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English as an academic lingua franca: The ELFA project

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Abstract

English is unquestionably the world language of academia – yet its most notable characteristic, being predominantly used by non-native speakers, has not seriously been taken on board in ESP descriptive studies. The project English as an academic lingua franca (ELFA) based at the University of Helsinki investigates academic discourses, branching out into two parts: one is the ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings) corpus project, whose major achievement is the 1-million-word ELFA corpus of spoken academic discourse. The other part is SELF (Studying in English as a Lingua Franca), a project with a micro-analytic orientation, which aims at capturing participant experience of ELF in a university environment. This research note describes the rationale and the design of the ELFA corpus, and introduces recent research in the project.
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1. Introduction

Universities have been thoroughly international since their inception. In the Middle Ages, scholars around Europe formed close-knit networks for sharing thoughts and discoveries. This was facilitated by a common lingua franca, Latin. Today, we again live in a similarly international context of research and study, albeit on a new scale. A considerable proportion of the age cohort in any country is now involved in higher education as students, teachers and researchers, and the joint enterprises of sharing knowledge and doing research span the entire globe. The need for a lingua franca to keep this network going has not changed, but this time the language is English, and the scale of its use is unprecedented.[1]

As the global lingua franca of academia, English is spoken much more by non-native than native speakers. Yet, it is only in the last few years that the English research community has begun to awaken to this new reality, despite hot debates in the EFL arena. Up to very recently, the unquestioned assumption has been that

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[1] The global spread of English has given rise to much debate in Applied Linguistics, both in academic contexts (see, e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Haberland et al., 2008; Phillipson, 2006; Swales, 1997; Tardy, 2004 for an overview of the critique) and outside it (e.g. Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992, 2009). However, the aim of the present paper is not to enter into these debates but primarily to introduce a research project, which investigates actual linguistic practices.

'good English' equals that of the educated native speaker, in other words Standard English (for a discussion and critique on the concept of a native speaker see, e.g. Davies, 2003; Jenkins, 2000, pp. 8–10; Rampton, 1990, pp. 98–99; Seidlhofer, 2001; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006; Widdowson, 1994).[2] Innumerable native speakers have been recruited to help non-native scientists and scholars in their struggle with the language, and it is standard practice in publishers' style sheets to require non-native writers to have their text checked by a native speaker of English prior to publication. These prevailing practices may well continue for some time, but a new awareness of the problematic assumptions behind them have begun to cast doubt on their advisability: if the vast majority of readers and writers are not native speakers of English, perhaps qualities such as clarity and effectiveness in communication should be considered from their perspective rather than that of the native speaking minority?

Academic discourses need to be learned specifically by novices entering a university or research community; this is part of the secondary socialisation that takes place in educational institutions. There are no native speakers of *academic* English. Although studies on academic literacy and socialisation suggest that language proficiency plays a role in academic success, other factors, such as being able to use appropriate literacy forms and conventions, come into play as well (e.g. Braine, 2002; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Lea & Street, 2006; Leibowitz, 2004). All novices undergo secondary socialisation into academic discourses, regardless of their linguistic background. Participating in communities of an inherently international character, such as the world of research, raises the question of whether there is justification for imposing the linguistic standards of a national community on their internal communication. Do we really benefit from 'checking by a native speaker'?

On a less polemical note, it is clear that ESP and EAP research fields are keenly interested in understanding the communities that use English as their professional language, the roles language plays in these communities and the ways in which practices are shaped by language and shape it in return. Since understanding English in its contexts of professional and academic use is one of our major goals, it is crucial that we investigate its current manifestations in complex international circumstances. How do academics and students manage demanding intellectual tasks using a second language? What discourse features are so vital to academic communication that they accompany successful academic exchanges even when speakers use a lingua franca – in short, what is the 'academic' in English for Academic Purposes?

For applied pedagogical interests, it is a top priority to analyse successful language use. What should we focus on in terms of successful discourse strategies in English as a lingua franca (ELF) circumstances? What do effective ELF users do as lecturers, supervisors, students or research group members?

