

Book Review

English as a Lingua Franca in the International University: The politics of academic English language policy

Jennifer Jenkins. Routledge, 2014. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-68464-4

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Globalization has revolutionized the world's economic system and business activities, and exerted an impact on education, particularly the higher education sector. The ease of global mobility has facilitated inter-institutional exchanges across national boundaries. The consequent increasingly internationalized academic environment has posed great challenges to university management, pedagogies and social interactions. Jenkins' book *English as a lingua franca in the international university: The politics of academic English language policy* is a timely revelation of how universities have responded to such challenges from the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective.

The first three chapters provide a detailed context and clarifications of ELF-related concepts. Chapter 1, titled "English, the lingua franca of the global economy", highlights the internationalization initiative taken by universities as a strategic response to globalization. The implementation of internationalization varies across institutions and the roles of English in such a process have been underexplored. Jenkins acknowledges the tension between what she terms "grassroots interconnectedness" and "homogenizing from above" (p. 6). The former is the ELF-oriented view which points to the actual use of English in intercultural communication while the latter is the stakeholders' views of how English should be used, which often means adherence to the so-called native norms.

Chapter 2 "The spread of English as a lingua franca" begins with a historical development of ELF followed by a definition. Jenkins suggests that most ELF researchers do not take a deficit view of ELF interactions nor do they consider all ELF forms acceptable. This is consistent with the aim of ELF to facilitate international communication and emphasise intelligibility rather than "cultural identification" (Faber, 2010, p. 20), and also with the irrelevance of the notion of 'native speakers' (NESs) to the ELF discussion (Kuo, 2006). Such theoretical understanding is important as it justifies Jenkins' linguistic approach to treating ELF data and her analytical focus on universities with international students of diverse first language backgrounds.

Chapter 3 focuses on the specialized domain of ELFA, the academic ELF. Many scholars consider academic English as central to the academic experience. Through the ELF lens, Jenkins identifies three sets of approaches to academic English, namely, the conforming approaches, the challenging approaches and the paradigm shifting approach. The last one is also the ELFA approach characterized by its focus on "non-mother-tongue international academics who use English in intercultural communication in academic contexts" (p. 61). This chapter prompts EAP teachers to reflect on practice, especially when assessing the accuracy of students' academic English.

Chapter 4 is a transitional chapter positioning the next three chapters which are research-based studies of ELF from the perspectives of institutions, faculty members and international students. Chapter 5 reports a study of 60 university websites across five regions looking at how the requirements of “native-like norms of academic English” (p. 81) of NNES students are articulated. Jenkins’ analyses of these websites are, in her words, “depressing reading” (p. 119) as there is little sociolinguistic realization of any internationalization perspective insofar as academic English is concerned. She demonstrates that many institutions worldwide still draw heavily on the Anglo-Saxon paradigm and marginalize “any kind of linguistic hybridity used by NNESs” (p. 121). She argues that the adoption of ‘international’ English entry tests, such as IELTS, required of NNESs but not of NESs, reflects the monolithic, ideological assumptions that native English equates with “international intelligibility” (p. 122) and that NESs have no problems with academic English whatsoever. This introduces a novel way of understanding institutional policies but is rather labour-intensive. It might have been better to only compare East Asia and Mainland Europe to trim the chapter to a more readable length.

Chapter 6 is based on a questionnaire survey of the views of faculty members from 24 countries on what can broadly be termed university English. A very clear signal is conveyed that English is taken for granted as the medium of instruction and lingua franca in the globalized higher education context. As with the website study reported in chapter 5, results here demonstrate that faculty members unsurprisingly preferred native English (i.e. British/American English) and had rather negative views about the NNESs’ English, although some respondents were prepared to accept slight variations from native norms, particularly when it came to spoken English.

The final chapter is a conversation study of international students’ views about current English language policies and practices. Conflictingly, interviewees unanimously considered native English best, but a majority of them also favoured the ELF model and showed an inclination towards intelligibility. Jenkins reveals a perception of unfairness among some students at being assessed on an equal footing as their NES counterparts despite their language barriers. She proposes several remedies, some more practical than others, one of which is to provide more time for international students to prepare for crucial milestones such as PhD upgrading meetings.

This book provides a comprehensive discussion and analysis of the issues involved in realizing ELF in global higher education. The author is clearly disappointed at the current situation and the deeply-rooted mindset of stakeholders. The book will alert university managements to the reality that while internationalization initiatives are praiseworthy, more reflection is needed about language policies and attitude towards NNESs’ interactions. The book is an enjoyable read although I would have liked to see more about how ELF is practiced in English-medium universities located in areas dominated by NNESs such as Hong Kong.

About the reviewer

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References

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