

Exploratory Considerations on Language Pedagogy from a Lingua Franca Perspective

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Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to a possible reconceptualization of certain elements of language instruction within the lingua franca paradigm. The interest of this brief intellectual exercise resides in that, first, it provides an overview of some of the fundamental constructs in lingua franca (LF) study and, second, it tentatively stretches the lingua franca paradigm over territory that is, a priori, outside of its customary scope.

While lingua franca study is not specifically concerned with any particular language, the English language is presently enjoying an upsurge in popularity as a lingua franca that both encourages and facilitates its analysis. The reasons for this upsurge are many and, in retrospect, have been snowballing over the last two centuries. Indeed, Crystal (2003) describes the connection between technological innovation and the English language as dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. He speaks to the far-reaching consequences that the innovations coming out of Britain during the Industrial Revolution had on the language itself and on the dissemination of information to professionals in the field who wanted to learn about them. The language underwent a growth spurt due to the introduction “new terminology of technological and scientific advance” (Crystal, 2003, p. 80). The user base expanded to include foreign professionals since English was the language used to describe the technologies and their applications. As technology advanced so did the use of English as a lingua franca for professional, academic, and commercial development. Mass transportation and mass media brought people into contact in ways that were not possible before. English emerged “...as a medium of communication in growth areas” which have gradually come to “shape the character of domestic and professional life” (Crystal, 2003, p. 86).

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The post–World War II economic expansion, also known as the Golden Age of Capitalism, that lasted until the early 1970s was in no small measure made possible by the internationalization of markets. Along with the United States, Western European and East Asian nations also experienced unusually high and sustained growth. In fact, the context was one of high worldwide economic growth. The agricultural and industrial throughput quickly saturated local markets and governments everywhere sought to aid their industries by facilitating commerce across national barriers. The wealth of the United States market was particularly attractive to outsiders and it can be argued that the modern (and current) status of the English language as the global *lingua franca* was established during this time (Graddol, 1997). Science and academia followed on the heels of economic interests and a budding international community of individuals found in the English language a convergent resource (Ammon, 2001).

Nonetheless, at that stage still, the segment of the world’s population that partook in international affairs was very small and highly compartmentalized, mostly from the business realm and, residually, from scientific and academic fields. The telecommunication revolution of the late 1980s that, only a decade later birthed the Internet, changed the rules of engagement completely. Nowadays, international communication is no longer limited to rarified or even specific circumstances. As of 2015, the distance between two human beings located anywhere on the planet has been reduced to a mouse-click and, furthermore, many of the established means of communication (newspapers, literature, etc.) anywhere in the entire globe have been a click away for nearly 20 years now. There already is a generation of human beings who do not comprehend the world in any other way.

Indeed, humanity is in the midst of a worldwide social phenomenon and, subservient to it, the English language has reached the status of global *lingua franca*. A consequence of this phenomenon is that the demographics of English-language users have changed dramatically (Crystal, 2003). The majority of today’s English-language users are mobile and plurilingual, participating in multiple and multiplying networks of interaction and exchange. In some cases, professional and academic advancement is tightly intertwined with the ability to use English with colleagues and counterparts from varied countries and cultures.

The expansion and diversification of English-language users and the situations in which the language is used have naturally opened up new venues of linguistic enquiry. Researchers have turned their attention to the subject of *lingua franca* (LF) communication and a substantial body of literature has become available in a relatively short period of time. It is important to note that, first, the target of LF study is mostly centered on the English language out of opportunistic concerns and, second, the investigative insights sought after are meant to inform about the manner in which individuals communicate across linguasocial divides independently of the language used.

State-of-the-art corpora have already been made available and they have inadvertently determined the scope of domains generally considered to be of interest to LF researchers. These domains are many and include, in the case of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), samples of discourse from educational, professional, and leisure domains falling into several speech event types including conversations, meetings, panel discussions, and question-answer sessions. In the case of the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA), the focus is on academic discourse in higher education and is categorized into disciplinary domains (i.e., social sciences, technology, humanities, natural sciences, medicine, behavioral sciences, and economics and administration) as well as a range of speech event types associated with academic forums such as presentations, seminars, conferences, and doctoral defenses. Of particular interest to this paper, language instruction is not among these domains and, in fact, seems to be clearly outside of the scope of investigation. Before turning our interests in the direction of pedagogy, however, the LF paradigm will be further elaborated upon.

