

Mind the Gap

EFL/ELF: What lies in between what teachers teach and what students use, and its pedagogical implications

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Abstract

From the observations collected as a non-native English teacher in Italian high schools and from the data of my qualitative PhD research on the use of English/es among native and non-native Italian adolescent students, I will here investigate within the gap which is opening between what English teachers teach and what English students use in a context where English is taught and learned as EFL. Analyzing what is happening between language as norm and language as use, I will also address the pedagogical challenges that ELF advances, but also the educational opportunities it offers in the perspective of a critical linguistic pedagogy as it puts into evidence the cultural, complex and situated nature of language and of interactional encounters.

Keywords. ELF and critical linguistic pedagogy, intercultural education, post-normative approach to EFL pedagogy.

Teaching versus Learning?

We all know what an EFL class is: a group of NNE students gathered in a class who, with more or less enthusiasm, motivation or success, learn English as a Foreign Language under the guidance of a teacher.

But can such a thing as an ELF class exist? Can ELF be taught, or is it only used? In multicultural contexts where English is learned as a foreign language, teachers might continue to teach English mainly as EFL, but in practice students use ELF as a contact language shared by people of different mother tongues, and as an international language in/formed by different cultures and languages. In particular, adolescent students appropriate English from common transnational, transcultural and de-territorialised areas such as the Internet, hip-hop cultures, online blogs and games, etc., using ELF as an interactional and intercultural medium to communicate with peers, to discuss issues, play on-line games, comment on news and exchange ideas. Adopted from below, ELF is thus widely used though not officially taught, and precisely for this reason it raises pedagogical questions of what it means now, and in the future, to teach and learn English – and of *what* English/es are, and will be, taught and learned.

In this paper I will examine how the issue of ELF represents a pivotal moment in the practice of EFL teaching, addressing some questions of how ELF is used by

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adolescent students, and of whether and how these uses can be incorporated by teachers into their practices to exploit ELF's intercultural potential, and also considering ELF's impact on EFL teaching.

Language Education

Language education is widely considered an essential vehicle to full personal emancipation and realization, as well as a principal means of informed participation to public debate (Scuola di Barbiana¹, 1967; Freire, 1970). In 1989, Fairclough vindicated the "*primary emancipatory task of language education*" (pp.239 and ff.), where education to a critical awareness of the language is meant to favour empowerment and agency.

The political issue which lies at the core of language education has necessarily called attention to English as a global language. Long has been the debate on English, whose widespread diffusion has been considered either a sign of "imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) or as a means to empower the speaker, allowing her/him to "speakback": "*English can indeed be appropriated and used for diverse ends, by dint of its widespread use, offering interesting possibilities for the spread of alternative forms of culture and knowledge and for new forms of communal action*" (Pennycook, 1994, p.321).

As the impact of linguistic interconnections is wide and multifaceted, "*simple notions of homogenization, ideological hegemony or imperialism fail to register properly the nature of these encounters and the interplay, interaction and cultural creativity they produce*" (Held *et al.* quoted in Dewey, 2007, p.336).

Studies of *Critical Linguistics and Pedagogy* (Pennycook, 2001) have then addressed the issue of how English can be appropriated "to teach and speak back", bridging through the years Pennycook's own prophecy that closed his book in 1994: "*English offers an expanded community of users. If insurgent knowledges can emerge through English, they may have an effect far broader than if they had been voiced in other languages*" (Pennycook, 1994, p.325).

In the last two decades, research has shown that the global uses of the English language and the rapid changes they bring forth have exceeded expectations, in particular where adolescents are concerned (Sernhede, 2007; Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2009). Adolescents use different varieties of English, adopting the language from non-official and non-institutional channels and adapting it to their communicative needs: they appropriate English from different sources and use it as an intercultural area of interaction as well as a symbol of a belonging to a transnational peer community.

