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# English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and International Relations

Papers from a conference held  
at Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
October 2011

edited by  
Geraldine Ludbrook and David Newbold

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*English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and  
International Relations. Papers from a conference  
held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. October 2011*

Edited by Geraldine Ludbrook and David Newbold

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## *Acknowledgements*

This volume collects the papers delivered at the *Giornata di studio su inglese lingua franca* held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on October 21st 2011. The full title of the study day was 'English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and International Relations,' since the event grew out of a research grant in the use of English in international contexts, made available by the university's fledgling School of International Relations. The results of this research are published in this volume.

The study day brought together a number of invited speakers: in the morning session, professional figures from the world of diplomacy and international organizations were asked for their insights into how English is used internationally; in the afternoon session, academics working on English as a lingua franca (ELF) in Italy presented research papers. This meeting between 'practitioners' (in actual fact, high ranking professionals whose expert use of English in international contexts is a crucial part of their job) and university researchers, working on topics ranging from the use of English in company websites to the teaching and testing of ELF, constituted one of the novelties of the event, offering multiple viewpoints on an emerging phenomenon and, perhaps, an opportunity for cross fertilization.

The organizers would like to thank the visiting speakers from the world of International Relations who so generously gave their time to share their experiences of how English is used today as a lingua franca: Ambassador Christopher Prentice, Prof Luca Pes, Dr Engelbert Ruoss, and Dr Federico Prato. We were particularly fortunate to have as our keynote speaker, Prof Barbara Seidlhofer, one of the foremost scholars of English as Lingua Franca (ELF), whose contribution continued beyond her opening address, as she stayed on throughout the day to handle questions, to listen to all the other contributions, and to offer her own feedback on some of them.

The study day, and the publication of this volume, were made possible by generous contributions from the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies and the School of International Relations and the support of the Heads of Department (Prof Flavio Gregori and Prof Anna Cardinaletti) and the Director of the School (Prof Rolf Petri).

Geraldine Ludbrook  
David Newbold



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# The role of English lingua franca in a university entrance test

David Newbold, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

## Abstract

This paper examines the need for a valid and reliable test of receptive skills in English for incoming European University students, in the light of the Bologna agreement, and the subsequent minimal level (B1 or B2) set by many universities. It reports on a needs analysis conducted among third year Italian university students who were asked to identify the specific English language skills required of them to complete their degree course, and a critique of existing tests aimed at university level students, concluding that these appear to be more suited to the needs of students in a native speaker English speaking environment.

## 1 The rapid internationalization of European universities

In March 2012 the Rome daily paper *La Repubblica* reported that the number of foreign students in Italian universities had grown to 3.6% of the total student population<sup>1</sup>. This figure is rather lower than the average for industrialized countries, but the average is skewed by the very high number of foreign students attending courses in the US and UK (which account for around 20% of all enrolments in these countries). In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, the number of foreign students enrolling for university courses, both at first degree and Masters levels, is growing steadily. The same newspaper reports, for example, that the number of Chinese students studying in Italy (currently 5,350) is rising by 10% each year.

The growth is due to a number of reasons. Continental Europe offers a long and distinguished university tradition, a wide range of courses, and, frequently, fees which are much more accessible than comparable courses in the US and the UK. But the impetus behind the flow of enrolments has been created by the possibility of attending courses delivered entirely through the medium of English, an indirect result of the need to make European universities more competitive internationally, which was recognized in the 1999 Bologna Process.

By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, according to Bernd Wachter of the Academic Cooperation Association, 7% of all university courses in continental non native speaker (NNS) Europe were being taught in English (Wachter 2011). Wachter stresses that most of these courses are in northern Europe, and especially Holland (which has a long tradition of teaching through English) and Scandinavian countries, where fees are low or non-existent. The Alps are seen as a watershed, and countries south of the Alps as 'abstainers'. But the picture is changing. The *Repubblica* article cited above lists 22 Italian universities now offering courses in English, many of which (such as medicine and engineering) are heavily subscribed. One of these is Ca' Foscari Venice, which since 2008-9 has offered a first degree in Economics and Management, aimed at both students from Italy and abroad, especially Eastern Europe.

