

Challenges in teaching ELF in the periphery: the Greek context

Nicos Sifakis

The paper presents a notional account of the challenges facing the introduction of English as an international lingua franca (ELF) curriculum in the state schools of the expanding circle, taking Greece as a case in point. It broadly delineates an ELF curriculum as one focusing on the skills necessary for carrying out successful communication involving non-native speakers and then highlights a set of challenges linked to both teaching context and teachers' perceptions of professional identity. It focuses on challenges related to three facets of the professional identity of academically trained Greek state school EFL teachers, namely, their roles as users, specialists, and, ultimately, custodians of English for their learners and wider community. These facets are discussed with reference to a description of the country's current sociolinguistic and educational profile. The paper concludes with an overview of the strengths of an ELF curriculum for Greek state schools and discusses implications for ELF teacher education.

Introduction

In the past few years, research in the domain of English as an international lingua franca (ELF) has posed important questions about the role and nature of communication between non-native speakers (NNSs) in today's globalized world. Topics that have raised heated debates have focused on issues like the nature of ELF as a variety (or network of varieties) in its own right, the issue of the ownership of English by its NNSs (Rajagopalan 2004), or the prospects of ELF testing (Jenkins 2006a). Other areas that have been extensively discussed have referred to areas such as the nature of successful NNS–NNS interactions (Seidlhofer 2004) or the lingua franca pronunciation core (Jenkins 2000), among others.

Despite the ongoing debate, however, there has to my knowledge been surprisingly little discussion on the actual teaching possibilities for ELF. Leading ELF scholars have argued that 'it would be premature to launch into a discussion of the teaching of this lingua franca before certain prerequisites have been met' (Seidlhofer 2004: 209) and that these prerequisites should include a comprehensive account of ELF use and its users. In a similar vein, Jenkins (2006b: 174–5) has linked ELF teaching with predominant policies related to EFL testing.

It is my contention in this paper that an additional concern should be added to those above, namely, the degree to which teachers are willing and 'ready' to engage in ELF teaching. Such a concern can have many dimensions

(for example the increasing demand for proficiency examinations in countries of the expanding circle that Jenkins refers to above), but here I would like to focus on aspects of teachers' professional identity that are likely to prevent them from integrating ELF into their teaching. By 'professional identity' I mean the wide range of characterizations that teachers, learners, and others use to delineate different aspects of their teaching practice.

My focus, in this paper, is domains where ELF is expected to have the greatest impact, i.e. countries of the expanding circle (where English is in extensive demand but does not have official status). As a case in point, I take the example of Greece and reflect on the complications that may be posed by certain facets of the professional identity of EFL teachers who work in the state sector.

EFL teachers and the ELF challenge

ELF as a communication-skills-based curriculum

Before I refer to these complications, it is fair to ask what an ELF curriculum might look like. We still lack enough information on which to base a comprehensive proposal, but it should be possible to argue that a preliminary phase of such a curriculum would focus on:

- 1 making learners aware of what is involved in contextualized instances of successful NNS–NNS communication and
- 2 engaging them in similar interactions among themselves.

An ELF curriculum would concentrate on those competences and communication skills that any successful (mainly spoken) interaction involving NNSs portrays (Sifakis 2004), such as the capability to render one's discourse intelligible for their interlocutors through a process of accommodation (for example making repairs, paraphrasing, rephrasing, or even allowing for linguistic errors that might facilitate communication). It is envisaged that these practices would lead learners to realize the importance that NNS–NNS communication will have for them in the years to come, appreciate the reasons for learning English (for example as a language for communication rather than as one for identification—House 2003), and instil confidence in their own use of the language.

It is expected that, in the first stages, such a curriculum would be used in addition to established EFL curricula, wherever this is possible. This means that it will be the responsibility of EFL teachers to make attempts at integrating it with their established practices and see what works and what does not work for their learners.

Teachers' attitudes towards ELF

It would be interesting to see what demands such a curriculum would make on EFL teachers. Apart from the fact that it would require that they have reached a certain amount of autonomy as teachers, it would also require that they have a positive attitude towards the issues that ELF research highlights.

Research into teachers' and learners' attitudes towards ELF issues (Jenkins 2007) has shown that people have strong perceptions about what is 'correct' and 'appropriate' in language communication. This is especially true in countries of the expanding circle, where EFL teaching is largely dependent on inner-circle norms (McKay 2003). This means that ELF teaching is not simply going to be a matter of becoming acquainted with excerpts from the

various published ELF corpora or reading the ELF literature. It is required that EFL teachers critically approach ELF research and try to see whether it can find applications in their own teaching context.