The acquisition of the language "*from below*", that is "*the informal – active or passive – use of English as expression of subcultural identity and style*" (Preisler as quoted by Androutsopoulos in Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2009, p.57) is often in contrast with the "*English from above*", that is with the English taught at school.

Questions then arise regarding on one hand how adolescents use and perceive English in a context in which it is taught and learned as a non-dominant¹ language, and on the other hand how EFL teachers can deal in their classroom practice with the changes that the different uses of English and ELF bring about.

The Research

To understand the state of the art of English/es used by adolescent students in a multicultural urban context, I conducted a qualitative study collecting data on the students' perspective, as I wanted to investigate the *actual uses* of the language in a setting where English is learned as EFL –that is in a situation where all speakers are non-English mother tongue. The data on students' perspective also allow us to approach and take into consideration the impact and the effects of the ELF/EFL issue on teaching.

During my two decades' experience as an English teacher in Italian high schools, I have had the opportunity to see many changes in the use of English by adolescent students, noticing in particular how, in recent years, there has been a tendency among them to use an increasing variety of English/es as a way to facilitate intercultural communication among peers, as well as a means to signal in-group affiliations.

While proceeding in the research, however, I realised that things appeared even more complex than they seemed at the beginning. Indeed, how *many* Englishes were there in question?

Data collected show that the paradigm of ELF can be helpful when applied to the micro context of the urban classroom as it helps us reflect on the implications and the impact of a common foreign language on intercultural encounters, and on the practices of moving to and from different L1s and English/es as a language in common. Last but not least, it helps us take a closer look at the gap between the English the students *use* and the English they *study*.

Structure of the Research

My qualitative PhD research was grounded on field observations as a teacher, and then carried out through written interviews and two back-talk focus groups. The research was conducted in two high schools in Turin, a large town in the northwest of Italy. One school is a vocational school with an art curriculum (the *Istituto d'Arte*) while the other is a *Liceo*, a grammar school which prepares students for academic studies.

I examined some of the theoretical literature on interviews (Kvale, 1996; Flick, 2009) and some questionnaires on languages: the *Motivational Questionnaire* (Dörnyei *et al.*, 2006; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), Dewaele's questionnaire (2010) on the relation between language/s, emotions and identity and Bagna & Barni's questionnaire (2005), which was presented in the school year 2007-2008 and was meant to evaluate the linguistic repertoire of Italian and non-Italian students in plurilingual contexts.

¹In the accepted meaning, the expression “non-dominant language” is used to indicate an Lx which is not the predominant language in a country, as well as an Lx which is not the native language of the speaker and in which s/he is generally less fluent.

Considering all this, I created an *ad hoc* qualitative written interview, from which data were collected anonymously. The interview consists of fourteen questions: three are general questions (about age, gender, mother tongue), followed by seven multiple-choice questions (regarding language/s spoken at home, with friends, on the Internet, and including feedback on qualities or feelings attached to each language), and finally four open questions in the form of narrative stories that presented some exemplary and emblematic uses of English by students I had observed as a teacher and on which interviewees were asked to comment, also relating to their personal experiences.

I decided to opt for written interviews as the first step of data collecting for many different reasons, the most important of which are:

- I was interested in understanding emically the students' own perspectives on their uses of English, in order to get as close as possible to their own reading of their world according to an ethnographic approach aimed at exploring "*the educational worlds of actors from their own perspective*" (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p.30). Moreover, a qualitative interview could offer width and *thickness* to reading data, insomuch as "*the focus of interview research is (mostly) the individual experience of the participant, which is seen as relevant for understanding the experience of people in a similar situation*" (Flick, 2007, p.79)
- I intended to create a protected area where all voices, in particular those of shy or introverted students, could speak out freely without any form of influence or impediment (such as adherence or reference to previous roles, impaired or problematic adult/student or student/student relationships, etc.)
- I intended to encourage students to reflect on their own practices regarding the use of a common foreign language.

