# "SHE LIKE IT" BUT SHOULD WE STANDARDIZE ELF?

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## Abstract

Some researchers call for describing English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which will result in calls for its standardization. However, there is no need to standardize ELF because English became a lingua franca via teaching based on native-speaker norms. Also, there are not enough descriptions of ELF to claim it is a legitimate variety of English. Besides, studies reveal that teachers and students are highly inclined to native norms. Moreover, some claim learners may decide to learn ELF, but today English is introduced at young ages. These factors clearly show that there is no reason for attempting to standardize ELF.

**Key Words:** language standards, norms, variety, codification, English as a lingua franca

## LINGUA FRANCA OLARAK İNGİLİZCE STANDARTLAŞTIRILMALI MI?

## Özet

Kimi araştırmacılar lingua franca olarak İngilizcenin betimlenmesini istemekteler ki bu da onun standartlaştırılmasını istemeyle sonuçlanacaktır. Ancak, lingua franca olarak İngilizcenin standartlaştırılmaması gerekmektedir. Öncelikle, İngilizce mevcut lingua franca durumuna ana dil İngilizcesinin öğretilmesiyle ulaşmıştır. İkinci olarak, lingua franca İngilizcesinin bir diyalekt olarak geliştiğini iddia edecek düzeyde betimlemeler yoktur. Ayrıca araştırmalar İngilizce öğreten ve öğrenenlerin anadil İngilizcesi öğrenme eğiliminde olduklarını göstermektedir. Son olarak, bazı yorumcular kimi öğrencilerin lingua franca boyutlu bir İngilizceyi öğrenmek isteyebileceğini söylemekteler ancak günümüzde dil eğitimine erken yaşlarda başlanıyor olması genç öğrencilerin böyle bir karar alma olgunluğuna erişmiş olmasını güçleştirmektedir. Sonuç olarak, lingua franca olarak İngilizceyi standartlaştırmaya gerek yoktur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dil standartları, normlar, diyalekt, kodifikasyon, lingua franca İngilizce

## 1. "She Like It" But Should We Standardize ELF?

In the 20th century, English globally spread bringing about its international communicative function. With its international function, English does not resemble any other language. In fact, no language has ever acquired a role like English (Dewey, 2007). Unlike languages spread by empires in the past, the spread of English today is not imposed, but rather it is more natural (Kayman, 2004). This claim could be debated, but the fact remains that English has globally spread like no other language. The spread is such that the non-native speakers of English well outnumber the native-speakers. According to the approximations made by Graddol (2000) and Crystal (2003), there are about one and a half billion speakers of English in the world. About half of them are non-native speakers whereas a quarter are native speakers and another quarter are the speakers of English in post-colonial regions where English has the status of a second (official) language. McArthur (2001) names these basically geographical categories as the ENL territories (places where the majority are native speakers), the ESL territories (places where English has been present for over a century and has the status of a second (official) language) and the EFL territories (where the majority of speakers are non-native speakers of English).

McArthur's representations resemble those of Kachru (1985) who represented this geographical reality over two decades ago with a model of three concentric circles: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding (or extending) circle. These categories could be matched with McArthur's ENL, ESL and EFL territories, respectively. In Kachru's model, ENL is spoken by native speakers in the inner circle (e.g. the USA), ESL is spoken as a second language in the outer circle (e.g. India) and EFL is spoken in the expanding circle to communicate with the people from the inner and the outer circles (e.g. Turkey).

However, there are oppositions to the view that people in the expanding circle are using English to communicate with the people in the inner and the outer circles. According to them, the speakers of English in the expanding circle use English to communicate mostly with the people from the same circle. They refer to this specific use of English between people who do not share the same first language as *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) (Jenkins, 2009, p. 200; Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339, Smith, 2005, p. 57).

