Varieties of English in an international academic context

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Introduction

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in today's globalising higher education involves more than teaching and learning through a language which for most lecturers and students is neither their first language nor their first language of instruction. EMI in an academic context is also about using particular formats (e.g. writing a research paper), adhering to particular conventions and a specific style. Academic writing not only involves a particular way of writing, but also a way of organising ideas. This is of paramount importance in the social sciences, which involve a certain amount of conceptualisation of the world, and in which the writer (the researcher) is more 'present' in their text than in the exact sciences.

The focus of this paper is on writing academic English in an international context. It deals with the difficulties encountered by a multilingual and multicultural group of master students while writing their first assignment. The paper discusses the students' attitudes towards writing in English as well as to their assignment. This leads to a discussion regarding the varieties of English which should be used in an international academic context.

Context

The present research is based on a master's programme in development studies offered by the University of Antwerp. The programme has had a long history, predating the founding of the university itself. As far as the medium of instruction is concerned, three periods can be distinguished. When the programme was set up in the 1920s, the medium of instruction was French, the language of higher education in Flanders at the time; moreover, French was also the dominant language used in the Belgian colonies. The programme was geared towards Congo, which remained a Belgian colony until 1960. In those days, French was the 'natural' language for both lecturers and students, even though for most of them it was not their first language. English was introduced as an additional language of instruction in 2000, in order to broaden the scope of the programme. This resulted in an influx of Asian students, initially mainly from China. Most of these students had only limited experience with EMI. For the lecturers the 'bilingual' structure was quite challenging, as they had to teach in French one year (mainly to the African students) and in English the next (to the other students). For many of the younger lecturers, English had become their natural second language instead of French, as well as the language in which they published. In 2007, French was dropped as a language of instruction, and the programme became English only. Since then, the number of French-speaking African students has decreased, resulting in an increasing number of students from other continents (including Central and South America).

All applicants to the development studies programme must be proficient in English. Those who have received their university education in English must provide an official certificate confirming this, while all other applicants must submit the test results of their IELTS (minimum score 6.0) or TOEFL (minimum score 550 for the paper-based test or 79 for the internet-based test). As most of the current students were not educated in English (and the quality of the students' output did not match the expected standard, due to insufficient mastery of English), language support was organised by the university's language centre. This language support is free of charge for the students, and it consists of the following facilities:

- A two-month pre-sessional language course for students with low IELTS (between 5.0 and 6.0) or TOEFL marks (paper-based 500-550, internet-based 61-79) but who have been admitted to the programme on the basis of their personal record.
- An obligatory language test (monitored by the university's language centre) for all students before the programme starts as not all students can provide valid test results, due to poor facilities in some of the countries involved.
- An Academic English course (30 hours) for those students who have low marks on the university's language test. The course focuses on academic writing, and is geared towards the first writing assignment, a 3,500 words synthesis paper which will be discussed below.
- Individual language support: all students get individual feedback on their first assignment. They have to submit a first version, the first 1,500 words of which are discussed with one of the language instructors from the language centre. Afterwards, the students have to rewrite their text and submit their final version, which is marked on the basis of content and feedback from their respective language instructors. This system has proven to be very fruitful, as the quality of the papers has improved significantly.

Previous research has revealed a number of problems encountered by the students, not only with respect to language (e.g. grammar, lexis, spelling), but also with respect to academic and other conventions, as well as the format, structure and style of the assignment (van Splunder 2012, 2013). The focus of this paper is on the students' problems related to writing and thinking in English. The data were collected through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews organised towards the end of the course.

Questionnaire

Language profile

Seventy students from 22 countries attended the programme (2013-2014). Fifty-five students completed the questionnaire (77% response rate). Unfortunately two native speakers of English (from South Africa and Canada) did not participate. The questionnaire consisted of closed as well as open questions. The first section was related to personal data (including the language profile), the second and third section to difficulties encountered while writing the assignment, section four and five to feedback provided by the language centre. In what follows, the students' language profile and their language problems will be discussed.

The students' language profile aimed to identify the students' first language (i.e. the language they regarded as their mother tongue), their medium of instruction (with a focus on higher education), and their professional language (in their home country as well as abroad). The profile, which is solely based on data provided by the students, reveals that most of them are – to varying degrees – familiar with English as a medium of instruction (MI) and as a professional language (PL), even though most students did not speak English as a first language (L1).

Table 1: Students' language profile.

