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Producing English as a Lingua Franca online content

Christopher G. HASWELL & Aaron HAHN

Abstract:

There now exist many categories of methods and approaches under the umbrella of English as an International Language. One of the more contentious is the field of English as a Lingua Franca. Although established in the early 2000s by Jenkins, it was first considered to be an alternative method for grouping varieties of English. However, it now generally considered to be an approach to language learning, teaching, and researching the role of English in international communication. Building on the work of Matsuda, Jenkins, and Seidlhofer, this project was focused upon making materials for the observation of English as a Lingua Franca interactions and designing various methods of integrating them into our language courses. This article outlines two methods using the same online materials and the feedback we received from the students after the course. It also makes suggestions about how these materials can be integrated into other instructors' language courses.

1. Introduction

Early work in World Englishes (WE) was focused on categorizing and describing the developing localized varieties of the language. This work also helped identify their developmental roots and the course of their future development as valid, distinct varieties of English. Following the famous Three Circles Model and theorizing of Kachru (1986), categorization by location, history, and links with other varieties was conducted by Görlach (1990), Strevens (1992), and Macarthur (1992), and later Modiano (1999) and Yano (2001) to build models of what was being spoken, learned, and taught all over the world. The next major phase of this field of study was the shifting from static models to dynamic ones (Schneider, 2007). Conceptualizing both the linguistic landscape of English and everyone's idiosyncratic English usage as constantly changing, dynamic models more accurately reflected the reality of English use and helped to disrupt the idea that there is "real" English in the core (US, UK, etc.) with other Englishes relegated to the periphery.

Next came the emergence of two additional fields: English as an International Language (EIL), led by scholars such as Matsuda (2003, 2012), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) led by Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2009). EIL moved away from tying English language use to nationalities (the so-called 'named varieties' or 'hyphenated varieties' such as American-English, Indian-English, Japanese-English, etc.) to look at how English operates in transnational and transcultural settings. It also considered the development of supranational and international varieties. ELF went further, shifting focus from individual

varieties to viewing English use as an emergent process arising out of the unique circumstances of each communicative act (Jenkins, 2007). Success in ELF is thus more about mindset than pure linguistic knowledge, including factors such as a willingness to negotiate meaning, maintain flexibility, and shift across styles, varieties, and even languages (translanguaging).

Our research and teaching seek to enact an ELF-paradigm within university classes. The present project investigated how materials could be produced for university-level study of topics likely to be of interest to students but elucidated by users of English that the students may not have had the opportunity to hear before. This report outlines how materials were developed through the adaptation of existing non-teaching resources, describes a pilot program that used the materials in classes taught by the authors, and presents the results of surveys and other personal observations about the use of these materials.

2. Intercultural interaction project on the university campus

Our original funded research plan (Grant-in-Aid #20K00746) for developing ELF-friendly materials was to have students and research assistants from diverse linguistic backgrounds generate spoken recordings about their experiences using English in international contexts. These recordings were to be made available to students and teachers through a web-based delivery system. Unfortunately, the grant was awarded in April 2020 at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout 2020, we were unable to record on campus in any capacity, and we had reduced access to international students due to immigration restrictions in 2021. Since the intended project timeline was compromised, we shifted towards a different source of ELF-focused materials. One of the authors had been the co-host of a podcast¹ focused on interviewing academics from a range of disciplines and countries. We selected and edited interviews to provide students with a diverse set of stories spoken in a diverse set of English language varieties — essentially, a library of ELF materials.

From the interview catalog, we initially selected ten interviews that collectively represented a breadth of English varieties. In addition, we gave preference to interviewees who were not currently living in their country of birth. The intention was to demonstrate how differences in life experiences and context can affect one's language development. From these interviews, we excerpted about 10 minutes of material (primarily from the interviewee, with little of the interviewer's speech). Five additional interviews were added during the pilot program.

The materials were listed on a single page of our open-access website². For each interview, students were given a photo of the author, edited audio, and an interview transcript alongside edited versions of the interviewer's questions. The transcript, produced by auto-produced transcript application 'Otter.ai' and verified by the researchers, was mostly an authentic representation of the speech. That is, if the speaker made a grammatical "error," the transcript included that. Similarly, if the author repeated a word or phrase multiple times (as when they were gathering their thoughts), those repetitions and recasts were also included. The only thing absent from the transcripts were time-filling sounds like "um." Inclusion of "ungrammatical" language was done because part of the goal was for students to understand what authentic English looks like by showing them that high-level speakers do not speak perfectly crafted English as is often seen in textbooks and other materials made for students.

