

# Red Herrings and the Case of Language in UK Higher Education

*Jennifer Jenkins, University of Southampton*

## *Abstract*

Focusing on English in higher education, I argue that while other ‘real-world’ issues such as power differentials and racism undoubtedly have a role in some settings, in higher education the prioritising of native English is, in itself, a cause of injustice and inequality for non-native English users. I go on to discuss how an English as a lingua franca orientation can help to remedy this problem.

Keywords: linguistic injustice; translanguaging; native speakerism; EMI

## *1. Introduction*

At a time when the English language is spreading around the world both actually and virtually at an unprecedented rate and orientations to the phenomenon of Global English (or Englishes, as I prefer) vary considerably, Anna Kristina Hultgren’s provocative paper provides a welcome contribution to the debate with respect to applied linguistics. Meanwhile, her invitation to several of us to respond to her position shows an admirable open-mindedness at a time when some parts of the field of applied linguistics seem (to me at least) to have become increasingly intolerant of alternative perspectives.

Before I move on to my response, which perhaps not surprisingly comes from an English as a lingua franca perspective, I would like to make a point about applied linguistics and applied linguists more broadly. Hultgren argues that English is a “red herring” because it is other phenomena rather than English/language that are the root causes of injustice and inequality, and that language is “a contingent and secondary factor”. In doing so, she contends that “any intervention focused solely on matters of language [will not] put things right”, even that it “misdiagnoses the problem and proposes the wrong solutions”.

My main response will, by contrast, argue that language—specifically English—can indeed be a root cause of injustice and inequality, even though rarely the *sole* cause. In this respect, I doubt I am

Jenkins, Jennifer. 2020. “Red Herrings and the Case of Language in UK Higher Education.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19(3):59-67.

the only one among Hultgren's respondents to draw attention to a widely respected definition of applied linguistics, and one to which many applied linguists have long deferred: that of the late Christopher Brumfit.

In his chapter of a volume on applied linguistics, Brumfit stated that his paper was "concerned with questions in applied linguistics as a problem-centred discipline", adding that his preferred definition of the field was "The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (1995: 27). While those who take Hultgren's view of applied linguistics might object to Brumfit's use of the word "central", there can be no disputing that Brumfit—and the many who have since adopted his definition—saw "real-world problems" involving language as the starting point, and in no way implied that addressing *language alone* would necessarily solve them. Having said this, my own response will argue that there are certain situations such as the one I discuss below, in which focusing on language will, indeed, "put things right". To this extent, then, I believe Hultgren has overstated her case against applied linguists.

In the remainder of my response, I will focus specifically on the first of Hultgren's three assumptions that applied linguists apparently hold, namely that non-native English speakers are disadvantaged by the spread of English. I will argue that while there are undoubtedly other "real-world" issues such as power differentials and racism at stake in some, but not all, settings, the prioritising of native English can, in itself, be a cause of injustice and inequality, and that an English as a lingua franca orientation to the English of non-native users can help to "put things right". The specific case I will use to make my argument will be English in higher education.

## *2. An English as a Lingua Franca Perspective*

I begin by running briefly through the development of English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) in order to provide some key background to the position I take in respect of English in higher education. English has of course been a global language for centuries and a global lingua franca for several decades. It was not until the 1970s, nevertheless, that the notion of legitimate non-native Englishes began to be aired. Initially this was in respect of the field that came to be known as 'World Englishes', that is, the English varieties used by speakers of other

languages in countries that had been colonised by the British. World Englishes scholars, most particularly the late Braj Kachru and the late Larry Smith, pioneered the study of these Englishes, and fought a long hard battle—still not entirely won—for them to be accepted as English varieties in their own right rather than seen as ‘deficient’ versions of ‘proper’ standard native English. Research into ELF came somewhat later, starting in the late 1980s with my own doctoral research, but not taking off as a field until just over a decade later with the publication of my first monograph on the subject (Jenkins 2000) and the establishment of the first ELF corpora (see Seidlhofer 2011, Mauranen 2003).

Initially ELF researchers followed the lead of World Englishes and treated ELF in the same way, arguing for the acceptance of ‘varieties’ such as German English, Japanese English and the like, on a par with Indian English, Singapore English and so on. Soon, however, it became clear that the phenomenon of ELF was of an entirely different order. For although ELF users from other first languages undoubtedly carried over a greater or lesser degree of influence from their first language into their English, something else entirely was responsible for the way their use of ELF subsequently developed, i.e. their interaction with speakers from different first languages than their own. Mauranen (2012) neatly conceptualises this in terms of the notions of ‘similects’ (first language influence) and ‘second order contact’ (interaction with speakers from other first languages). A key feature of ELF was thus acknowledged as its context dependence (who is speaking with who, as well as the influence of the language(s) spoken in the specific geographical setting), and its resulting variability. With the realisation that ELF use was so contingently variable came the understanding that it would never be possible to describe ELF in the way World Englishes varieties could be described, let alone to codify it.

