornly persist in their incompetence. But they also learn more than they are taught as is evident from the fact, pointed out earlier, that when they become ELF users they are capable of communicating by means of the very non-normal exploitation of English as resource that teaching had sought to suppress. They have somehow learned how to put to expedient resourceful use the inherent meaning potential within the language, to have acquired a communicative capability in English in spite of the competence confinement imposed upon them. Rather than conforming to the conventions that make English the property of its native speakers, ELF users have appropriated it as language for themselves. This is not something they have been, or can be, trained to do – it is indeed something they are discouraged from doing. So how have they managed to do it?

The first and most obvious point to make is that this capability is not initiated during the English course but originates in the learners' experience of their own language. And here we come to the point made earlier about the TESOL acronym. Confronted with a language which is formally foreign to them, learners will look for ways of engaging with it, attempting to make the foreignness familiar by relating it to the experience of their other language(s). Since they lack a knowledge of normal conventionalized English, they will quite naturally seek to make use of English as a communicative resource. In other words, they are learning how to mean in English, and the non-normalities they produce will be the overt realization of this process.

From an orthodox ELT perspective, however, learners have to be trained to learn how to mean in the approved conventional way, and so they have to be discouraged from exercising the capability they have acquired through their own language experience. It is taken to be an impediment to achieving the approved competence objective which calls for training in norm conformity: the influence of the learners' own language(s) is therefore to be countered as far as possible by an exclusive monolingual focus on English. And this, of course, as previously pointed out, has the alienating effect of making the language all the more foreign.

As noted earlier the non-normalities of learner English closely resemble those that frequently occur in ELF communication. The usual conclusion is that ELF use is really only learner English/an interlanguage, its users still in the process of acquiring the language. But one can draw the opposite conclusion: that learners are, in effect, behaving like ELF users, their non-normalities the natural outcome of their capability to make expedient use of whatever English, or any other language, is available to them as a communicative resource. In so doing they enact the process of translanguaging (Cenoz and Gorter, 2022; García and Wei, 2014). This

has been identified as an essential feature of communicative behavior in general, but is stigmatized as incompetence when learners do it. English language learners, being already capable users of language, naturally bring this capability to their learning, apply it to extend their resource repertoire, and draw on this subsequently as ELF users. Learning can now be seen as a kind of self-education, for it is this developmental process that it is the purpose of education in general to promote.

Education, whatever the particular subject, is essentially a transitional developmental process which Janus-like is both retrospective and prospective. It starts from the learners' existing experience, from what they initially know and believe, and extends and reformulates this in ways assumed to be beneficially relevant to them in subsequently making their way in the world. Development by definition has to have some prior state of affairs to develop from, and this in the present case is represented by the learners' existing communicative capability. But this retrospective educational condition is not met by orthodox ELT, where competence is disconnected from the learners' previous language experience.

Orthodox ELT does not meet the prospective educational condition of future relevance either in that its fixation on competence as objective does not prepare learners to adaptively cope with unpredictable communicative situations they will encounter after the end of the taught course and beyond the test.

7. The learner/teacher relationship

Re-conceptualising the subject ELT as an education in capability rather than a training in competence radically changes the nature of learner involvement. But what of the teacher? The role of the teacher in competence training is clear, and their pre- and in-service preparation for adopting it is appropriately called teacher training, which generally involves initiating them into different techniques for persuading learners into conformity. This task is greatly facilitated by the fact that the course books and other materials commercially made available to them will be designed with the same objective. The question arises as what the role of the teacher should or can be if the objective is to educate learners in capability instead.