3. Pilot Study

3.1 The courses

The two authors developed separate courses with distinct goals that fulfilled distinct roles within a single university's more extensive curriculum. The remainder of this paper describes how those classes were conducted and our observations of them.

3.2 Course 1: "Academic English: Skills-Based"

The Skills-Based academic English course is required for all students and can be taken in any year after the first. Each course is custom designed by the individual teacher, with the only requirement being that it focuses on a specific academic English "skill" (e.g., debating, advanced academic writing, etc.). In the present case, we set the topic as "Global English Communication," and it focused on listening to many varieties of English, learning communication strategies useful in transnational and transvarietal English conversation, and participating in online communication designed to resemble SNS. This course was taught eight times over six different eight-week quarters. Most classes consisted of students from a single major, though several majors were represented across the full pilot.

3.2.1 Materials used

Seven interviews were selected by the teacher for each class. The list of interviews varied across the eight courses the study was piloted in, as adjustments were made to the materials based on student feedback and personal observation, and to include some from the five new interviews added during the middle of the piloting. Most interviews contained explicit discussions of international English, EMI, and associated topics. For the first seven weeks of each quarter, as homework, students had to listen to one of the interview excerpts, summarize it, and answer questions which included both listening comprehension components and opportunities to consider the topic in light of their own experiences. Students were instructed to listen to each several times and use the written transcripts only as aids when writing summaries. In the following week, students discussed the interview topics in groups. These discussions were mostly student-led, with any interview-related topic open for discussion.

3.2.2 Data collection

As part of the final week's homework, students were required to complete a survey in which they were asked to identify the easiest and hardest interviews and explain why they felt so. They were also asked for any suggestions about the website and were allowed to answer in English or Japanese. While the survey was a mandatory homework assignment, participation in the research was voluntary. Of the 137 students who completed the courses, 115 submitted surveys with informed consent.

3.2.3 Survey results

Criteria for "easiest" or "hardest" designations were categorized by the author; since some students offered multiple reasons, each response could be placed into more than one category. In total, there were 190 reasons given for the "easiest" interviews and 170 reasons for the "hardest" interviews. Those

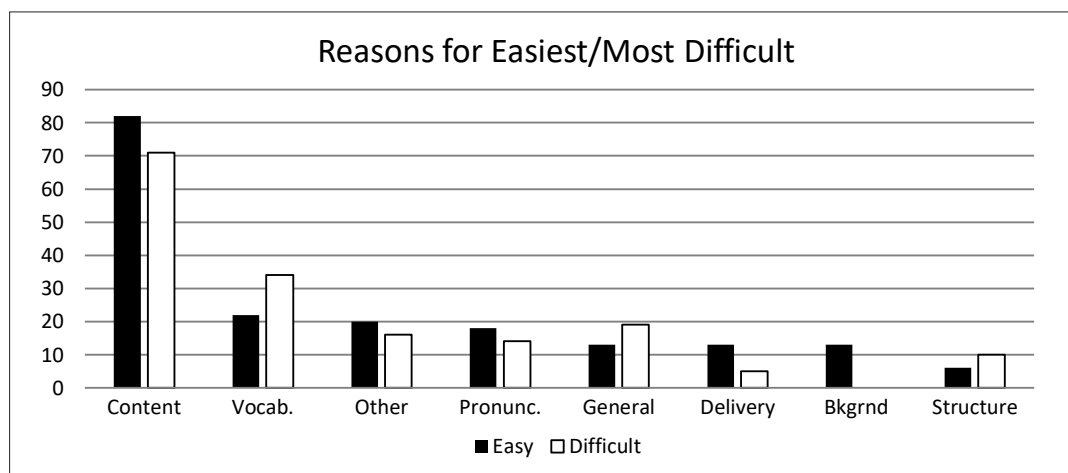


Figure 1. Reasons for identifying interviews as easiest/most difficult

reasons were organized into 8 broad categories: Content (the ideas being discussed), Vocabulary & Grammar, Pronunciation & Accent, General (responses consisting of “it was difficult” or something similar), Delivery (including the rate of speech, quality of the recording, etc.), Background (when students recalled having a similar experience), Structure (how the interview was organized) and Other (anything which did not fit into one of the previous categories). The compiled results can be seen in Figure 1. “Content” was overwhelmingly the main contributor to an interview’s perceived difficulty, appearing more than twice as often as the next most frequent factor (Vocabulary & Grammar). Furthermore, Pronunciation was a distant fourth, suggesting that the variety of English used by the speakers was not significantly contributing to students’ ability to understand.