The student mobility promoted by the Bologna Process has various facets. It includes incoming students from outside Europe (especially Asia), and those on short term mobility programmes, such as Erasmus, which reached a record 213,000 exchanges in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Although these are clearly two distinct groups, they share similar linguistic needs: to be able to follow lectures, complete academic tasks, interact with students and staff, understand notices, and so on. For many, the only real option available is to enroll in a course delivered in English.

## 2 Which English?

But what sort of English is needed to survive, and preferably thrive, in a European academic environment? Most, if not all, teachers in non language faculties are likely to be NNS; but some of

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<sup>1</sup> *La Repubblica*, p. 36, 3.3.2012.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/0910/students.pdf>



them will have had experience working in English speaking countries, especially the US. This is the case for the course in Economics and Management at Venice mentioned above. Most students will also be NNS; although the UK is consistently the number one destination for students on Erasmus exchanges from Europe, the number of British students going to Europe is much smaller<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, Europe is proving less popular than it used to be for US students studying abroad; according to the *Times Higher Education*<sup>4</sup>, by the year 2009/10 15 of the top 25 student destinations were outside western Europe, with China, Brazil and India high on the list.

It goes without saying, then, that the most common context for communicative interaction will be between NNS and NNS; a context in which the cultural identity provided by a native language is of necessity sacrificed to the need for effective communication in a shared non native language, English, and a context which Seidlhofer (2011) terms '*secondary socialization*: a means of wider communication to conduct transactions outside one's primary social space and speech community' (p 86).

This English, or rather this context for lingua franca interaction, has been described, debated, researched and re-conceptualised with increasing momentum over the last ten years or so (recent important contributions include Jenkins 2007, Prodomou 2008, Mauranen and Ranta 2009, Seidlhofer 2012). It is captured in corpora such as VOICE and ELFA, and numerous research projects continue to show how strategies such as accommodation, collaborative speaking (see Basso in this volume), and linguistic creativity are all part of the successful participants' armoury, and can go a long way to offset the problems which might be caused by (say) the reduced lexis of a NNS, or phonological patterns which are a long way from familiar native speaker varieties such as (standard) British and American English.

### 3 The emerging nature of ELF in an academic context

In its groundbreaking (2001) description of language performance and levels of proficiency, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) makes a useful distinction between language *interaction* (such as 'conversation', or 'goal-orientated co-operation') and language *production* (such as 'addressing an audience'). The CEFR is of course describing abstract learner levels, rather than actual user performances, but the need to consider the two modes of using language as separate seems particularly pertinent in an academic environment. Here language production, whether spoken, as in prepared lectures, or especially written, as in publications, is a form focused activity in which NNSs are likely to seek the help of NS colleagues (if they have any) for linguistic advice and perhaps proof reading.

In the first full length study of English in Europe Mollin (2006) reports on a survey of 435 European academics, from 21 EU member states, who 'largely cling to native speaker standards' both directly, in their attitudes, and indirectly, through their identification of acceptable and unacceptable examples of the language. The reason behind the entrenched positions, Mollin surmises, quoting Murray (2003), is that many European academics have invested a lot of time themselves as learners of (British) English and don't wish to 'discount' the investment.

But when it comes to communicative interaction, everyday deviation from the native speaker standard, and tolerance of it, is the norm. This is as true of an academic context as anywhere else. In student-student and student-teacher interaction in ELF, pragmatic considerations prevail, norms are negotiated ad hoc, and (to quote Seidlhofer 2011) 'the fluidity and flexibility highlighted in descriptive ELF research .... is clearly seen as an asset – a further language existing side by side with pretty much taken-for-granted national languages.' (p. 80). The reference to the existing national language seems particularly appropriate, as it implies a sort of enabling co-existence

<sup>3</sup> *Mapping mobility in European Higher Education*, p. 92., retrieved 25.09.12 from [http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/aca\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/aca_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Times Higher Education* retrieved 11.03.2012 from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=418158>

between two languages, and the possibility for code switching to reinforce the communicative act. This is a feature not only of spoken interaction, but also of computer-mediated texts such as emails, blogs and even the more formal texts on university websites. At the time of writing the home page<sup>5</sup> of Ca' Foscari featured five upcoming 'events'; two of them posted in Italian; one entirely in English:

Workshop on endangered Romance languages in contact with Balkan languages

and of the remaining two one begins in English and finishes in Italian, while the other goes in the opposite direction:

Red Lanterns Among Baobabs: Cina e Africa tra realtà e percezioni  
IV conferenza internazionale Energythink - Sustainable energy for all.