**'Objective' and
'subjective'
hindrances in
integrating an ELF
curriculum**

What are the characteristics of such a process and what demands would it pose? It is possible to distinguish between two sets of challenges that EFL teachers face, those that are 'objective' and outside the teachers' own control and those that are 'subjective' and within teachers' conscious control.

One set of 'objective' problems stems from the current status of the ELF field. As already mentioned, more research is necessary in clearly delineating the ELF domain. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the many variables of teachers' 'contextual situation' (Stern 1983: 274) that are conducive to shaping their self-image and sense of professional obligations and are likely to influence the extent to which they will be genuinely interested in ELF. These constraints spring from the curricular situations teachers find themselves in, the available courseware, the prevailing institutional and educational cultures, and the established social-professional status teachers enjoy.

On the other hand, 'subjective' hindrances are related to teachers' perceptions about their role and status inside and outside the language classroom. How teachers perceive ELF may influence their attitude towards teaching it. Research shows that EFL teachers seem to recognize the usefulness of the ELF-based skills mentioned in NNS–NNS communication but are prone to taking up an NS-oriented perspective when asked specifically about language teaching (Sifakis and Sougari 2005). Other sources of influence, apart from the contextual factors mentioned above, can be teachers' previous experiences in pre- and in-service training or as foreign language learners and their self-image as educators and subject matter experts. Where teachers live and how they have been accustomed to teaching can shape their perspectives about issues that are central to ELF concerns, such as language and identity, the development of appropriate ESOL policies and pedagogies, the role of accuracy and efficiency in communication, or established perceptions about literacy and testing.

**A 'peripheral' country
profile—the case of
Greece**

Let us see how the above features relate to Greece, a typical expanding-circle country, where English has no official status but is considered a key prerequisite for 'surviving' in today's globalized world.¹

Greece's *de facto* population' is around 11.1 million (2005). The resident migrant population (which includes economic immigrants from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Asian countries like Iraq and Afghanistan) is in the region of 10 per cent. A quick look at officially available ethnic groupings, however, shows that the Greek population is, at least on the surface, notably homogeneous, with 97 per cent being Greek and 98 per cent being nominally members of the Greek Orthodox Church. The official language, Modern Greek, is the LI of about 99 per cent of the population and is used throughout the territory and taught at all levels of education.

Education and EFL

Education plays an important role in Greece as a means of providing basic knowledge and life skills and, especially, preparing pupils for future employment. The adult literacy level (i.e. people of 15+ who can read and write) is at 91 per cent, and in 2003, about 74 per cent of the tertiary age population were enrolled in some type of higher education programme.

As Modern Greek is not widely used outside Greece, foreign language learning is considered crucial. As expected, English is the primary foreign language. In 2004, 96.9 per cent of state school pupils of all levels learnt English (EU25 = 84.9 per cent). Since the late 1980s there has been an increasing demand for certification of proficiency in English which is today taken for granted as an employability requirement. Having a C2-level proficiency certificate is considered as essential for future employment as having basic computer skills. For the state, these certificates have lifelong validity and are considered by many as having as much weight as a university degree. Virtually all pupils aim at acquiring certificates from acclaimed standardized examination boards, for which they prepare strenuously by studying at private institutions or attending one-to-one classes. The EFL teachers occupied in these institutions are, at best, academically trained, but the great majority are C2-level certificate holders who are certified by the Greek Ministry of Education to teach.

Greek state school EFL teachers

All state school EFL teachers should have a university degree in English studies. The 2003 state school curriculum follows the cross-curricular approach. While it focuses on teaching the normative structures and functions of the language, it does not require that learners reach near-native speaker proficiency. Rather, the emphasis is on intelligibility and effective communication with N Ss and N N Ss and on highlighting the 'international elements' of English.

Since the dominant belief is that effective EFL teaching should aim at helping learners to pass examinations and acquire certificates, it is generally assumed that foreign languages are taught and learnt more effectively at private schools. This has led to a situation where state school EFL teaching (especially in the large cities) has the status of a TENOR² situation (Abbot 1981) and state school EFL teachers enjoy a relatively lower status in relation to teachers of other, more 'important' subjects. Also, as teachers are under pressure to cover the material prescribed by educational authorities, competent learners can become easily demotivated and weaker learners find the lessons difficult to follow.