A similar result can be seen by looking at which interviews were selected as easiest/most difficult. For example, the interview most frequently selected (44 times) as the easiest and least frequently (0 times) selected as the most difficult concerned the problem of silence in junior high school English classes in Japan. Outside of a small number of international students, this was a topic that most students had personally experienced (which they stated in homework and discussions). Furthermore, the variety used (Japanese English) was likely not the reason why it was “easy,” since the other two speakers of Japanese nationality, who spoke on more abstract or linguistic topics, were not rated as highly.

3.2.4 Teacher observations

As discussed above, the interviews formed the basis of both homework assignments and class discussions. Problems arose in the way that students approached the homework. There were indications that many students were not listening to the recordings and were simply relying on the written transcripts (or, in some cases, computer-generated Japanese translation of those transcripts). This was indicated by idiosyncratic inaccuracies in the summaries, often caused by mistranslations of the repetitions and recastings in the interviews. The most striking were cases where the students translated the name of a South American university from Spanish into English, which would only occur because of automated translation. Regarding

the discussions, students generally focused on the topics most familiar to them, and there was often resistance to engaging with more abstract topics (e.g., globalization of English, language variety).

3.2.5 Discussion of findings

The key finding from the Skills-Based course was that the main factor affecting students' ability to understand the interviews seemed to be the content, not the pronunciation (variety of English). The raw measurement of which interviews were easiest/most difficult, together with the student survey comments and the teacher's observations of the discussions and homework all point to "Content" being the primary issue precluding easier comprehension. In other words, the "good news" is that teachers should not feel the need to exclude texts that feature a diversity of English varieties when selecting course materials. These preliminary results suggest that the presumption held by some teachers that "non-native" Englishes are too difficult for students is not accurate given the success students seemed to have with materials that were topically accessible. As such, the authors believe that if we had been able to proceed with the original plan (with materials generated by other students on topics more relevant to students' personal experiences) the site would have been more successful and thus could potentially become the backbone of an ELF-focused course — even a compulsory course like this one.

3.3 Course 2: "Intensive English"

3.3.1 Materials used

In this course, School of Interdisciplinary Sciences (ISI) students were taking six lessons of weekly Intensive English in three back-to-back lesson blocks, covering two periods each of Global Issues, Academic Issues, and Research Issues. The present materials were used in the Global Issues lessons as homework tasks. Students selected two interviews of their choice each week from the list of 15. They then summarized the contents and described how well they understood the material, their individual experiences with that specific topic, and their opinions about the interviewee and the topic. This was done for five of the eight weeks of the quarter, meaning students covered 10 of the 15 interviews.

3.3.2 Data collection

Data was collected in the final lesson of the quarter, the focus of which was the global development of English, covering WE, GE, EIL, and ELF. The students completed a worksheet on which interviews they had listened to, which they had found easier or more difficult, and why they had judged those interviews in that way. The nature of the project was also explained, and the survey asked students to consent to having their anonymized responses used in the present research, of which 20 of 24 consented.

3.3.3 Survey results

The raw data, displayed in Table 1, showed that, perhaps unsurprisingly, three of the top five most listened-to interviews, (which received 20, 17, and 19 selections respectively), were also the three the students identified as being the easiest to listen to. Interview #1 being selected 20 times means that it was listened to by all the students who agreed to have their data included.

Table 1 – Selection count

Interview	Count	Interview	Count	Interview	Count
1	20	6	16	11	6
2	17	7	15	12	7
3	19	8	12	13	9
4	10	9	17	14	9
5	13	10	10	15	9

The most common student comments on the interviews revealed that the speaker's pronunciation and performance were critical for student understanding. The data indicated that moderate to slow pace of speaking, clear speech, or familiarity with the English performance (e.g., Japanese English for interviews #1, #2, and #9) all affected student perception of the difficulty of the interview. The homepage for the materials featured the speaker's name, their linguistic background, the topic being discussed, and a photo of the speaker, which allowed the participants to make pre-listening decisions of which interview they would like to review.