Many of the discussions about LF communication are currently framed within the parameters of interactional sociolinguistics (IS). This framework approaches the study of language with the aim of identifying how linguistic and interactional behaviors influence communication, that is to say, “...how language conveys meaning in interaction” (italics in original; Tannen, 2005, p. 205). IS has proven useful to the study of LF interactions because it uses actual audio-/video-taped exchanges as its source data. Analysts can track sites of successful and unsuccessful meaning-making, make observations regarding how the participants signal understanding or the lack thereof, and document the means by which communicative outcomes are achieved. The IS approach makes it possible to observe “...the pragmatic process of communication live, in action, laid bare, so to speak...” (Widdowson, 2015, p. 367).

Participants in LF interactions are acknowledged to be language users who embody varied experiences which yield individualized linguistic repertoires (e.g. Firth, 2009; Mauranen, 2012). Language users in these situations are described as forming pro-tem communities of practice which entail real-time collaboration and the establishment of functional norms in order to achieve a common goal (e.g. Firth, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). In order to do so, participants converge on a shared repertoire of linguasocial resources by monitoring interaction and negotiating meaning (e.g. Cogo, 2012; Firth, 2009). ELF users appear unconstrained by conventions of any particular bounded speech community and often exploit the potentials of the linguistic code in creative and novel ways (Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2003).

This paper will first discuss the key concepts that are shaping interpretations of the dynamics of LF interactions before considering how this framework might be applied to language pedagogy. It is relevant to mention that traditional frameworks will be here reduced to those elements that have

been formalized, namely, assessment and sequencing. This does not imply that there is an absence of frameworks that address, for example, classroom dynamics as these do in fact exist and are of significant value (e.g., learner-centered approaches). The reason for this argumentative approach is to serve the objective of the paper, that is, to challenge the LF paradigm using pedagogy as the conceptual battleground.

1. Key concepts in LF study

1.1 Linguistic repertoires

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is viewed not as “a circumscribed object” but rather as “a loose confederation of available and overlapping social experiences” (Hopper, 1998 cited in Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 171). A linguistic repertoire, then, can be conceptualized as an idiosyncratic mental representation of experiences accumulated over an individual’s lifetime through engagement in communicative interactions (e.g., Firth, 2009; Mauranen, 2012). It is in a constant state of development and inherently heteroglossic (i.e., relating to multiple social registers). It has also been observed that most are plurilingual, “...evol[ing] by experiencing language in interaction on a cognitive and on an emotional level” (Busch, 2012, p. 521).

In this manner, it can be said that linguistic repertoires are comprised of linguasocial resources that experience has demonstrated to have certain communicative valence. Frequency effects are thought to be influential as items and features that are encountered repeatedly have a high probability of inclusion (Maurenan, 2012). Sustained and regular associations with a particular group of people provide information regarding conventionalized forms and preferred formulations of the community. Moreover, the interactional legacy created among individuals in turn influences the development of these individuals’ linguistic repertoires. Past communicative experiences are drawn upon in order to address present concerns and future ideations. LF interactions take place when language users in possession of diverse communicative experiences (hence, diverse linguistic repertoires) engage in the pursuit of coordinated goals. In the absence of a shared interactional legacy, LF users rely on an assortment of resources to establish their sociocultural identities while engaging in situationally appropriate ways of communication. Importantly, LF users adjust and calibrate their own language to suit their conversational partners. “...Interactants are making use of their multi-faceted, multilingual repertoires in a fashion motivated by the communicative purpose and the interpersonal dynamics of the interactions” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 108). So, while there will naturally be differences in experience and expertise among interlocutors, the success of the interaction resides in their ability to use their linguasocial resources flexibly in order to establish and further mutual understanding.

1.2 Pro-tem communities of practice (PCoP)

While mental representations are individualistic, communicative interactions necessarily involve others. In other words, these experiences are shared, thus increasing the possibility of there being commonalities across idiosyncratic linguistic repertoires since, after all, these experiences inform individuals in similar ways. A geopolitical description of speech community is therefore no longer necessary. Rather, a speech community can be construed to be a dispersed network of individuals in possession of an interactional legacy. Experiential common ground supports communication by providing speakers with linguasocial resources that promote shared understanding. In this manner, members of a speech community draw upon past shared experiences in order to furnish the elements with which to manage current and future interactions. The linguistic repertoire, then, is both inherently unique and plural, exhibiting features and functions that support one's identity while simultaneously serving as an interface with one's peers.