To seek answers to questions like these, the project *English as an academic lingua franca* (i.e. ELFA; www.eng.helsinki.fi/elfa) was started in 2001. It is based at the University of Helsinki, with Professor Anna Mauranen as the director. The project investigates academic discourses, and branches out into two parts: one is the ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings) corpus project, its major achievement being the 1-million-word ELFA corpus of spoken academic discourse. The other part is SELF (Studying in English as a Lingua Franca), a project with a micro-analytic orientation, which aims at capturing participant experience of ELF in a university environment. The ELFA corpus project was funded by the Academy of Finland 2004–2007, and the SELF project is currently being funded by the University of Helsinki Research Funds.

2. ELFA corpus

Coming to grips with academic lingua franca English requires a good database. A large corpus is a rich resource: corpus data are able to reveal linguistic regularities and patterning while also keeping track of variability in the material – and where substantial variability can be expected, as in L2–L2 interactions, discovering regularity is particularly interesting. A corpus also provides material for qualitative analyses of various kinds, especially if it consists of complete discourse events, whether spoken or written.

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[2] Our point of departure here is a traditional understanding of a native speaker as someone who has acquired a language in childhood as the first language or as one of the first languages, and considers him- or herself a native speaker. Clearly, it is far from a monolithic group, and the standard of an 'educated native speaker' can justifiably be criticised from a native as well as a non-native perspective.

The ELFA team started gathering recordings of speaking in English at the University of Tampere in 2001 (Mauranen, 2006a). The purpose was to collect material from international degree programmes and other academic events, such as conferences or guest lectures, which were routinely carried out in English. Data compilation quickly spread out of the idea of 'discourses of one university' applied in the two academic corpora in the US, the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE, see Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 1999) and the T2K-SWAL (see Biber, Reppen, Clark, & Walter, 2001), first to the Technological University of Tampere, and later to The University of Helsinki and the Technological University of Helsinki, so as to cover a wide spectrum of disciplinary domains.

The ELFA corpus was completed in 2008, and it now stands at one million transcribed words, which equals 131 h of recorded speech.

Opting for a corpus of spoken rather than written discourse was due to two reasons: first, in contrast to writing, speaking is spontaneous and unedited. Even in the more formal kinds of university discourses, such as large lectures, it is unusual to read aloud pre-written text. In spoken interaction, as speakers co-construct shared understanding and negotiate meanings to achieve communication, language is employed to serve interactional purposes, without so much concern for its ostensible correctness as its intelligibility and ability to maintain communicative cooperation. The spoken mode therefore reveals much more about language change in progress. We were looking for 'successful' ELF speech, which in the minimal case means that the goals of the event are reached and communication does not break down. We expected such success to be achieved in university contexts, and even though this was not a criterion of excluding events if communicative breakdowns should occur, the expectation turned out to be correct. Studies on the corpus reveal that on all occasions the communicative goals were eventually successfully carried out, although some events were more successful than others, and some sequences clearly more effective than others in reaching their goals, as measured by participant responses and the continuation of the event. An important facet of assessing success and effectiveness is their conceptualisation as participants' joint achievements rather than as individuals' proficient performances.

The second reason for focusing on speaking is that academic speaking has been studied far less than writing; both American academic speech corpora were compiled in the late 1990s, when there was virtually no research of speaking in academic contexts. This millennium has witnessed a sea-change in EAP interest in speech, see for example the British BASE corpus (www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/base/), but for the most part the research is limited to L1 speakers – or else non-native language has been construed as a problem. Although MICASE and BASE also include L2 speakers, the context is one where English as a native language (ENL) is the norm.

The ELFA corpus consists of authentic speech in the sense that it has not been elicited for research purposes. The recorded speech events are complete sessions. The compilation criteria have been generally 'external', that is, not determined by linguistic register features, but by socially based identification of the prominent genres of the discourse community. The data gathering was informed by 'local knowledge' (Geertz, 1983) as far as possible; informed by interviews and public material of the communities about themselves. In effect, the 'folk genres' thus arrived at and used as corpus categories were largely based on the genre labels that central participants in the discourse events themselves, such as faculties, departments, or conference organisers, were using. Many of the resulting event labels like "seminar" and "panel discussion" were used across the institutions.