As Greek society is rapidly becoming multicultural, state school classes are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. However, while this phenomenon has had an enormous impact on the economy of the country, essentially helping to push it forward, it has not been acknowledged as positive by the majority of Greeks. In many cases, these attitudes are evident in state schools too (Dimakos and Tasiopoulou 2003). At the same time, Greeks consider themselves a largely monolingual and monocultural community. As Greek is the dominant language of education, it seems to me that it would be good if state school EFL teachers used ELF as a 'neutral' and non-threatening medium of self-expression and a means of raising their learners' intercultural awareness.

Three 'hats' of EFL teachers

In view of the above, how 'ready' are Greek EFL teachers serving in the state sector to integrate an additional ELF curriculum into their everyday practices? To try to answer this question, it is important, in my view, that we draw attention to the social, professional, and pragmatic reality that these teachers find themselves in. In what follows, I will attempt to further explore this reality by referring to three hats that these teachers wear, or three distinct roles that they adopt with regard to the language they teach, their learners, and the wider community.

Teachers as language users

As mentioned, English does not have an official status in Greece, which means that its knowledge is not necessary in carrying out important transactions. However, in everyday life, English does play an increasingly visible role in various domains (in shop names, restaurant menus, even words and phrases that combine Greek and English, commonly termed 'Greeklish') and its knowledge is helpful when engaging with modern technology (for example computers, mobile phones, electronic games, satellite TV, internet, manuals, etc.). However, engaging with the language in this way means mainly practising receptive macro and micro skills (reading and some listening), although in certain areas productive skills may also be called for (for example in email communication or online chats).

What use of the language teachers make outside their classrooms is not easy to say, but it is certain that EFL classrooms would be a primary domain of English use in the majority of cases. This means that such language use would reflect the proficiency levels and needs of their learners, lead to repeated simplification patterns (integrating, at times, Greek), and, to a large extent, be management oriented. If the language is not practised in other domains, it runs the danger of becoming fossilized. Still, in the majority of cases, as EFL teachers are NNSs, their communicative use of English outside the language classroom would have many of the features of an ELF variety.

Teachers as language and teaching specialists

Since English does not have an official status in Greece, any choice for would-be EFL teachers to study it further would not be a response to an underlying pragmatic need, but more a conscious 'academic' decision. In other words, when senior high school students with an interest in English begin a university degree in English, they do so for two reasons: first, out of an affinity for the language, its history, literature, culture, and (native) speakers and, secondly, as a means of seeking employment as teachers, translators, or perhaps civil servants (as university degree holders) after graduation.

Currently, university degrees offered in the two Greek Departments of English Studies are organized around a wide variety of courses (approximately 40 in either case) that satisfy both of these needs. Students can also combine courses from the philosophy-philology-pedagogy departments. While there are courses on offer that will help them form a comprehensive perception of issues related to intercultural communication and European foreign language perspectives, it is only natural that pre-service EFL teachers perceive their university training as a vehicle for:

- 1 acquiring a thorough grounding in the linguistics, culture, and history of the language and
- 2 developing an informed awareness of the pedagogical principles and methods they will need as teachers.

As academic excellence is highly valued in any tertiary institution, it would be interesting to see the extent to which prospective state school EFL teachers would be open to perceiving the validity of an ELF curriculum for their own context. The same would be the case for their learners, who would want to excel in learning the norms of the language.

Furthermore, being a university degree holder in Greece means having earned a specialist status, similar to that enjoyed by any degree-holding professional. It is expected that specialists carry out their duties in a responsible professional manner, which, in the case of EFL teachers, would mean viewing the teaching of English as similar to that of any other subject matter and teaching the NS norms. The same situation applies to most in-service training programmes. Clearly, these are not favourable circumstances for an ELF curriculum, as the latter might be seen as a means of lowering the academic and professional standards of teaching and an inability to respond to learners' and parents' expectations.

Also, knowing the language is something that university-educated EFL teachers share with C2-level certificate holders who also teach. In the private language schools domain, professionalism and success depend largely on the number of candidates who pass a particular exam.

University-educated EFL teachers are better off in many ways. In times when employability becomes more and more difficult, they can be appointed as tenured state school teachers serving in domains where the pressure to prepare candidates for exams is non-existent. And, most importantly, they have had extensive in-depth academic pedagogical training.