More recently, it became clear that there had been too much focus on the Englishness of ELF while the other languages of ELF users had not been sufficiently taken into account, and in particular that the role of translanguaging (e.g. Li and García 2014, Otheguy, García and Wallis 2015) needed to be given far greater prominence in ELF research (see Jenkins 2015). Until then, ELF had widely been understood and defined as the use of English as a contact language among speakers from different first languages with no reference to ELF users’ first and other languages. For example, a much-quoted definition from Seidlhofer

described ELF 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, my italics). By contrast, the definition I proposed in 2015 in an attempt to switch the focus from English to ‘multilingualism with English’ was: “multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice but is not necessarily chosen” (p.73).

So what does this all mean in terms of Hultgren’s claim that to posit English as a main cause of inequality and injustice is a “red herring”? The key factors, it seems to me, concern language ideology on the one hand, and lack of understanding of the natural effects of language contact and change on the other. For although World Englishes are nowadays accepted globally (if sometimes begrudgingly, especially among certain native English speakers), the English of its non-post-colonial users such as continental Europeans and East Asians is still seen by the vast majority (including some theoretical and even applied linguists) as English as a Foreign Language (EFL): in other words, an unsuccessful attempt to speak English like its natives.

Monolingual language ideology is of course not restricted to English. Indeed, some non-native English users, precisely because they hold this same kind of ideology in respect of their own first language (e.g. Chinese speakers of Putonghua), transfer their first language ideology to the English language, and regard the English of their countrymen and women and themselves as intrinsically inferior where it differs from certain types of native English. In this, they are showing their lack of awareness not only of the way language contact leads to language change, but also of the distinction between a native or foreign language and a lingua franca. While there may be some justification for requiring certain norms to be respected in the case of ENL (English as a native language) or EFL, there is no justification whatsoever for it in the case of a global lingua franca such as ELF. And from this ideological position and lack of awareness come inequalities and injustices that can relate specifically to language use rather than to other “root causes”. This may be the case especially in contexts where non-native speakers are at the elite end of the social and professional spectrum. For it seems that in professional settings where English is the primary means of communication, non-native English speakers are made to feel they should defer to the English of native English speakers. This may even be

made explicit, as it is for example in academia, where non-native English speakers are regularly exhorted to have their journal submissions ‘checked by a native English speaker’ (rare exceptions being publications on ELF such as the *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, the book series *Developments in English as a Lingua Franca* and possibly the earliest example, a special issue on ELF of *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 2006, edited by Mauranen and Metsä-Ketela). This type of linguistic inequality is, nevertheless, unlikely to be restricted to elite professional groups. And although it is still an empirical question, I believe current and future research may demonstrate similar in settings where ELF users are also affected by non-linguistic disadvantage such as racism, power relations, poverty and so on, and where linguistic inequality intersects with these other phenomena.

It has been the aim of ELF researchers over many years to disseminate knowledge about ELF in order to raise awareness of this global phenomenon, improve understanding of it, and help change the way people orient to the English of the large numbers of non-native speakers who use it primarily as a tool of communication in lingua franca contexts, rather than as a means of communication and blending in with native English speakers. In this endeavour, I believe we ELF researchers have already made great strides in our aim of improving understanding of the linguistic (sic!) injustice and inequality from which many non-native English users have suffered for decades. In fact, ELF is nowadays often described as a “mainstream” field of applied linguistics and is also included in various ELT teacher training courses. The second part of the aim, to effect changes in orientations to the use of ELF is still very much a work in progress. It is nevertheless already leading to changes in education, albeit in small steps, particularly at the level of higher education, to which I now turn.

### *3. English Medium Instruction in Higher Education*

In this, the main part of my response to Hultgren, I restrict myself to UK higher education. I should first point out that like the majority of ELF researchers, I do not accept the orientation of Macaro et al (2018) towards English Medium Instruction (henceforth EMI) that we can only talk of EMI in countries where English is not the mother tongue, and therefore that the UK is not an EMI setting. I beg to differ on the grounds

that where a university is sited geographically is of minor relevance as contrasted with the number and range of students from non-English mother tongue countries who study in any given institution. In this respect, the UK for many years has had the highest ratio of (non-native English) international students to home students and been second only to the US in terms of actual international student numbers. Indeed, it is not unusual to find courses in UK universities, particularly at postgraduate level, where home students are vastly outnumbered by international students.

The majority of international students attending UK universities tend to be elite in terms of status, income, power and the like, so could not be described as suffering from injustice or inequality in these and similar respects (although racism cannot as yet be discounted). Having said that, I have encountered among my own postgraduate students both refugees and impecunious self-funding students from low-and-middle-income countries. As well as this, it is important to observe that just because someone has a comfortable background does not mean they do not have any needs. And in the context of my current discussion, these needs are linguistic: they involve feelings of being discriminated against on account of their non-native English, and being made to feel inferior because of it. In my own research (e.g. Jenkins 2014, Maringe and Jenkins 2014, Jenkins and Mauranen 2019), I have found plentiful evidence of this phenomenon. The injustice and inequality from which these students (and often also international staff) suffer is purely linguistic injustice and inequality. That is, it is purely about *English*. Because their use of English differs from 'standard' (i.e. native) English, they may not gain a high enough score in the native-English based IELTS entry examination to be granted university access in the first place, which risks destroying their proposed careers before they even start higher education. And even if they do score highly enough, they may find they have marks deducted from their written work and sometimes oral presentations too, because their English is not sufficiently natively-like. They will therefore graduate with lower grades than their home student peers, purely on account of their English.