Native speakers of English were not excluded from the corpus, because their presence is a normal part of ELF interactions. However, they were not recorded in dominant positions such as lecturers or PhD examiners. Sessions with speakers who all share a L1 were not included, and neither were ELT courses. In this way, ELF data clearly distinguishes itself from both Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) settings, where speakers typically share a first language, and learner corpora, which are compiled from students of English. It is also important to note that ELFA corpus differs radically from learner or CLIL data in not taking note of speaker proficiency. It is easy to see that the speakers' proficiency levels vary, but no attempt was made to control, measure or code this. It is a normal part of lingua franca encounters that speaker proficiencies are different in the vehicular language, and it is important to capture this reality in its everyday manifestation.

The basic unit of sampling was the 'speech event type', a looser term than 'genre', and therefore perhaps more appropriate, not only because these were folk genres, but also because some of the event types were more firmly established as genres across the board (e.g. lectures) than others (e.g. panel discussions). The commonest event types in the data were also mostly perceived as central in their institutional contexts. Typicality

played a role: event types shared and labelled by most disciplines and departments – seminars, lectures, thesis defences – were regarded as representative of the repeated activities of the relevant discourse communities. Such events are also influential in that they concern most people in the institutions, including guest lectures, even though they are one-off occasions. Conference presentations and discussions are more relevant to academic staff than to students, and they present a mixture of repeated and unique features, as do, for instance, panel discussions. All these event types were included, with typical university-internal discourses and international programmes in the majority (see Fig. 1).

The second basic selection criterion was the disciplinary domain. The spread of disciplines is wide, comprising both 'soft' and 'hard' sciences (see Fig. 2).

As for the speakers, a number of attributes were noted down: the speakers' language backgrounds, their gender and age group, as well as each speaker's institutional position. This information is available for researchers in the file headers.

At this point the corpus does not have its own search interface that would allow direct searches on the basis of all the attributes; however, in corpora of this scale, many categories tend to remain small and searches in such cases get too few hits to yield useful results. The categories are therefore informative rather than classificatory. Moreover, subcorpora for individual researchers' interests are not laborious to establish, and no doubt will be, when the corpus is launched to the wider research community in the near future. For keeping track of participants' relations in terms of their familiarity with each other, university events were more accessible than conferences. Courses and seminars are typically serial events, where interpersonal relations change as a result of repeated interaction. There is more initial facework in a newly formed group than in its sessions in later stages when roles and routines have been established and the degree of formality negotiated.

Two language-internal selection criteria were observed: the first was the speakers' background language. The purpose was to ensure a maximal range of languages, and to keep the number of Finnish native speakers in check. This monitoring paid off, because in the end the proportion of speech by Finnish speakers was only a little more than a quarter (28.5%) of all the recorded data. The general spread of language backgrounds showed considerable typological diversity: there were speakers from 51 different first languages ranging from African languages (e.g. Akan, Dagbani, Igbo, Kikuyu, Kihaya, Somali, Swahili), to Middle Eastern (e.g. Arabic, Persian, Turkish), to Asian (e.g. Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Uzbek), and European languages (e.g. Czech, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, etc.). Native English speakers accounted for 5% of all the data.

The second linguistic criterion was a deliberate bias towards securing as much dialogue as possible (which makes up 67% of the data). In practical terms, this meant favouring multi-party discussions such as seminars and thesis defences.

In all, the ELFA corpus fills a gap in academic English research material. It permits different research approaches, and covers a broad range of language backgrounds, genres and disciplines.
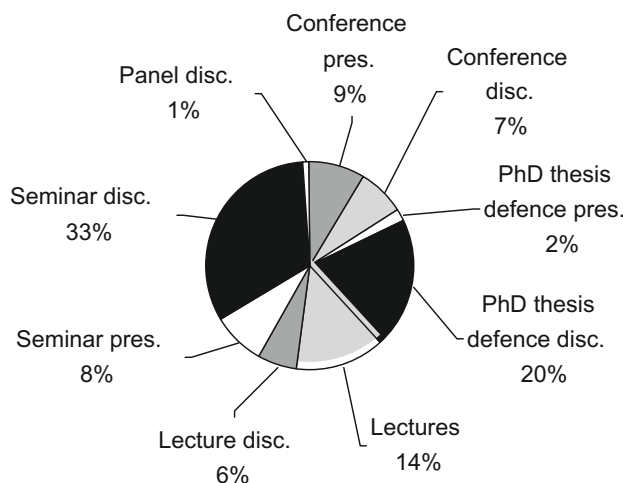