Since this kind of communication accounts for the majority of exchanges in English, there is a strong position among some commentators towards calling for describing, codifying and standardizing ELF. According to Seidlhofer (2000, p. 53), "the "E" in *English as a Mother Tongue* (EMT) is bound to be something very different from the "E" in *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF)." She further claims, "English is being shaped at least as much by its nonnative speakers as by its native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 340). As a consequence of this belief, ELF commentators oppose to the fact that descriptions of English are made in terms of native speakers and then imposed upon

nonnative speakers who are forced to be norm-dependent (Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2000). According to such commentators, the situation is a paradoxical one because the majority of speakers are nonnative speakers and the majority of exchanges do not include native speakers and yet the standards are formed based on the native speaker's linguistic behavior. Therefore, some commentators demand that the comprehensive descriptions of ELF be made. Seidlhofer (2000) says that it is even more necessary to describe ELF because it does not have any native speakers to provide information and thus systematic study of ELF is necessary. She says, "now that the right to descriptions in their own terms is finally accorded to nativized varieties of English, it is high time that we granted the same right to ELF" (Seidlhofer, 2000, p. 54).

A number of scholars (Breiteneder, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; 2006c; Seidlhofer, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004) also believe that ELF communications result in to develop common features that form a common ground that shares some features with native speaker English but at the same time includes features that are different from it. This common ground, they believe, is giving its way to the development of a variety of English in its own right.

This belief results in a debate of norms. While they admit that native speakers "can provide a convenient common denominator" (Cook, 2002b, p. 336, as cited in Jenkins, 2006c, p. 146), proponents of an ELF variety believe native speaker norms are irrelevant in ELF settings (cf. Alptekin, 2002). They believe that "ELF has taken on a life of its own" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 212). They call for research for more descriptions of what they believe to be a new veriety (Seidlhofer, Breiteneder & Pitzl, 2006). Ferguson (2009) argues that the long-term goal of the ELF proponents is "the codification of an alternative ELF norm" (p. 118) which they see as "one means of conferring legitimacy on ELF varients and of enhancing the feasibility of teaching an alternative form of English" (p. 118). Although the ELF commentators make cautious statements, this long-term goal is evident in their statements such as "clearly the increasing prominence of ELF by its nature poses a considerable challenge to existing established attitudes towards the nature of English and its teaching" (Seidlhofer et al. 2006, p. 22) and "obviously, if a language is perceived to be changing in its forms and its uses, it is reasonable to expect something in the teaching of it will aslo change" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 225). Seidlhofer (2004) foresees a major change in teaching and testing of English as well as in teacher education. Jenkins (2006a) takes the claims to a next level by claiming that sometime in the future, if the codification of ELF forms is achieved, native speakers "will have to follow the agenda set by ELF speakers" (p. 161). In short, according to ELF scholars what needs to be done is describe this veriety and establish standards that are not based on native speaker norms, but rather on the descriptions of ELF. However, in contrast to what they believe, there is no need to standardize ELF. There are solid reasons why there is no such need.

First, the current lingua franca function of English is attained through teaching based on native-speaker norms. English has not become a lingua franca by imple-

menting an international variety. Since the common practice has been and still is accepting native speaker competence as the teaching model, it will not be wrong to argue that we have a language that is functioning as a lingua franca (although the reasons are socioeconomic and sociopolitical) through teaching based on native speaker standards. People can engage in ELF communications owing to teaching based on native speaker norms practiced for many years. Seidlhofer (2000) gives an example of a successful ELF communication.

This is a dialogue between L1 speakers of Swiss German and French respectively. They have been asked to choose one picture out of several options which will best serve for a campaign for a charity:

(1) *Reto (L1 Swiss German) & Stephanie (L1 French)*

1 R: I think on the front xx on the front page should be a picture who-which only

2 makes p- people to er spend money, to the charity

3 S: yes

4 R: and I think er yeah maybe

5 S: I think a picture with child

6 R: Yeah, child are always good to

7 S: Yes

8 -R: to trap people spend money

9 S: Yes. I think, erm, let me see, erm ...

10 R: I don't know ... but maybe we should er choose a picture who gives

11 the impression that this child needs needs the money or

12 S: So I think, then that's my, this one, no

13 R: Yeah it's quite happy

14 S: Yeah, she's happy er … Maybe this one

15 R: Yeah.

16 S: He look very sad … and he has to carry heavier vase

17 R: Mm, that's right.

18 S: Too heavy for him, or …

19 R: Hm hm

20 S: But also this one, even if he's smiling

21 R: Yeah, that's right … And maybe this one can show that the

22 that the chari-er charity can really help

23 S: Uh huh

24 R: and that the charity can er make a smile on a on a chil -on on a child's face

25 S: Yes

26 R: Yeah I think this one would be

27 S: A good one

28 R: It would be good

... long pause

- self-correction

-R continuation

xx unintelligible

(Data incl. transcription donated by Jennifer Jenkins)