One is tempted to ask who the organizers had in mind as potential readers of these announcements, and who might be interested in attending the events. The desire to inform and attract an external international audience may provide a partial explanation but most recipients, and attendees, are likely to come from within the university's own community. In other words, they are likely to be NNSs, the vast majority of them native speakers of Italian.

#### **4 Students' language needs and the existing test**

The webpage quoted above provides an emblematic example of ongoing change in the public life of European universities. For, although the choice of English is part of a process of 'internationalization', an indirect result, as we have seen, of the Bologna process, and apparently aimed at communicating with a wider international community, and with incoming international students, nonetheless most students at any given moment and at any given university are likely to be 'stay at homers', who do not take part in any mobility programme, and who may have no particular motivation (intrinsic or instrumental) for language learning. Yet this large group, as well as their internationally mobile peers, are increasingly required to find their way around websites, do Internet based research, and attend lectures, in English, whatever their discipline.

It is with this student population in mind, and the English language demands which will be made of them, that European universities have introduced entrance requirements of a minimum level of English for all incoming students. At Ca' Foscari, as in other Italian Universities, this is set at B1 of the CEFR (for a rationale, see Newbold 2010). From 2008 the university has administered a home-produced computer-based test for all incoming students (around 80%) who do not hold internationally recognized certification at this level. Those who fail the test can re-sit it up to three times, and can also enroll for an on-line support course to help them prepare for the re-sit.

The test assesses listening, reading, grammar, and lexis through a multiple choice format. No attempt is made to measure the productive skills, not only because of the cost that this would involve, but also because, as we have seen above, the type of language skills needed by stay-at-homers are primarily receptive, at least until they try to engage with international students or teaching staff. However, we also realized that the task types, whether focusing on accuracy in the grammar section, or presenting short conversations between native speakers in the listening part, were a long way from the target language use (TLU) domain which Bachman and Palmer (2010) define as 'a specific setting outside of the test itself that requires the test taker to perform language use tasks'. One of the most striking aspects of this domain is, as we have noted, that it involves the use of English as a lingua franca, and this use was not reflected anywhere in the test. We felt that, if the test were to be a valid and reliable predictor of students' ability to operate in this environment, the entrance test needed to be redesigned with a significant ELF element built into it.

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<sup>5</sup> March 20<sup>th</sup> 2012

### 5 Initial research: the needs analysis

In 2010 a group of three researchers in English language at Ca' Foscari<sup>6</sup> drew up a research proposal for a redesigned test, which was funded by Trinity College London – an international testing organization with whom Ca' Foscari has a successful and long-standing relationship, having developed with Trinity a 'co-certification' at levels B2 and C1 of the CEFR, which offers students doing English language courses a widely recognized alternative to in-house end of year exams (Newbold 2009, 2012). The proposal was as follows:

*We propose to research, construct, and develop an online test which would be suitable for use as a screening tool for incoming students in European universities. (...) The test aims to distinguish between the levels A2, B1, and B2 of the CEFR. (...) This test aims to reproduce authentic language situations and use in an academic environment in Europe (...). In this respect, it is likely to have some predictive value, and give students useful feedback about the specific skills which they need to develop to successfully complete their course.*

First of all we needed confirmation of the level and type of language skills needed. To do this, we drew up a questionnaire for 3<sup>rd</sup> year students who were required to look back over their career and identify the purposes for which they had needed to use English. We also arranged structured interviews with teachers, across the four faculties, about their perceptions of students' needs. In addition, a smaller scale parallel survey was carried out at the University of Lecce in the south of Italy to have an idea of the extent to which these needs might be generalizable beyond our own university. Altogether 275 valid questionnaires were completed in Venice, approximately reflecting the percentages of students in each faculty, and a further 36 from Lecce.

The central question, from the test development point of view, concerned the specific TLUs which students had experienced as part of their university career (Table 1).