Interviews

Participants: 62 students from five different classes (two classes from the 'Liceo' and three classes from the Art Institute)

Conditions: all above eighteen years of age and in their last two years of high school; voluntary participation; no compensation

Gender: 40 female students; 22 male students

Mother tongue: 6 non-native Italian speakers (2 Romanian, 2 Arabic and 1 French-German bilingual), corresponding to 9.68%, a slightly higher percentage than the regional data for high schools².

²According to ISMU data 2011 (*Iniziativa e Studi sulla Multiethnicità* – Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity – <http://www.ismu.org/> is an independent Italian research centre) the percentage of students with immigrant background in high school in the region where research was conducted

Data from interviews were stored and analyzed according to the most recurrent keywords and themes through a dedicated web application. Data are accessible online, protected by a password and a captcha code.

Back-talk focus groups

The back-talk focus group is a follow-up tool which “*consists in drawing together research participants to discuss research findings*” (Frisina, 2006). It is meant to stimulate the reflexivity of the researcher, to empower participants, and to disseminate results in a responsible and cooperative way.

Some representatives of the 62 students participated in the back-talk focus groups at the same conditions of the interviews. The focus groups were recorded and privacy was guaranteed according to Italian laws on privacy (D.L. 30/06/2003, n. 196).

I presented both groups with some categories I had derived from the analysis of the recurring themes that had emerged from their interviews. I asked the participants to discuss these themes and/or to offer new ones.

Participants were 25 students in two groups:

- ‘*Liceo*’: 16 students (9 female, 7 male), all native Italians, of both Italian and non-Italian origins
- Art Institute: 9 students (6 female, 3 male), all native Italians except for one student who belonged to generation 1.5³.

I analyzed data focusing mainly on the themes discussed, but also accounting how they were constructed through interactional moves. The analysis of the focus groups’ data was based on Goffman’s work (1959) on the ritual presentation of the self, on Rampton’s research about linguistic behaviours among adolescents (1995), on works addressing how inclusion and exclusion (Klein & Paoletti, 2002) and identity and alterity (Pistoletti & Schwarze, 2007) are created through language, and on Linguistics texts such as Auer’s (1998; 2007) and Bazzanella’s (2011).

The data collected in this research show that 45 students out of 62 interviewed (72.58%) do not consider the English expressions/short sentences they use as a foreign language, but rather as expressions in a contact language among peers to speak about their passions and interests, such as music, sport, blogs, the Internet, comics, etc. English is a language which is part of their way of speaking, not only in their use of loans such as “chat” or “mouse”, but also in longer sentences that they exchange with peers, and is sometimes used as a way of being accepted by them.

In the data collected there is no evidence that being native or non-native Italian, or of foreign origins, influences the ways students use English/es, and similarly there is

(Piedmont) is of 8.7%.

³The term “generation 1.5”, or “children of family rejoinders” indicates individuals who were born and began their schooling in their home lands. According to several studies (i.e. Colombo & Santagati 2010), at the moment this is the most common condition of adolescents with immigrant background in Italy. On their arrival in Italy, English is often the first common language they use to communicate with native or non-native Italian peers.

no evidence of gender differences regarding the use of English/es. More or less consciously, adolescents code-switch from L1s to ELF according to the topics they want to discuss, the context and the people they want (or do not want) to communicate with, shifting “*in and out of language varieties and discourse genres in their lyrics, writings, conversations and computer mediated communication*”, as Alim comments on Androutsopoulos’s work (Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook 2009:11).

The English students use is thus mainly “*English from below*”, a practice used “*to symbolize affiliation and peer group solidarity. It is acquired via non institutional channels and is much more viable than officially promoted, institutionally transmitted English as a Foreign Language*” (Preisler as quoted by Androutsopoulos in Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2009, p.57). Indeed, in the students’ life-world, English is not only a way to communicate with others “*from below*”: it is also a school subject which comes “*from above*”. And there the gap between EFL and ELF fully emerges.