Despite all these 'errors' which most EFL teachers would certainly consider in need of correction and remediation, the exchange between Reto and Stephanie can be regarded as an instance of successful ELF communication. (p. 62-64)

If, in their criteria, this conversation is successful, then the question of why they need to change the language standards arises. If, through native speaker norms, they attain successful ELF interaction, then it means current standards work for ELF communication as well. As it is, keeping native speaker standards seems to be the best approach. Acting otherwise and allowing variety into global teaching of English may result in English losing its useful lingua franca function over time. Some commentators, including proponents of ELF, caution against this possibility. For example, Berns (2008) says that such an approach may result in "the evolution of standards and norms that make one community potentially unintelligible, incomprehensible, or uninterpretable to another" (p. 331). She, then, asks the question of "how can mutual intelligibility be safeguarded when the conditions, contexts, and communicators in any instance of cross-cultural communication – even if limited to Expanding Circle users – are not identical or stable?" (Berns, 2008, p. 331). Similar concerns are shared by ELF proponents as well. For example, Jenkins (2006, p. 35) says:

> A policy of pluricentricity is pursued unchecked, in effect a situation of 'anything goes', with each expanding circle L1 group developing its own English pronunciation norms, there is a danger that their accents will move further and further apart until a stage is reached where pronunciation presents a serious obstacle to lingua franca communication.

Likewise, Balfour (2002) describes the debate of standards in South Africa, but it applies to ELF discussions perfectly well. He cautions about pluricentricity by asserting "not only is it possible to determine how many varieties any two people might have access to, but how many they have access to in common" (p. 29). To prevent this kind of problems arising from deviations, Jenkins (1998) proposes to "use a native model as a point of reference" (p. 124) in order to ensure that non-native varieties do not deviate from each other too much. These show that there is no need to standardize ELF and there are, in fact, serious concerns about causing the loss of intelligibility in ELF communication. Thus, native speaker model should remain as the standard.

Second, there are not enough descriptions of ELF to claim it is a legitimate variety of English. Research in this area is fairly immature (Mollin, 2006; Pickering, 2006; Prodromou, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2000; 2009; Seidlhofer et. al., 2006). This makes it difficult to come to a conclusion that ELF exists as a variety in its own right. Some commentators believe expecting this would not be true because in fact in current varieties of English there is no uniformity and expecting it to emerge within the dynamic nature of ELF communication does not have enough ground. Prodromou (2007) says:

> The speech community of EIL contains diverse and often contradictory lingua-cultural groups; it embraces multitudes of L1- and L2-users of English. ELF is, in essence, different from the speech communities of territories where English is a second language; it is difficult to see how these groups are going to converge in linguistic terms (p. 49).

Different commentators refer to the nature of English in the expanding circle as *diverse*, *dynamic* (Dewey; 2007, p. 347), *flexible* (Dewey; 2007, p. 341), *fluid* (Dewey, 2007, p. 348; Ferguson, 2009, p. 129; Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 240), *slippery* (Berns, 2005, p. 91), *unstable and unsystematic* (Pickering, 2006, p. 224) and *variable* (Dewey; 2007, p. 339) because it does not depend on a single source and it changes according to the situation in which a specific interaction is taking place. Still, some argue that there may be features that are developing as the common core of a legitimate ELF variety. Some of the features of ELF they propose (especially in continental Europe) are countable use of uncountable nouns, zero marking of 3rd person singular present tense verbs (Jenkins, 2009), and context dependent use of definite article (Dewey, 2007). Seidlhofer (2004) adds to these the following:

✓Confusing the relative pronouns *who* and *which*

✓Omitting definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in ENL, and inserting them where they do not occur in ENL

✓Failing to use correct forms in tag questions (e.g., *isn't it?* or *no*? instead of *shouldn't they?*)

✓Inserting redundant prepositions, as in *We have to study about…*)