*Table 1: English language skills needed by Italian university students during a first degree course*

Skill	Venice	Lecce
Reading textbooks & articles	70%	75%
Using internet for research	53%	44%
Watching film and video	23%	44%
Attending lectures and seminars	21%	8%
Writing emails	19%	8%
Interaction with foreign students	18%	33%
Interaction with foreign lecturers	9%	13%
Writing letters	2%	3%

Although some of these results were predictable (reading and using the Internet in English for research purposes are part of most university students' experience), others were less so. For example, Venice showed a relatively high percentage (21%) of students participating in seminars given in English, although this was taken to include attending lectures in English which may not have involved anything more than listening. The need to interact (in English) with foreign students in one's home university (18% of students in Venice, 33% in Lecce) is also presumably on the rise, given the increase in incoming international students reported at the beginning of this paper.

A small number of Venice students (22.8% of the total number of respondents) had themselves spent a study period abroad, and they identified other major TLUs, such as interaction with academic staff (41%) and with other students (54%) (Table 2). The fact that this is not higher is, of

<sup>6</sup> Ludbrook, Newbold and Rees.

course, due to the fact that some students will have enrolled in courses taught in the national language, and been able to interact with other students in that language.

*Table 2: English language skills needed by Italian university students on mobility programmes abroad*

Skill	
Reading textbooks and articles	72%
Using the Internet for research	59%
Interaction with students	54%
Attending lectures and seminars	45%
Exams	45%
Interaction with academic staff	41%
Written course work	22%
Interaction with technical staff	18%
Using university websites	13%
Using phone	4%
Writing emails	2%
Writing letters	0%

Unequivocally, though, the main English language skills required by the majority of students, whether stay-at-homers or internationally mobile, are reading skills. This was further confirmed by the structured interviews with ten university teachers in Venice. Two of these felt that students did not need any knowledge of English to complete their course. The others identified reading – texts and articles and internet research – as the most important skill. Listening to lectures/seminars in English and watching video, film, and presentations was also considered necessary, whereas most teachers felt that their students would not need to interact in English with foreign students or visiting lecturers.

Using the CEFR bands, which the teachers believed they were sufficiently familiar with to be able to make approximate judgements of level, all but one teacher believed that the B1 level was acceptable as a minimum overall level of proficiency. When it came to identifying required levels for reading, however, six teachers believed that the minimum level was B2, and one put the level even higher, at C1 (Table 3).

*Table 3: Teachers' estimates of required levels of English for their students*

	C1	B2	B1
Speaking/Listening			5
Reading	1	6	2
Writing			3

## 6 A critique of existing tests

At this point we had a clearer idea of the real life TLU domains we would want to sample in the proposed test. But before going any further we wanted to look at existing international tests which might feasibly be used as university entrance tests (and in some cases were being used for this purpose), and which might be more appropriate than our own existing test described in (4) above.

We looked at eight tests in all, ranging from the free access on line diagnostic test *Dialang* to expensive proficiency tests such as *IELTS*, *TOEFL* and *Pearson Academic* (PEA), and quick-to-

administer online tests such as *Password* and *Oxford Online Placement Test* (OOPT), comparing them for features such as level(s) and skills assessed, and administration and reporting times. An extremely synthetic overview can be seen in Table 4.

All of the tests were problematic, for a variety of reasons. At the time of the critique, Dialang was under attack by hackers. Such is the fate of a not-for-profit test with no one to look after it properly (although it has since been cleaned and is now graciously hosted on the University of Lancaster website). More typical problems were inappropriate items in the quick on line tests, inappropriate TLU domains in TOEFL and IELTS (developed with universities in native English speaking countries in mind), and, no less important, cost.

To start with the recently developed on line tests, OOPT and Password. We looked carefully at the sample material for both of these, and found them both to be too form focused. Although simple to use and user-friendly, OOPT relies heavily on inferencing, and attempts to differentiate B2 from lower level items by using less transparent language, bordering on the idiomatic, which although not unnatural in itself becomes so when this type of language comprises the bulk of the text.

The rationale behind Password seems to be that a test of grammar and lexis is a good predictor of how international students who may not have benefited from skills-based English language teaching will perform in a university course delivered through English. For such students a knowledge of English test is thus 'equitable', as well as reliable. In addition, we are told that their ability 'particularly in speaking and listening, usually changes rapidly once they are immersed in an English language environment'. This claim, however, is not backed up by any evidence. Many of the items seem to be of dubious quality, and perhaps excessively based on native speaker norms of accuracy.