1. *The students’ perspective: EFL learning and ELF uses*

Some excerpts⁴ from interviews and focus groups help to highlight certain issues of the research, as they show

- how, and for which reasons, adolescents use a common non-native language to communicate among themselves
- how they *adopt* English and *adapt* it to their communicative aims.

Through the students’ words, the issue of ELF slowly emerges tridimensionally from the EFL canvas, showing that the EFL/ELF gap is already a point in question.

Some students reflect on the present uses of English, affirming that:

- “*As young people we very often use English expressions as every day we are in contact with a multicultural reality where the English language serves as an important unifying factor among people of different mother tongues*” (L,F,18)
- “*Two years ago, a new classmate arrived from the Dominican Republic, initially he spoke only in English with me and my classmates, he spoke English better than we did, I always thought he had a perfect pronunciation and he helped me a lot to improve mine*” (L,F,19)
- “*As everybody uses expressions in English, I use them too. It is a global language, you need to use it to communicate at an international level*” (Al,F,18).

⁴The excerpts from interviews and focus groups are here reported as AI for the *Istituto d’Arte* and L for the *Liceo*; F indicates a female student, and M a male, while the number (18, 19, 20, etc.) indicates the age. Excerpts from interviews are here quoted in between quotation marks (“...”) while excerpts from focus groups are here quoted in between slashes (/.../).

A student reflects on how English can be used not only to communicate with people of different mother tongues, but also as a way to be accepted by peers:

- “ (the stories in this interview) *made me reflect not only on myself but also and in particular on those guys who don't know our language (Italian) well and use English to be accepted and to relate with their peers*” (AI,M,18).

English can be used not only for intercultural communication, but also for *intracultural* communication:

- *“I use English to speak with my friends from Spain, but also with my Italian friends”*/ (AI,F)
- *“English is useful to communicate as it is known by everyone and it is part of our way of speaking”* (AI,M,18)

Another student considers English in relation to his personal experience in a multicultural and plurilinguistic context:

- *“When I was at junior high school no wonder you learned English! We were all of different nationalities there, so we didn't need to go abroad to learn it!”*/ (AI,M)

while another connects current uses of English with future perspectives:

- *“Using expressions in English is a way of unifying young people and preparing them for their future or for a progress which is very much connected with the English language”* (L,F,18)

The students' use of English in a daily context unties the language from a definite national belonging and opens up new affiliations:

- *“Every day I use a lot of English words and I often use English to write to friends, it is a language which belongs to me now, and I could not express myself without it on many occasions”* (L,M,18)

Indeed, *“English can belong to whoever chooses to make it their own through communicating and interacting in the language”* (Dewey 2012a:11).

New belongings and affiliations can sometimes favour reflections on multilingualism:

- *“I find it interesting that the English language has influenced our way of speaking to the point that it is natural to use expressions from foreign languages” (L,M,18)*

English can favour intercultural relationships:

- *“A classmate of foreign origins knows English very well and she helped me many times during tests and class questionings. From her help, a true friendship was born” (L,F,18).*

And intercultural romance, too. A couple (an Italian girl and a Romanian boy) report that they often speak English between themselves so that their parents will not understand what they say:

- *“When I want to cut out my mother from what we are saying, I speak with her (his girlfriend) in English. My mother does not understand English. At first we spoke in Italian, which is a language my mother initially did not understand well, as she’s Romanian, but then we decided to shift to English”/ (AI, M).*

The uses of English as above mentioned display quite a wide range of ELF characteristics, from its being a contact language exchanged among non-native speakers to its inter- and transcultural qualities. Some cases show that English was needed as ELF when people could not have communicated otherwise, while in others ELF emerges as the ideal space to create new transcultural affiliations that do not derive from ethnicity or descent.