It is evident, nonetheless, that members of different speech communities are able to communicate despite not possessing an interactional legacy, that is, in the absence of a collection of shared experiences to draw upon in order to negotiate present concerns and ideations. Indeed, this dearth of previous encounters makes necessary the formulation of additional constructs with which to strengthen our understanding of what a linguistic community is.

The notion of pro-tem communities of practice (PCoP) has been advanced in order to capture the transient yet collaborative nature of LF interactions. Research findings indicate that despite the diversity and mobility of the interlocutors, a given PCoP demonstrates certain tendencies that facilitate mutual understanding (e.g., Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Blommaert and Rampton (2011), for example, observe that there appears to be a suspension of assumptions regarding what is known and shared among group members, proposing that the management of ignorance comes into play as a characterizing feature of the PCoPs created by LF interactants. Collaborative efforts are made in order to establish an interactional space that promotes group cohesion and identity. Mauranen (2012) identifies various accommodation strategies that function as cooperative acts across PCoPs. These include mirroring of both linguistic and corporal gestures as well as a preference for increased explicitness. In the absence of presumed shared linguasocial resources, situationally functional norms emerge as the interaction unfolds; each PCoP collaborates to arrive at a common ground that can be used to serve its communicative purposes (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2015).

LF interactants actively engage in the act of languaging, "...the dynamic and never-ending process of using language to convey meaning" (Swain, 2006, p. 96). The diversity inherent to the individuals in a given group yields hybridity and fluidity in both the conversational styles embodied and the linguistic forms produced. Individuals appear to be unconstrained by linguasocial

conventions of any specific speech community and have been observed as deploying the assets in their language repertoires in non-conventional yet situationally pragmatic ways. “...Parties may borrow, use and re-use each other’s language forms, create nonce words, and switch and mix languages” (Firth, 2009, p. 163) in order to achieve mutual understanding and establish affinity.

1.3 Shared repertoires

A central question in LF study concerns how individuals with widely varied, diverse, and typically multilingual repertoires manage to converge on mutually satisfactory means by which they can accomplish their communicative ends. Put simply and succinctly: “... users have to cooperate to establish common ground” (Widdowson, 2015, p. 365). Members of PCoPs contribute to the process of convergence on a shared repertoire of linguasocial resources by monitoring interaction and negotiating meaning. This implies that LF users are vigilant of their interlocutors’ reactions and alert to preferred linguasocial formulations.

The idea of negotiation suggests a give-and-take strategy among participants, in principle an equal opportunity endeavor. This may stem from the transactional aspect of LF interactions. People in these situations are, after all, brought together in order to get something done, be it a medical consultation, a business deal, a bureaucratic formality, or an academic lecture (below, Cases A, B, C, and D, respectively).

Case A. Using the French language as a LF, an Italian doctor and a German patient participate in an interaction whose aim is to exchange information about a medical diagnosis.

Case B. Using the Chinese language as a LF, two delegations of Vietnamese and Korean executives participate in discussions involving a corporate deal.

Case C. Using the Spanish as language a LF, nine Canadian and three Moroccan officials negotiate intergovernmental policies.

Case D. Using the English language as a LF, a Finnish professor gives a presentation to a multinational audience at an international academic conference.

Accomplishing the task is the primary and ultimate aim, the language used as LF no more than contributes to the communicative assets which allow the interactants involved to achieve their objectives. LF users appear to exploit the potentials of the linguistic code in creative and novel ways that serve to convey meaning and to promote emotional cohesion among the interlocutors. Seidlhofer (2011, p. 111) describes LF discourses as “...creative local realisations, or performances, of a global resource that continually gets appropriated and re-fashioned by its speakers”. Seidlhofer draws on finding from analyses of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) to

illustrate how LF users exploit word formation processes and arrive at creative and novel coinages that help the interactants achieve their communicative ends. Carey (2013) analyzed interactions from a corpus of spoken academic lingua franca English (ELFA) and found interactants making use of pragmatically-effective, novel collocational patterns. Findings have revealed that LF speakers show the capacity and willingness to vary their usage in accordance with that of their co-interactants, making variability an interlocutor-dependent phenomenon (Firth, 2009). There appears to lay at the heart of interaction “a set of basic bearings” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 109) that guides usage but does not constrain it. One of the consequences is that LF users demonstrate a wide tolerance for non-canonical forms that diverge from standard usage but serve their communicative purposes.