Fig. 1. Distribution of event types in the ELFA corpus. Abbreviations: pres. = presentations, disc. = discussions.
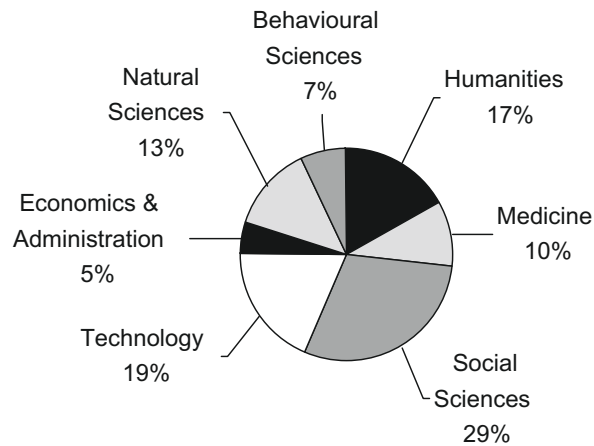
Fig. 2. Distribution of disciplinary domains in the ELFA corpus.

3. SELF

Corpus data lends itself to diverse analytical approaches, but capturing participant experience of discourse events is not among its strengths. Yet this is also a relevant perspective for understanding academic discourses, not least in an international context where the matrix culture is not English speaking but where English is nevertheless the principal lingua franca. The project *Studying in English as a Lingua Franca* (SELF) was set up at the University of Helsinki to delve into the details of university discourses from the participants' point of view in degree programmes. Such programmes keep expanding and multiplying, not just in Helsinki but around the globe (see, e.g. Haberland et al., 2008; Wächter, 2008). This development has been received with mixed feelings in the host universities. While many academics and students have high hopes for the opportunity of working in an international environment, some worry about falling standards of learning on account of poor language skills, the status of local languages, and even falling standards of English. Research-based evidence from actual programmes and events is called for in order to address the issues raised and to detect possible problem areas as experienced by those who are involved in the activities as students or teachers.

The SELF-project seeks to relate a linguistic perspective to a more social one, looking for interactive and adaptive language processes in action, and talking to the participants about them. Data for SELF is collected from interrelated speech events, interviews, and observation as well as written documents. The micro-analytic perspective enables researchers to explore ELF as situated language use, in this way connecting the global phenomenon of ELF to local practices of adaptation and assimilation – even resistance.

SELF sets out to answer two sets of questions:

(1) How do speakers regulate their use of English in interaction? How do participants negotiate their linguistic differences arising from their diverse first-language backgrounds and their varying levels of proficiency?
(2) What is participant experience of academic ELF discourses? How do students and teachers feel about and relate to the pursuit of academic activities using English in a non-English matrix culture? What spoken and written discourses do speakers mostly engage in, and how do they go about managing them in this multilingual environment?

Analyses explore discourse phenomena such as the interactive management of discourse, negotiation of meanings, accommodation, and sources of misunderstanding as well as ways of clearing up misunderstandings. The close-up view of an institutional community enables observation of behind-the-scenes relations of, for example, power and solidarity, or participants' diverse interpretations of the activity at hand. These are hard to get at in corpus compilation work, which is primarily oriented to gathering large quantities of language. It also offers a glimpse of a discourse community as a community – for example, the characteristic sequencing of academic genres in chainlike formations, such as lecture courses or lectures followed by

seminars or presentations, allows for the detection of self-regulatory mechanisms and the effects of developing familiarity. It also enables researchers to contrast these with one-off recordings of individual groups.

The ethnographically influenced approach of SELF makes it possible to relate the discourses being co-constructed in particular communicative situations with established practices in the relevant community. Participant experience is also pursued by interviewing and shadowing some of the international students in their daily activities in the study environment.