ELF is not only a functional language but a *“language of socialization”* (Jenkins 2003:38): set at the borders of different L1s, ELF can favour intercultural encounters and be a strategy to enhance communication across cultures. Not belonging to anyone, ELF is a language that can represent an actual space between the boundaries of different languages, cultures and *voices*; that can help to blur the borders of ethnicity and also those of identity, as it is an ideal space for imagining (and allowing to grow) a different self, one often more in line with an ideal self – more extroverted, popular, or confident. Though the distinction runs within the lines of the statements quoted above, students seem to have no overt perception of the difference between the English used as ELF and the English studied as EFL, both generically reported as “English” or “English expressions”. One student, though, exposes the gap as follows:

- *“At school it makes me feel more exposed and insecure, while in my private life it gives me more protection and sense of security” (AI,M,18)*

The student is always referring to the English language, but he perceives it both as a normative subject (EFL) which causes anxiety and as an interactional medium (ELF) able to offer protection and connection. EFL is the they-code, a language *“from above”* which signals distance, while ELF is the we-code, appropriated, co-constructed and

used “*from below*”, which allows contact and communication. The student’s statement is soon echoed:

- *“The vocabulary we learn on the Internet or from songs is not the one our teachers want us to know”*/ (L,M)
- *“English at school is not intended to favour communication among us”*/ (L,F)
- *“These are two incompatible aspects of the same language”*/ (L,M)

Indeed, an attachment to EFL normativity “*does not fit very well with the communicative realities of English speakers*” given that “*an interactional setting may require numerous combinations and admixtures of languages, with hybrid selections of language resources being constructed from within a very varied repertoire*” (Dewey 2012a, p.26).

It is not only students, though, who may feel in between. Teachers too are more and more asked to face the “*tension between the variable actuality of language in use and the need to select a model for classroom teaching and language assessment*” (id.:27).

Pedagogical Implications of ELF in EFL Contexts

The EFL/ELF gap revealed by the students’ point of view compels us to observe carefully what it means for the teachers, and to consider its impact on teaching. The issues that ELF raises in EFL teaching are various and multifaceted, ranging from how far a language appropriated by all can force its own margins to include forms and practices once considered mistakes, to whether intelligibility can be the only parameter in linguistic education by which to judge and evaluate an effective communication.

Moreover, ELF puts EFL teachers in a rather uneasy position: on one hand they are professionally, institutionally and ethically committed to teach the established norms of a language so as to provide students, in particular the less advantaged, with a toolkit of the appropriate words and expressions they are likely to need in their future. Within this perspective, grammar is a political issue, as it is there to fill in socio-cultural gaps and remove obstacles to a full personal expression and realization; however, within the same perspective, some of the widespread usages of ELF should be marked in red-pencil. On the other hand, with the global spread of English, it is clear that EFL teachers can no longer adhere acritically to NL models when, in everyday use and practice, we are all exposed to nonstandard forms of English, and when English teachers in the world are mainly NNT.

If the EFL/ELF gap opens up questions, it also offers solutions. They come disguised as a paradox: “*it may be of pedagogic value for teachers to be aware of non-ENL varieties, but only so as to identify the ways in which students need to develop linguistically in order to achieve ENL goals*” (Dewey, 2012b, p.155). Within this paradox lies the occasion for teachers to develop a true critical linguistic pedagogy: they can provide students, in particular the less advantaged, with a solid architecture of the language that will help them reach their goals in the future and, at the same time, with a

critical approach to language/s offering the occasion for a “*coscientization*”, where a personal awareness of the gap between linguistic norms and usages, language and languaging, can fully develop.

Considering English both as “*a fixed set of codified forms*” and “*a dynamic means of communication*” will help teachers to “*adopt multiple perspectives in their approach to language, which can be beneficial to language learners*” (Dewey, 2012b, p.161).

Not only ELF encourages a meta-reflection on language as we have considered it so far, it also fosters a meta-reflection on language education, urging teachers and educators to revise their methodologies, approaches and aims in the perspective of a critical linguistic pedagogy, not for “*identifying alternative sets of norms, but more in terms of enabling us to move beyond normativity*” (id.:166).

