

English as an Academic Lingua Franca – the ELFA project

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As the use of English in academic settings has continued its spread and influence all over the world, the global status has brought with it a change in the user population: academic English is mostly used by non-native speakers.

The situation calls for a better understanding of the way English is used in the new circumstances where the native speaker may not be present, and where Standard English may not be the most relevant norm. It also raises many new questions about the teaching of English for academic purposes. More generally, we know relatively little about the effects on English of the complex language contact that now characterises its global use.

The ELFA project investigates academic discourses using English as a lingua franca. The main foci are university discourses, and the chief achievement so far is the 1-million-word ELFA corpus of spoken academic discourse. The project as a whole branches out to other academic discourses and supplements corpus work with other approaches. The project leader is professor Anna Mauranen. The project was funded by the Academy of Finland 2004-2007, and is currently being funded from the University of Helsinki research funds.

1. The ELFA corpus

The ELFA corpus (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings; www.eng.helsinki.fi/elfa) is a one-million-word corpus of spoken academic English (131 h of recorded speech altogether) compiled mainly in the University of Tampere, and in part also in the University of Helsinki, and the technological universities of Tampere and Helsinki.

The corpus is compiled in authentic situations where English is the contact language, but not an object of study in itself. ELT classes are thus not included, or events where all speakers share a first language. Native speakers are occasionally present in group situations, but in

relatively minor roles. Compilation criteria have been 'external' throughout, that is, they are determined by socially based definitions of the prominent genres in the discourse community.

The basic unit of sampling is the 'speech event type', which is a looser term than 'genre'. This was preferred because some event types are much further established as genres (e.g. lectures) than others (e.g. workshops or panels). The speech events are 'complete' in that the individual sessions have been recorded in their entire duration. For other sampling criteria, the aim was to achieve breadth and avoid undue focusing on any single type. The factors considered were disciplinary domain, typicality (shared by many disciplines, such as lectures, seminars, thesis defences, and conference presentations), influentiality (affecting a large number of participants, such as introductory lectures), and prestige (invited speakers). As for the disciplinary domains, the ELFA corpus is composed of social sciences (29 % of the recorded data), technology (19 %), humanities (17 %), natural sciences (13 %), medicine (10 %), behavioural sciences (7 %), and economics and administration (5 %).

A deliberate bias was built into the sampling by favouring dialogic events such as seminars and discussion sections (which make up 67 % of the data), because the idea was to capture ELF speech taking shape in interaction.

Speakers in ELFA represent a wide range of language backgrounds. Altogether, the corpus comprises approximately 650 speakers with 51 different first languages ranging from African languages (e.g. Akan, Dagbani, Igbo, Kikuyu, Kihaya, Somali, Swahili), to Asian (e.g. Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Persian, Turkish, Uzbek), and European languages (e.g. Czech, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, Swedish etc.). The percentage of speech by native English speakers is 5 %. Also, considering that the recordings were made in Finnish speaking universities, the percentage of speech by Finnish mother tongue speakers is relatively low at 28.5 %.

Although all speakers have been taught English in some formal education system, their proficiency levels appear to vary a great deal. There was no attempt to control this, as it is common in ELF encounters, a normal part of the situation speakers find themselves in. In fact

university contexts probably have a narrower range of variation than many other contexts, given its specific demands.

The transcription is broad, with spelling normalised to Standard (British) English as far as possible, to facilitate computer searches. To offset this, the sound files will be made available to researchers. Basic background information such as context, and speaker age, gender, and L1(s) are coded along with recording and transcription information.

The principal researchers are Elina Ranta who is investigating features of verb syntax in ELF, and Maria Metsä-Ketelä, whose topic is vague expressions in ELF. The ELFA team has published their work extensively, see for example a special issue on NJES (2006).

2. The SELF project

Project SELF (Studying in English as a lingua franca) complements the corpus study by a more qualitative approach. It seeks a close-up view of ELF by tapping participant experience by observing and interviewing speakers.

The main questions SELF seeks to answer are

- (1) Seeking to understand the ways in which communities of practice regulate their use of language. How do participants negotiate their linguistic differences arising from their diverse first-language backgrounds and their varying levels of proficiency?
- (2) Seeking to capture participant experience of academic ELF discourses. How do participants experience the pursuit of academic activities using English in a non-English speaking matrix culture? What spoken and written genres and speech events do participants engage in?

The project explores interactive management of discourse, negotiation of meanings, accommodation and sources of misunderstanding. In addition to speech, written data is analysed. The SELF project began in Helsinki in 2007, and is funded by the Helsinki University research funds for three years. The principal researcher is Niina Hynninen, whose doctorate is on “Language Regulation in English as a Lingua Franca Interaction”.

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3. Other work on academic ELF

ELFA project team members pursue PhD projects in other settings as well: lecturing in English-medium programmes at the Technological University of Helsinki is investigated in Jaana Suviniitty's doctoral thesis, and Diane Pilkinton-Pihko is developing appropriate ELF-based tests for the same university. In addition, project members work on vocational education, Business English, and other professional Englishes.