The SELF-project began in 2007 with a pilot, and started a year later in earnest to gather data from select study programmes. At its core has been a forestry institute with a wealth of international activity. In and around the Institute, a number of courses have been recorded, and participants (teachers, students, researchers) interviewed. In addition, written student texts are gathered, together with teachers' and students' comments on them.

The main researcher is Niina Hynninen, whose ongoing PhD work is concerned with language regulation in ELF interaction. She explores the ways participants manage and monitor each other's language use in interaction. This involves investigating regulatory mechanisms such as commentary and other-repair, and the roles these mechanisms play in achieving mutual understanding and in negotiating group practices in and through interaction. How individual participants experience English, and how they conceptualise and lexicalise it, is tapped by the interviews.

4. First outcomes of the ELFA project

The ELFA research team has already published their research on the ELFA corpus as well as presented their work in numerous conference papers. The corpus has been described in a few papers (e.g. Mauranen, 2003, 2006a, 2007a; Mauranen & Metsä-Ketelä, 2006; Mauranen & Ranta, 2008). Corpus methodology has been used to show that not only do ELF speakers use patterns that are different from comparable native speakers, but that they also display systematic new patterning (Mauranen, 2005a, 2006b, 2007b, 2007c). It also shows that ELF speakers' syntactic structures tend towards explicitness and universal features of spoken grammar that are also to be found in native speaker speech (Ranta, 2006, 2009), and that ELF speech uses vague expressions much like native speakers in comparable situations, but that both forms and distributions of expressions can be different (Metsä-Ketelä, 2006).

Many phenomena of language use, such as detecting misunderstandings, or expressing criticism, disagreement or evaluation, cannot be teased out of a corpus merely by concordancing. They require exploring transcripts of target conversations, at least to begin with. Some ELFA studies have consequently taken a discourse analytic approach, drawing a sample from the transcripts. The findings suggest that very little misunderstanding emerges in ELF interaction (Mauranen, 2006c) and that ELF discourse is skilfully organised by utilising repetition, contrast, parallelism and other similar means to make long turns and monologic speech accessible to hearers (Mauranen, 2005b, 2006d, 2009a). Other studies have combined a linear, dynamic approach to text with corpus analysis (Mauranen, 2009b), showing that interactive chunks are managed in ELF purposefully and successfully, while their linguistic patterning does not conform to ENL preferences found in the MICASE corpus.

Jaana Suviniitty's PhD work on lectures at the Helsinki University of Technology has shown that students manage their studies equally well in ELF contexts as in their L1, but that they find some lecturers more comprehensible than others (Suviniitty, 2008), with interactivity playing a key role in this.

The ELFA team has also edited volumes on ELF (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009; Mauranen & Metsä-Ketelä, 2006), with particular emphasis on the emerging empirical research in the field.

5. Conclusion

The ELFA project fills a gap in research on academic English. The ELFA corpus complements previous academic speech corpora by opening the door to a new reality – beyond the Anglo-American context. This is increasingly the reality of today's students, professionals, and academics all over the world; student mobility continues to be on the rise, and whether we are talking about exchange programmes, international degree

programmes or even entire departments or faculties adopting English as their medium of instruction, the trend seems to be towards more English in non-English environments.

At the level of research, international projects adopt English as their lingua franca even if there are no ENL speaking participants. The current trend is for research projects in many competitive fields to expand, include more and more partners, and extend across continents. Under these circumstances, the use of English is likely to escalate, because it has become the language known to most people working in these fields. Conversely, the dominance of the ENL speaker model is likely to diminish, because the determinants of language use lose their connections to any national basis. Instead, the influence of professional and disciplinary communities may well be on the increase. This is good news for the EAP research community: increasingly, there will be more diverse uses of English to investigate.

On the applied side, current trends in the development of English would seem to complicate matters. It is no longer sufficient to point to the 'educated native speaker' for a model. The successful use of ELF demands new skills from its speakers, native or non-native, compared to those which traditional language education has prepared people for. ELF research is needed for developing innovative applications.

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