2. Language pedagogy within the LF paradigm

It is intriguing to consider the possibility of accounting for certain elements of the dynamics of formalized language instruction in terms of the insights gained from LF study. Based on the discussion so far, the LF paradigm does not seem equipped to handle pedagogical concerns. It is here proposed that it may be nonetheless be possible if the following two concepts are appropriately elaborated upon: information and agency. The first considers the objective of an interaction to encompass a collection of data serving various functions and possessing different degrees of relevance. The second considers the relationships established between the participants in an interaction to have various impacts, at times fundamentally unequal, over the informational components of such an aggregate of data.

2.1 The principal informative component of communication

Human beings interact in order to exchange information and communicative events are the means by which information is conveyed. Cases A, B, C, and D above delineate some real-world scenarios that illustrate the notion. As linguists, our focus is on the linguistic code these people employ to successfully carry out their objectives. Despite our specific interest in language, the fact is that the linguistic code no more than piggybacks on the principal informative component of these interactions, a medical diagnosis (Case A) or a commercial transaction (Case B). It is therefore possible to assert that the whole of the information exchanged in a transaction can be conceptually divided according to, at least, function and relevance. The principal informative component will always be the one that underlies the motivation to interact. Other ancillary informative components can be identified, such as those that establish identity, territoriality, hierarchy, comity, and, importantly for us, the communicative code. This last component includes the linguasocial resources that assist the accomplishment of the goals of LF interactions.

2.2 The influence of agency on contributions to shared repertoires

In principle, the LF paradigm considers that all participants in an interaction have equal contributory rights to the communicative code. Interactants bring to bear their linguistic repertoire and, by the means already described, arrive at a shared repertoire that allows them to conduct informational transactions. Importantly, the mechanics of constructing a shared repertoire can include the creation of volatile, novel constructions that are acceptable provided that the parties involved agree so. However, it is clear that it is possible to conceive scenarios where certain interactants will influence the linguistic code more than others even if only due to the sheer numbers of interactants. Case C, mentioned previously, presents a scenario where nine Canadian and three Moroccan officials interact so that, all other considerations being equal, a shared repertoire will be dominated by the contributions of the Canadian participants. Case D presents a different scenario (an academic conference) that also leads to an imbalance in contribution since, in this case, a single individual dominates the conversational floor.

The LF paradigm requires all interactants to engage and agree on the communicative code in order for the exchange of information to be successful. This is a critical departure from traditional views of language learners as non-functioning users lacking the required structural knowledge needed to support interaction. The underlying traditional assumption is that learners fail as users because they cannot communicate with inflexible users who will systematically adhere with complete strictness to an idealized model of language. In the LF paradigm, only interactions can be functioning or non-functioning. Human beings bend linguistic rules because they are ultimately unknown. There are no models. There are only ideas about models which would fill hundreds of tomes and still fail to describe every linguistic nook and cranny deployed by a community of speakers. In contrast, communicative interactions do exist and their analysis reveals that interactants adapt the linguistic code in order to communicate. Indeed, for a classroom to work, for instructors to teach, communication must be possible. In traditional frameworks, a paradoxical situation arises where instructors are somehow able to both unilaterally understand what non-functioning users are assumed to be incapable of communicating while simultaneously deeming the interaction to be uncommunicative. The contention here is not that traditional frameworks are useless. Rather, the insight is that traditional frameworks are bound by formal considerations that make explication of classroom dynamics difficult if not impossible.

In contrast, LF study provides an analytical paradigm that while unproductive in terms of formal assessment and sequencing (unlike traditional frameworks), nonetheless predicts the linguistic behavior of learners as users that bring to bear their linguistic repertoires in order to interact with their instructors. If the interaction is successful, and only then, their instructors can respond with pedagogical accuracy, having been able to assess the developmental stage from which

the learners start and to which the learners are trying to arrive. Interestingly, these predictions are very specific. Learners will deploy anything and everything at their disposal in order to communicate, be that novel coinages and improvised collocational patterns as well as code switching and overgeneralizations. In other words, their linguistic behavior will be pragmatically-effective. Importantly, instructors' contribution to the shared repertoire will be passive, not deploying any of the creative elements at the disposal of the learners in order to communicate. In sum, the learners alone control the propositional components in the creation of the shared repertoire, a volatile and dynamic construct permanently at the service of present concerns.