	L1	**MI**	**PL**
Spanish	10	8	6
Amharic	6	0	6 (+ English)
Bengali	6	3	6 (+ English)
English	3	32	35
French	1	3	1
Other languages	19	12	8

As far as the L1 is concerned, the largest single group consists of speakers of Spanish. Most of these students are from Central and South America, while only one student is from Spain. For most of these students, Spanish also served as their MI and their PL. One Spanish-speaking student was educated in Dutch (in Belgium) and one partially in English (a teacher of English). Four students stated they used English rather than Spanish as a professional language. The second largest group sharing a common language consists of the students from Ethiopia, whose L1 is Amharic but whose MI (in higher education) and PL (in combination with Amharic) is English. An equal number of students speak Bengali (Bangla) as an L1, but only half of them have been educated in their L1 (the other three in English). Both languages are used in a professional context. English has only three L1 speakers, with one speaker from the UK, one from Cameroon (who reported 'Pidgin English' as his L1) and one bilingual English/Portuguese speaker from Brazil. The most striking fact, however, is that most students (32) have had some kind of experience with EMI in higher education; to 20 of them this meant 'English only' education, whereas 12 students were instructed in English and another language (usually their L1). It should be added that EMI can refer to different varieties of English, most of which can be regarded as 'indigenised' varieties, a feature which will be discussed below. Even more students (35) report English as their PL (15 English only, 20 English + one or more other languages). French was reported as an L1 by only one student (i.e. a French-speaking Belgian), while two more students reported French as their MI. Apart from the French-speaking Belgian student, this included two students from Congo (reporting Swahili and Lingala as their L1, and one of them reporting English as his PL). The remaining students report 19 other languages as their L1 (including Portuguese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Filipino, and Dutch with three or more speakers). They also report a wide variety of other languages as their MI (12) and PL (8).

Whereas Spanish ranks first as an L1, English ranks first as the MI in higher education. It should be noted that not all students have had experience with EMI and that their exposure to English varies a lot. However, *all* students used English as their daily working language while studying at Antwerp University. All in all, the students' language profile reveals multilingual practices in which English plays a dominant role as a *lingua franca* (even though it is not the most widely spoken L1).

Reported problems

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to identify the students' difficulties while writing their assignment. The question asked was, *What did you find difficult when writing your paper?* The students' answers related to the following issues (see van Splunder 2012):

1. Organising ideas in English: thinking/writing in a language other than one's first language;
2. Writing in an academically appropriate way: style, using a formal tone;
3. Conforming to the academic conventions: citing/quoting in a correct way, avoiding plagiarism;
4. Being critical: formulating and justifying one's own views;
5. Structuring a paper: organising one's ideas into a good text, use of paragraphs;
6. Writing in a correct way: grammar, vocabulary, spelling.

Only the first issue will be discussed here. According to the students, organising ideas in English proved to be particularly problematic. This was also the item most commented on in the third part of the questionnaire. Several students mentioned the fact that they found it difficult or even impossible to convey their ideas in English. The following quotes (in the students' own words) are exemplative:

- 'The challenge for me was how to think in English'
- 'I think in Spanish'
- 'Organising my idea[s] in English is extremely difficult for me. […] I think it is impossible […]'
- 'I have to struggle with my own ideas [in English]'

Many students admit they translate their ideas from their L1 into English:

- 'I'm translating from Filipino to English'
- 'I always think in Thai before I write in English. I translate it into English. I don't know how I can think in English and write in English'

Unfortunately this often results in English which can only be understood by speakers sharing an L1, such as Filipino or Thai. Writing in English turns out to be a serious handicap, as was conceded by one student,

- 'I'm almost sure I would write better ideas in French. Because I would have understood the literature better, my thoughts would not focus on language, I would have more time etc.'

Even students who were educated through the medium of English but who do not use it as an L1 admit that EMI can be problematic:

- 'We do use English in school [i.e. in the Philippines] but it is still very difficult for me to formulate sentences as in the back of my mind'

A particular problem is that many indigenised varieties of English do not reflect 'standard' British or American usage, as the following example (student from Sri Lanka) makes abundantly clear:

- 'Though I have grew up in English background I have only good ability of speaking. And of course my universities don't think much about grammar.'

Assessment of the students' assignment

Apart from the problems reported by the students, the assessment of their assignments was also taken into consideration. All assignments were marked independently by their content lecturers as well as by their language lecturers. In general, there appears to be a connection between the marks for content and those for language. In what follows, the 'best' (≥ 16/20) and the 'weakest' (≤ 11/20) assignments will be discussed, taking into account the marks obtained on the assignment in relation to the students' linguistic profile discussed earlier. The 'best' assignments were written by students with English as their L1 and/or MI and/or PL (see Table 2).