In the big tests such as IELTS and TOEFL we were interested in how listening was tested. In the limited sample material offered on line we found a variety of text types, both academic and 'social', monologue and dialogue, although some of the questions relating to the lecture extract (in the TOEFL text about the 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist Wilkie Collins) could be answered by students with knowledge of the topic. We were particularly interested in the recordings. Texts for both tests are scripted, with plenty of built-in redundancy, presumably to make them seem more authentic, and are read by actors; accents are all native speaker, but some of them (e.g. the American accent in the 4<sup>th</sup> IELTS listening sample) are unnatural and not authentic. There are no authentic NNS accents; we viewed this as a major drawback. The claim that ETS, the developer of IATEFL, makes about the predictive power of the test:

'You will be able to listen to lectures, view films, attend seminars, read textbooks, perform online research, speak with professors and other students, write academic papers, reports, e-mails and more.'

may have some validity in the US (after all, it is according to McNamara<sup>7</sup> 'the best-researched test in the world'), but it seemed to us that the listening texts it proposed, as well as the British actor imitating an American accent in the IELTS test, were a long way culturally and linguistically from the reality of English use in European universities.

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<sup>7</sup> retrieved from the TOEFL website on 26.3.2012 [http://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/about/research\\_design/](http://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/about/research_design/)

Table 4: Existing tests compared

	Levels	adaptive?	Skills*	Time	Results
Dialang	A1-C2?	No	R+W+L+G +L	30-45m	immediate
IELTS	A2-C2	No	L+R+W+S	2 hrs 45m	13 days
TOEFL IBT	B1-C2	No	R+L+S+W	4 hours	15 days
TOEIC	A1-C2	?	S+W+L/R	4 hours	7 days
QPT CBT	A1-C2	?	L+R+UE	20m	immediate
Password	A2-C1	?	G + L	1 hour	immediate
OOPT	A1-C	Yes	UE + L	45m	immediate
Pearson TEA	B1-C1	?	R+L+W+S	3 hours	5 days

\*S = speaking, W = writing, L = listening, R = reading, G = grammar, L = lexis,  
UE = Use of English

### 7 Conclusion: the need for a test with an ELF element

From the outset we had in mind a receptive skills test which could be delivered on line, like the existing test reported in (4) above, but including TLU tasks sampled from the TLU domain which emerged from the needs analysis, such as accessing information on the Internet, surfing university websites, reading academic texts, and listening to (exerpts from) lectures. Some of these meant engaging with the reality of English as a lingua franca, which we knew to be a controversial topic for language testers.

Davies and Elder (2006), for example, caution against the rapid development of tests of ELF before the phenomenon has been properly described. But Jenkins (2006) suggests that the time has come for the major testing organisations to engage with ELF, and to move away from the default setting of native speaker standards. Since then ELF research has gathered momentum, but the institutionalized tests have not yet taken up the challenge (as we saw in our survey of existing tests).

The test we are proposing (provisionally named TEEUS, Test of English for European University Students) is not however, a test of ELF so much as a test with ELF elements. To exclude elements of non native speaker use would, we believe, compromise the validity of the test. The fact that only the *receptive* skills would be measured means that students would be required to make sense of ELF, in texts for listening and possibly also reading, but not have to produce NNS forms, or rather, not be assessed using criteria which were not based on a description of native speaker forms. We were fortunate in having an English language medium humanities faculty within a stone's throw (almost) of our own university, at Venice International University, which could provide real examples of ELF interaction, and lectures given by non native speakers. In addition, we believed that the research carried out by Basso, also at VIU, could throw light on the nature of those ELF interactions, and possibly, on test contents and results, and students' reactions to the authenticity of the test. With all this in mind, we were now in a better position to look more closely at the underlying constructs of the test, reported in this volume by Ludbrook, and the challenges posed by the on line format, reported by Rees.

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**David Newbold** (newbold@unive.it) is a researcher and lecturer in English language at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He has a long standing interest in testing, and a more recent interest in ELF. At Ca' Foscari he has been responsible for the development of a 'co-certification' in integrated skills in English, jointly with Trinity College London.

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