In this manner, those learners that interact with their instructors go on to build an interactional legacy and those learners that do not interact, will not. This is the fundamental reason why the otherwise formidable contributions of formal assessment methods such as the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) often fail to explain why poor interactants can still achieve high scores. These tests are reasonably consistent because, like the traditional frameworks on which they are based, they formalize interaction against non-responsive off-line counterparts in the form of written or recorded material. Test takers with a high TOEFL score are likely to be able to read a newspaper article in English because such a measure can be formalized within a certain margin of error. However, the same test takers can struggle greatly while trying to converse with another human being. Similarly, poor test takers with low scores but that have nonetheless built interactional legacies with their instructors will have at their disposal strategic resources that make future experiences to be likened to past experiences, allowing these learners to partake in interaction as it is meant to be, that is, in the pursuit of goals other than perfect adherence to idealized linguistic models of language.

2.3 The role of agency on normative informational control

Having contextualized classroom dynamics within the LF paradigm, the question arises regarding how language learning takes place at all. Since the proposition is that not only learners will bend the target language to suit their goals but, in fact, they should be encouraged to do so in order to build an interactional legacy with which to handle future communications, it is relevant to ask how the interactional legacy of the target speech community is made available to these learners and how these learners familiarize themselves with it and eventually adopt it. The answer can be furnished by means of the instructor-learner relationship (agency) and its implications regarding control over the principal informative component of the interaction which, in this case, revolves around the target language itself.

This is so because control over the principal informative component of the interaction can be as unequal as control over the propositional components in the creation of the shared repertoire.

The example given regarding a doctor-patient relationship (Case A) implies the involvement of the interactants in a (voluntary) covenant where one of the parties has greater control over the principal informative component of the interaction, the medical diagnosis. In fact, this greater control can be said to be total or, perhaps more precisely, normative since the doctor is endowed by this covenant with final say regarding the validity of the information shared.

In this manner, the classroom is a place where instructors have normative control over the principal informative component of the interaction which, in the case of formal language instruction, is the target language. In all cases (A, B, C, and D), interactants had reasons other than language learning for interacting and the linguistic code can be said to piggyback on the principal informative component of those interactions (a medical diagnosis, a business transaction, etc.). In the language learning classroom, the principal informative component of the interaction is the linguistic code itself, albeit as normative information alone. For learners will innovate, forcing their linguistic repertoires to produce what is needed to accomplish the task at hand (e.g., a specific exercise). Instructors will acquaint themselves with the shared repertoire embellished by learners so as to make successful as many of the interactions as possible, for it is in this success as well as with this success that the language deployed by the instructors becomes the interactional legacy of the learners. Because it is also normative, the forms and manner of expression of instructors will be preferred by learners in future interactions. In other words, learners will produce a communication in their own linguistic terms and only exchange it for a target-compliant counterpart if two conditions are given, first, they consider this counterpart to be informationally equivalent and, second, it is offered by a credible source.

Ultimately, agency (and its impact on informational control) is an issue of authority and the behavioral mimicking that naturally comes with it. In the presence of a judge (or a doctor, a parent, etc.), the parties with authority not only control the principal informative component of the interaction but also influence the linguistic code that piggybacks on it. Human beings naturally imitate those perceived to have superior opportunities for survival, that is, those in positions of relative power or command (e.g., Van Vugt, 2006).

3. Summary remarks

This paper has explored the extent to which it is possible to conceptualize language pedagogy in terms of the LF paradigm. By doing so, it has expanded the purview of LF study to a domain that is generally not perceived as falling within LF concerns. The conceptual dimension has augmented the construct of linguistic repertoire by proposing the notion of interactional legacy to account for the role that experience plays in the strategic deployment of linguasocial resources to achieve communicative ends. Furthermore, the discussion has explored the scope of the analytical

parameters of LF study within this domain by viewing learners as participants with propositional control over the shared repertoire. In sum, the LF paradigm can be said to provide predictive power over interactional dynamics in the language learning domain as it does in academic and professional settings, the usual focus of LF study. It can also be said that this foray into the application of the LF paradigm to pedagogical situations complements traditionalist approaches because it makes it possible to integrate interactional dynamics into classroom milieus.

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