One obvious move, and one that has already been underway for some time (e.g. Seidlhofer, 2004, 2011; Widdowson, 1990, 2003) is to educate teachers themselves in a critical awareness of the limitations of orthodox ELT, in the realization that Inner Circle native speaker competence is an idealized abstract construct that bears little resemblance to the realities of English as it actually used, so in effect learners are trained to conform to something that does not actually exist. There has, over recent years, been an increasing acknowledgment that although canonical Inner Circle norms of competence may be given pedagogic primacy, English manifests itself in various other ways and these should be given due attention in teaching, especially when it comes to comprehension of the spoken language (e.g., Llurda et al., 2018; Sifakis et al., 2018, 2022; Vettorel, 2016). How it is variously manifested in Outer Circle communities has been recognized as being distinct Englishes in their own right, equivalent in status to that of the Inner Circle and it is now common to find samples of these world Englishes included in ELT materials (e.g., Rose and Galloway, 2019). In this way, learners are made aware that there are varieties of English usage they may have to cope with, other than the standard version of the language that they are trained to be competent in.

But of course, a variety is an *état de langue*, a state of language, which represents how communicative resources have been normalized by convention in a particular community. Raising awareness that varieties exist does not in itself reveal the variable process whereby

these resources have become conventionalized. If learners are to develop their communicative capability in English it is this process of variation that they need to be aware of, of how the inherent meaning potential in the language is resourcefully and expediently adapted to meet communicative contingencies (Seidlhofer, 2021; Widdowson, 2015b, 2020). And it is precisely this adaptive process which is enacted in the non-normalities of ELF usage, and, as argued earlier, accounts for the corresponding non-normalities in learner language.

What then does this suggest should be the teacher role in educating learners in a communicative capability in English? To begin with, its relationship to the learner role clearly has to be other than which is presupposed in orthodox ELT. When the subject of ELT is discussed, it is almost always referred to as the English teaching and learning, as indeed it is in the name of this Journal, RP*LTL* rather than RP*LLT*. Again, one might ask: What's in a name? And again one can assign significance to this order of words in that it suggests that teaching is primary and learning a secondary consequence (Widdowson, 2020, p. 207f.). If learning is taken to be a matter of competence conformity, this order does indeed signal that the teacher role is primary and that of the learner subordinate to it since, as indicated earlier, what is learned is taken as dependent on what is taught. But if it is capability that is to be the pedagogic objective, then since learners are already communicatively capable in their own language(s), teaching is a matter of encouraging learners to exploit the resource of English to extend the range of this capability. The teaching task then becomes not to initiate the learning of something new but to encourage and support the further development of a process that already exists. It is the learner role that then becomes primary and teaching subordinate to it.

Such a learner-centred role reversal has far reaching implications. Perhaps the most obvious is that the monolingual teaching that has long been a defining feature of orthodox ELT would be abandoned and the use of the learners' L1, and any other language available to them, would not only be allowed, but encouraged as an essential learning resource. This would mean that translation, which has always been a covert learning strategy in ELT classrooms, would become an overt and indeed central feature of teaching methodology (Cook, 2010; Widdowson, 2020: Ch. 17*)*. And this in turn would mean that as learning is local, so must this methodology be, and teaching can no longer be based on monolingual English course books designed to induce competence conformity and assumed to be globally suitable for teaching, whatever the local learning context might be. It also, of course, challenges the authoritative status usually accorded to the native-speaking teacher.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that 'integrating English as a lingua franca in education' necessarily involves the reconceptualisation of the ELT subject as education in capability rather than as training in competence. How far a reform of the subject along these lines is a realistic prospect is, of course, a very different matter. Orthodox ELT is institutionally endorsed by such authorities as the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2018) and profitably promoted by the publishing and testing industry (e.g., Hawkins and Filipovic, 2012; Kurtes and Saville, 2008; UCLES/CUP, 2011; for further discussion, see Widdowson, 2021) and any challenge to its validity is bound to meet resistance from ingrained beliefs and vested interests, against which educational arguments, however valid, may be of little avail. But the emergence of ELF is part and parcel, both cause and consequence, of globalisation which has brought about changes which challenge the validity of many an accepted idea and supposed certainty and have to be adapted to. So it surely makes sense to at least consider what change in our established ways of thinking about ELT might also be warranted in the contemporary world.

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