ELF is challenging EFL teachers to revise their teaching practices, but it is also offering them new perspectives and new opportunities for a renewal in their profession: as we are only “*at the beginning of a potential turning point in current approaches to language in educational contexts*” (id.:165), teachers “*need to be encouraged to reflect on ELF research findings (...) to reassess current practices and incorporate changes*” (ib.) such as taking into consideration the socio-cultural contexts in which English is learned and used, “*increasing the exposure to the diverse ways in which English is used globally*” (id.:163) and considering critically contexts, norms and purposes of language/s as an interactional practice.

In multicultural and plurilingual contexts where English is the non-native language for all speakers ELF can be the ideal “*third place*” (Kramsh, 1993), a space in-between languages and cultures which can foster a critical reflection on both.

ELF’s post- and transnational character opens the doors wide to intercultural perspectives. There are indeed deep connections between ELF and Intercultural Education: both in/formed by different cultures and languages, they are practices and processes which explore the boundaries of identity/ies and culture/s; both characterized by polycentricity and multiculturalism, they highlight the cultural, complex and situated nature of interactional encounters.

If teaching and learning foreign languages “*serve as a metaphor to understand the basic dilemma of educational systems, which must both socialize learners into the social order and give them the means to change that social order*” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 236), and if “*foreign language education, in so far as it offers alternative ways of naming and interpreting the world, has to provide also challenges for the second kind, namely the opportunity to think through and to question existing practices*” (id.: 240), it is clear that ELF pushes all that even further.

ELF’s permanent impermanence, its condition of in-between, its capability of crossing and being informed by different cultures, its focusing on fluidity and variety, and its sensibility to contexts, users and interactions, all reveal and epitomize the characteristics of language itself.

In the multicultural class, ELF-aware pedagogies can thus work beneficially in the perspective of a critical linguistic education able to include “*a systematic assessment of the situational context in the production and reception of meaning*” (id.: 243).

Moreover, ELF can suggest to teachers and students new ways to approach and conceptualize ‘otherness’, exposing its cultural construction: indeed, who is ‘the other’ when everybody speaks a language which is other to all?

“Perché è solo la lingua che fa eguali.

Egual è chi sa esprimersi

e intende l'espressione altrui.”

(“As it is only language that makes people equal.

Equal is the one who can express her/himself

and understand the expressions of others”)

(Scuola di Barbiana, [1967] 2007:96).

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EFL/ELF: Öğretmenlerin Öğrettikleri ve Öğrencilerin Kullandıkları, Pedagojik Çıkarımlar

Özet

İtalyan lisesinde anadili İngilizce olmayan İngilizce öğretmeni olarak toplanan gözlemler ve anadili İngilizce olan ve olmayan İtalyan ergen öğrencilerin İngilizceyi kullanımları konulu doktora tezini kapsamında toplanmış olan nicel veriler doğrultusunda, bu çalışmada İngilizce öğretmenlerinin öğrettikleri ile öğrencilerin kullandıkları arasında göttiğe açılan farkı, İngilizcenin EFL olarak öğretildiği ve öğrenildiği egemen olmayan bağlamlarda inceleyeceğim. Dilin bir norm ya da bir kullanım olması durumları arasında olanları analiz ederek, aynı zamanda EFL'nin oluşturduğu pedagojik tartışmalara değineceğim. Bunun yanında, EFL'nin sağladığı eğitimsel olanaklara, dilin kültürel, karışık ve konumlandırılmış doğası ve etkileşimsel karşılaşmalar tarafından oluşan kanıtlarla, kritik dilbilimsel pedagoji perspektifinden değineceğim.

Anahtar sözcükler: EFL ve kritik dilbilimsel pedagoji, Kültürlerarası Eğitim, EFL pedagojisine normatif sonrasıyaklaşım