3.3.4 Discussion of findings

Comments about the interviews tended to be connected to the pronunciation of the speaker, unfamiliarity with or comments about a named variety of English (#9 and #13), or unfamiliarity with the subject matter (#4). The topic of Interview #4 was unfamiliar to many students. However, one student noted that the speaker was "too fluent." This speaker was from Australia and, admittedly, spoke quickly compared to the other included interviews. This is perhaps inevitable when the interviewees are asked to explain technical concepts regarding language or philosophy. Nevertheless, such comments seemed to be indicative of both a lack of familiarity with what is supposedly a 'native speaker' variety and, perhaps, an emergence of understanding the core component of ELF: the comprehensibility of the speaker is more important than their geographical location.

4. Conclusions

We believe that the differences in the data collected and the results noted were caused by the differences in how the course materials were used and the nature of the courses: the Skills Course was compulsory, and the interviews were chosen by the teacher, while for the Intensive Course students, who voluntarily selected a more challenging course, they were freely able to choose which two interviews they would prefer. In both cases, it appears that some type of additional pre- and post-use support should be investigated, either content-based or language based. We believe that such additional support can be provided in a way that does not treat differences as deficiencies and thus cultivate an ELF mindset.

Other feedback from students (on the surveys and otherwise) suggested that improvements to the website itself would also increase student success. The content could be further categorized and laid out to account for student's preferences, and additional support (as discussed above) could be embedded directly into the site. It may also be helpful to students to reconfigure the way the recordings are presented to include the questions (rerecorded to make them more concise than in the original podcast) so

that students do not have to jump between the written transcript and audio to understand the context of the interviewees' answers.

We currently have 15 excerpts and 5 more in development. There are also over 110 more interviews available at the time of writing from which we can select future materials that fit the criteria that have emerged from this pilot scheme. The current selection of interviews contains few cases of English varieties or topics that students are likely to have encountered in their lives, which is not surprising since the target audience for the original interviews that these excerpts were drawn from is other researchers, not students. As such, the current materials are insufficient to solve the problem of classes and homework with little student interaction. Once the process of selection, editing, and presentation becomes more fluid, we hope that this page can serve as a diverse bank of materials that will be available, all open source (creative commons), free to use and easy to access across a variety of platforms. In addition, we still have the possibility of complementing the present materials with interviews of students as originally planned.

There is a need for open-source ELF course materials presented in an easily accessible manner. While this project has been short, other teachers have expressed an interest in both using the materials and suggesting interviewees who would be a good match for the site. With a more extended study, we hope to have a website with dozens of interviews and related course materials for open-access use. We encourage teachers with interest to have a look for themselves, try our classroom delivery techniques, or develop methods of their own.

This project went a step beyond what might be considered 'proof-of-concept,' but it is by no means finished. Having the materials online in an easy-to-use webpage hosting service means we can continue to add features that will make the materials easier to use as a self-access resource. We have yet to fully avail ourselves of the opportunities for mobile access by both smartphone and tablet. By linking to other internet programs, we intend to continue to expand both the library of materials and their ease of use. In addition, some students suggested it would be helpful if the transcripts and recordings could be linked, such that if a particular sentence were clicked on the transcript, the recording would automatically play from that point. While we agree that this would be beneficial in allowing students to easily listen multiple times to difficult sections, it would require a significant re-coding of the website, and a web-design expert.

English as a Lingua Franca is not a *form* of English; it is a mindset of inclusivity regarding every individual's use of the language. It is the authors' belief that no person, group, or region of English users should be privileged by virtue of their access, often since birth, to a certain variety of English. While this has been a long-developing and accepted opinion within the field of English language researchers, the real difficulty has been to encourage mainstream EFL and ESL to be open to this approach to teaching English. Through work such as this project, we intend to give our students the widest possible experience of the English language, a mutually beneficial linguistic resource.

Notes

- 1 "Lost in Citations", hosted by Chris Haswell and Jonathan Shachter: <https://www.lostincitations.com/>
- 2 ELF Communication: <https://www.elfcommunication.com>

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