By pure coincidence, while writing this piece, I received an email from an international staff member at a UK university who succinctly presented both the problem and the potential of ELF research to address it. This is what the email writer said:

Like many universities around the country, University of X is very eager to be a welcoming international institution, but as the diversity of our student body grows, we seem to struggle with some implications re language expectations/requirements. As somebody whose first language is not English, I may be particularly sensitive to that. I am writing to you because after one particularly difficult meeting, I googled 'English as a tool' (I clearly lacked the right terminology) and stumbled on your talk about Global Englishes. I was so inspired, I immediately bought your book *English as a Lingua Franca in the International University*. You say so eloquently and with abundant evidence what I had very clumsily tried to communicate on that slightly heated meeting.

I have reproduced this extract from the email not as an exercise in self-congratulation, but entirely to demonstrate a first-hand example of the potential for ELF research to improve the current linguistic injustice and inequality in UK higher education, where most universities call themselves 'international', take massive sums of money from international students, but still conduct their daily linguistic business as if they were national institutions. Change is nevertheless on the horizon as ELF research becomes more widely disseminated among non-linguists. For example, after a few years of ELF research being disseminated in my own department, the requirement to use native-like English was removed from the marking scheme for masters' dissertations. This is of course only a very small step, but many such small steps will lead to a major reduction in the linguistic inequality faced by non-native students in UK universities.

Currently, in line with the expansion in research into translanguaging, and the subsequent redefinition of ELF as a multilingua franca, ELF researchers' attention has been focusing far more than previously on the multilingualism of ELF users, and the ways in which they translanguage in and out of the various languages in their repertoires. Given that UK universities are sites of ELF use par excellence, and that UK universities regularly boast on their websites about the vast range of languages spoken by their international recruits, I would like to end by proposing for the first time that instead of EMI, we rename the phenomenon TMI: *Translanguaging as Medium of Instruction*. My hope is that just as ELF research has raised awareness of the implications of language contact and change and the need to respect diverse uses of English, so the re-termining of EMI as TMI would normalise the use of other languages than English on UK university campuses instead of their being regarded as undesirable. This would

bring UK higher education more into line with higher education in other countries, where the home language is mostly not English, and where other languages as well as diverse uses of English tend to be more ubiquitous if not necessarily condoned by those in authority (see Jenkins and Mauranen 2019 for examples of UK HE faring badly in comparison with English-medium HE in other countries, but also Jensen et al. 2013 and Werther et al. 2014 for examples of similar bias against non-native English in Danish HE).

To return to Hultgren's argument that language/English is not the root cause of injustice and inequality, I conclude by saying I disagree. There are undoubtedly occasions when she is correct, but there are also occasions when she is wrong, and I believe language/English in UK higher education is one of them. On the one hand, international students (and staff) seemingly hold an elite status by virtue of having been accepted into UK universities. But on the other hand, the continuing language ideology permeating the UK university system that places native varieties of English at the top of a linguistic hierarchy (and generally excludes other languages altogether) does indeed cause injustice and inequality.

### *References*

- Brumfit C. 1995. Teacher Professionalism and Research. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (eds.) *Principle & Practice in Applied Linguistics. Studies in honour of H.G. Widdowson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 27-41.
- García O. and W. Li 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenkins J. 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language. New Models, New Norms, New Goals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins J. 2014. *English as a Lingua Franca in the International University. The Politics of Academic English Language Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins J. 2015. Repositioning English and Multilingualism in English as a Lingua Franca. *Englishes in Practice* 2/3: 49-85.
- Jenkins J. and A. Mauranen (eds.) 2019. *Linguistic Diversity on the EMI Campus. Insider Accounts of the use of English and Other*



- Languages in Universities within Asia, Australasia, and Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Jensen C, Denver L, Mees I, & Werther C 2013. Students' Attitudes to Lecturers' English in English-Medium Higher Education in Denmark. *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 12/1, 87-112.
- Macaro E, Curle S, Pun J, An J, and Dearden J (2018) A Systematic Review of English Medium Instruction in Higher Education. *Language Teaching* 51, 36-76.
- Maringe F. and J. Jenkins 2015. Stigma, Tensions, and Apprehension: The Academic Writing Experience of International Students. *International Journal of Educational Management* 29(5), 609-626.
- Mauranen A. 2003. The Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings. *TESOL Quarterly* 37(3), 513-27.
- Mauranen A. 2012. Exploring ELF. *Academic English Shaped by Non-Native Speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Otheguy R., O. García and W. Reid 2015 Clarifying Translanguaging and Deconstructing Named Languages: A Perspective from Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review* 6(3), 281-307.
- Seidlhofer B. 2011. *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Werther C, Denver L, Jensen C & Mees I. 2014. Using English as a Medium of Instruction at University Level in Denmark: The Lecturer's Perspective. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 35(5), 443-462.