Teachers as language custodians/guardians

The above parameters can help us understand the intellectual, psychological, and moral qualities of successful Greek state school EFL teachers, as perceived by themselves and their learners, peers, and broader community. In the eyes of their learners, fellow teachers, and learners' parents, EFL teachers are custodians of the English language and culture. They are therefore responsible for using the few weekly hours to teach the norms of NS English and expose learners to contextualized examples of the target language that are linguistically flawless, if communicatively efficient. The same would be expected of any (foreign or mother) language teacher.

Conclusion

I have tried to draw a notional orientation of the challenges that state school teachers of a typical expanding-circle country like Greece face with regard to the possibility of integrating an ELF curriculum. These challenges relate not only to issues concerning the description of ELF use and users but also to widespread attitudes about the use and status of English and the professional responsibilities of academically trained teachers. In particular, as far as the Greek state school context is concerned, these challenges have been linked to:

- the low professional status of state school EFL teachers (in comparison to teachers of other school subjects which are considered more important);
- the higher academic status of state school EFL teachers as university-trained professionals (as opposed to that of C2-level holders occupied in the private sector who specialize in preparing learners for certain examinations);
- the widespread preference for the teaching and learning of a standard inner-circle norm, which is reinforced by (a) the strong testing-oriented context and (b) the strong monolingual character of the country's profile; and
- the fact that English is not used extensively outside the EFL class.

In this context, communication involving NNSs is perceived as a realistic situation that Greek state school learners will be facing and need to be prepared for, yet the link with established classroom practices still remains to be explicitly made. This clearly has implications for policy makers, curriculum developers, and educational institutions alike. First, policy makers in Greece should realize that the endorsement of the teaching of English as a lingua franca and not simply as another foreign language in state schools can, if appropriately implemented, help raise learners' awareness of the increasingly multilingual and multicultural character of the country in which they live. Second, curriculum developers can offer extensive opportunities for dialogue among all learners on issues related to the expression of identity and the arousal of interest in and concern for other people's cultures and life histories. And finally, educational institutions are prompted to engage prospective and in-service EFL teachers in appropriate reflection-based activities that will empower them in their implementation of such a project. In particular, a Greece-based ELF teacher education programme should focus on:

- raising pre-service and in-service teachers' awareness of the communication value of ELF-related accommodation skills, with the aim of empowering themselves and their NNS learners as valid intercultural communicators, as opposed to maintaining a perspective that views EFL learners as deficient users of a language that is wholly 'owned' by its native speakers;
- prompting teachers to see their state school classes for the increasingly intercultural situations that they are and put forward action research programmes to promote all learners' cultural identities on the basis of a shared, non-threatening language, essentially helping to alleviate negative stereotypical attitudes about immigrants;
- emphasizing the strengths of the communicatively efficient use of English, as opposed to perceiving the language as subject matter that needs to be 'mastered';
- enabling state school EFL teachers in opening up to the possibilities of using modern technology to make links with NNS learners of other countries of the European Union (EU) and, as a result, promote intercultural communication among EU members;
- ultimately, raising state school teachers' confidence as autonomous practitioners.

It is important that ELF research draws attention to delineating those features of an ELF curriculum that characterize the skills and subskills required for successful communication involving NN Ss. The Greek state school setting would be ideal for integrating a curriculum that would respond to current interest in foreign language learning by focusing on successful communication between NN Ss, while drawing attention away from heavy-duty examination preparation. In this way, state school EFL teaching might responsibly meet the needs of an emerging reality in ways that private tuition will not. It is very probable that the same is the case with similar settings in other countries of the expanding circle.

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Notes

- 1 All information provided here is based on the *Eurostat Yearbook 2006–2007* (available from http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-CD-06-001/EN/KS-CD-06-001-EN.PDF) and *Eurybase—The Information Database on Education Systems in Europe: The Education System in Greece, 2005/06*. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture (available from http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/ressources/eurydice/eurybase/pdf/o_integral/EL_EN).
- 2 ‘Teaching English for no obvious reason’.

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The author

Nicos C. Sifakis is a lecturer at the Hellenic Open University in Greece, where he has taught and written study guides for the MEd in TESOL since 1998. He holds a BA in computational linguistics and a PhD in language and linguistics from the University of Essex, UK. His teaching and research interests include teacher and adult education, English as an international lingua franca, intercultural communication and pedagogy, English for specific purposes, and distance education.
Email: sifakis@eap.gr