✓Overusing certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as *do, have, make, put, take*

✓Replacing infinitive-constructions with *that*-clauses, as in *I want that*

✓Overdoing explicitness (e.g. *black color* rather than just *black*) (p. 220)

Mollin (2006) conducted a corpus study in European Union (EU) and investigated some of the features proposed by the proponents of ELF variety. She found that speakers follow native-speaker standard. The data shows limited amount of deviations from standard native speaker language use. This limited number of deviations could better be described as errors. The results of the study showed no sign of common features developed by the speakers of ELF in EU. Likewise, Breiteneder (2009) investigated zero marking of third person singular present tense verbs in a corpus of 43,000 words used in two meetings with the participants from 15 different European countries. She found that of 151 instances, only 25 were unmarked. Although she claims that they are differences rather than deficiencies and two forms coexist in a contact situation which eventually resulting in the loss of one, it makes more sense to consider 126 instances that were marked, accounting for 83%. Mollin (2007) also analyzed three criteria of expansion, nativization and institutionalization as prerequisites of a new variety in terms of Euro-English and she concluded English in Europe did not meet these criteria to claim English in Europe is a new variety of English. In short, to conclude at this stage that an ELF variety exists is not possible (Berns, 2008; Ferguson, 2009; Mollin, 2006).

In their efforts of studying and describing ELF to identify characteristics of its own, researchers make mistakes as pointed out by some commentators. For example, Prodromou (2007) draws attention to one of those mistakes. He says while ELF scholars criticize linguists for disregarding L2 users in their descriptions, they themselves disregard L1 users in their descriptions. This is "the same mistake, but in reverse" (p. 50).

According to Ferguson (2009), another risk is that in the course of standardization there is a danger of exclusion and marginalization of *non-standard ELF users* (p. 129) which is a risk that comes by "most efforts at codification and standardization" (p. 129). This means that the roles may change, but the reality will remain.

It should also be admitted that English has a specific function in the expanding circle which is different from other uses of English. This specific lingua franca function could be described as a register rather than a variety as the former refers to a specific function and the latter refers to a group of speakers (Mollin, 2006; Widdowson, 1998).

Third**,** descriptions of ELF end up no more than being reduced versions of English as a Native Language as ELF researchers are inclined towards disregarding items that do not cause communication problems when they are incorrect or do not exist. For example, Seidlhofer (2005) proposes to remove items that do not cause misunderstandings in international communication from teaching to "free up valuable teaching time for more general language awareness and communication strategies" (p. 340).

This approach is problematic in a variety of ways. Firstly, what they are trying to describe is a language mostly used as a tool for interpersonal communication. Many commentators (e.g. Berns, 2005; Earling, 2005; House, 2003; Kayman, 2004; Kuo, 2006) draw attention to this fact by asserting that English as a Lingua Franca is simply a language for communication and the functions of it are mostly limited to international interpersonal communication. This limits the descriptions of ELF into a limited aspect of language, that is interpersonal communication and in such communication some things could be overseen. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006: 392), House (2003, p. 567) and Watterson (2008, p. 401) say a characteristic of ELF communication is that participants usually have a "let it pass" attitude for the items that they do not understand. This overseeing communication problems attitude is interpreted as if errors do not cause misunderstandings. Thus, it is not a good approach to minimize English to a reduced language of communication. Prodromou (2007) poses this question: "Is the 'reduced' form of ELF (*She look sad...*) equally unproblematic in speech and writing, in informal conversation, and in business meetings and conference presentations?"(p. 51). In interpersonal communication, there are a lot of contextual clues listeners could use to guide themselves to the meanings of the utterances and many errors could be overseen. However, production requires more effort and complex processes (Kuo, 2006). Furthermore, English is a gatekeeping language for education and profession (Kuo, 2006; Widdowson, 1998). For a person to be successful in these areas, s/he needs to show a great deal of mastery in proficiencies beyond interpersonal communication. These more academic proficiencies covering the areas of reading and writing cannot be achieved through a reduced teaching model. Therefore, such factors clearly indicate "frequent occurrence of a common error does not constitute a strong case for standardization and popularization … a description of such language exchange does not constitute an appropriate model for learning purposes" (Kuo, 2006, p. 217-218). In sum, such an approach is a minimalist approach which clearly lacks a distinction between spoken and academic English. If you describe spoken English in international context and standardize it, you will miss the more important part of English. Prodromou (2007) states **"**it would be irresponsible to encourage learners to assume that they can do without standard forms of the language" (p. 51).

Fourth, attitude of speakers in the expanding circle to nonnative norms plays an important role in making decisions. In language teaching, learners' needs and choices should be essential. In this respect, their attitude to nonnative varieties is important. Prodromou (2007) draws attention to this fact by asserting "At the end of the day, our

scholarly deliberations and laboratory research will have to confront the realities of English in the classroom and in the world and will, above all, need to motivate learners and meet their aspirations" (p. 48). In many respects, speakers in the expanding circle are inclined towards native speaker norms and convincing them to learn a nonnative variety will be difficult (Dewey, 2007; Jenkins, 2006c). In three different studies, Jenkins (2007, as cited in Jenkins, 2009), Kuo (2006) and Mollin (2006) investigated attitudes of speakers in the expanding circle towards nonnative varieties and they all found that speakers in the expanding circle are highly inclined towards native language norms. Furthermore, these researchers found that the speakers in the expanding circle rate nonnative varieties fairly low. In this respect, teaching them nonnative varieties will mean teaching them something they are not willing to learn. On top of this, a challenge lies beneath changing teachers' attitudes towards teaching ELF (Sifakis, 2009) as they may be strongly inclined towards teaching based on native speaker norms. For example, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) found that teachers in Greece have strong NS norm-based attitudes towards teaching English. This again shows there is no need to standardize ELF.

Fifth, one argument ELF commentators make is that learners may want to learn English for ELF purposes and thus native speaker variety should not be forced on to learners who have ELF communication in mind (Jenkins, 2006c). This argument is again problematic because learners start taking English classes at young ages, often too young to decide why they will need English in the future. For example, according to the website of Piccolingo (n.d.), a company founded by the Commission of Europe to promote early foreign language education, in all 27 countries in the EU, English is introduced at primary levels, in even some of them it is introduced before primary education. Expecting learners at early stages of their education to decide on a purpose of language use in the future does not seem to be a logical approach. Therefore, this argument limits ELF claims into adult education. For such a limited use, it will be neither feasible nor appropriate to standardize ELF.

The aim of standardizing ELF as a new model is not an appropriate aim. Any effort of standardization requires prescriptivism (Bridger, 2002, as cited in Berns, 2005). Even if standardizing ELF is realized, it will not mean anything more than "simply meeting the new boss who's same as the old boss, or the hegemony of the old with the hegemony of the new" (Berns, 2008, p. 333). On top of that, factors explained in this article make ELF as a bad candidate for being a language standard. First of all, the function of ELF has been attained through native speaker standards and allowing variety into language standards may result in English losing its lingua franca function as intelligibility and comprehensibility may be lost over time. Next, there are not enough descriptions of ELF in hand to see whether it is a legitimate variety or not. A few studies show that such a variety has not emerged. Furthermore, the efforts of describing international interpersonal spoken communication is a minimalist approach as it oversees more academic competences. Also, studies show that speakers of English

in the expanding circle tend to adapt to native speaker standard and rate other varieties low. Finally, claiming that some learners want to learn English for ELF purposes limits teaching ELF into adult education as most learners are introduced to English at primary levels where they are too young to decide to learn English for ELF purposes. Therefore, adopting an ELF approach is problematic and even the proponents of ELF are cautious about applying ELF descriptions directly to teaching (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins, 1998; Seidlhofer, 2000). What makes English a topic of discussion in terms of norms is well explained by Widdowson (1998):

> Almost every minority group would have a tale to tell of how a majority language is used to control it. English is only the most obvious case, and because its speakers are so numerous and diverse it can be subjected to critical attention without fear of causing too much offense. It is an easy target (p. 398).

All in all, while keeping in mind the international lingua franca function of English and being sensitive to local realities where English is spoken, native speaker norms should remain as the language standard worldwide. By doing so, we will ensure we have a language with which we can easily communicate globally.

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