Table 2: 'Best' assignments.

Content (20)	Language (20)	Student's L1	Student's MI	Student's PL
16	18	English	English	English/French
16	17	Amharic	English	English/Amharic
16	17	Spanish	Spanish/English	Spanish/English
15	17	Dutch	Dutch/English	Dutch/English
15	17	Dutch	Dutch/English	Dutch/English
15	17	Spanish/Dutch	Dutch/English	Dutch/English
15	17	Amharic	English	English/Amharic

The 'weakest' assignments were written by students with limited experience in English (see Table 3). None of the students in this group spoke English as an L1, and only one student had experience with EMI. Their access to English appeared to be more limited as well, and most of them did not use English as a PL. These results reflect the students' concerns that they are struggling to organise their ideas in English, and that they translate from their L1. Moreover, most of these students are not familiar with writing in academic English (e.g. the format of a research paper, academic conventions, and writing a critical literature review).

Table 3: 'Weakest' assignments.

Content (20)	Language (20)	Student's L1	Student's MI	Student's PL
11	11	Amharic	English	Amharic/English
11	11	Thai	Thai	Thai
11	11	Swahili	French	French
11	9	Lingala	French	French/English
10	8	Indonesian	Indonesian	Indonesian
9	9	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish
9	8	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Vietnamese

Overall, the differences between the best and the weakest assignments were considerable. Interestingly, students with the same linguistic background (e.g. Amharic as an L1) had very different marks. These differences may be explained by differences in students' individual language aptitude, but also in their educational background (e.g. elite v. mass education), socio-economic class (and thus access to English), and so on. Moreover, the data suggest that some varieties of English appear to be more problematic than others when used in an international academic context. This happens to be the case for the varieties used by the students from Ethiopia and Bangladesh. Although English is widely used in higher education in these countries, it is a strongly 'indigenised' variety of English which may cause serious problems in an international context. For many students from these countries, it comes as a surprise that the language in which they have been educated and which they use in their daily lives causes so many problems when used in an international context. Moreover, the students appear to be unaware of their 'mistakes' in English, and they face huge difficulties in 'improving' their English. On the other hand, the content and language lecturers have a hard time trying to understand their students' indigenised written language.

Discussion

It has been argued that people from different cultures literally see the world in a different way (Nisbett & Masuda 2003 on Westerners and Asians). Academic writing in English may be regarded as quintessentially Anglo-American in that it reflects a Western way of seeing the world, including a particular ('critical') way of thinking and the use of certain formats (such as a research paper), academic conventions, and style. For many non-Western students language is only part of the problem, as they face considerable problems with the non-linguistic aspects of their assignment as well (e.g. conducting a literature review). To put it rather bluntly, there is more to English than just language.

As far as language is concerned, the question arises which variety of English should be used in an international academic context. As most international encounters take place without 'native' speakers of English, it may be argued that British and American varieties are no longer necessary or even appropriate. Yet the problem is that many indigenised varieties of English are not mutually intelligible and cause considerable problems (e.g. for the lecturers who have to mark the assignments). The irony appears to be that some 'non-native' varieties of English (e.g. written by Dutch-speaking students) are judged more favourably than some indigenised but nevertheless 'native' varieties (e.g. Indian English), at least in a Western context. This may be due to the fact that Western students and their lecturers have a common linguistic, cultural and educational background.

Although the approach taken by the content and the language lecturers is largely pragmatic (that is, their focus is on conveying intelligible ideas rather than on producing 'correct' language), the issue remains one of what should be considered as 'acceptable' language. Whereas some 'mistakes' do not necessarily hinder communication (e.g. use of articles), others can make a text incomprehensible (e.g. literal translations across cultural borders).

There may be some irony in the fact that we impose a 'colonial' language model to a post-colonial world. That is, the variety of English promoted in higher education is modelled on the

'native' English used in the *Inner Circle* (countries in which English is used as a primary language; Kachru 1985), rather than on 'nativised' Englishes used in the *Outer Circle* (basically former colonies) and 'emerging' Englishes in the *Expanding Circle* (the rest of the world, e.g. today's Europe, where English is gaining ground as a *lingua franca*). This focus on Inner Circle English could be regarded as *linguistic imperialism* (a term coined by Phillipson 1992), but on the other hand it may be deemed a necessity as well (that is, some kind of model is needed). I would argue that ELT (English Language Teaching) cannot do without norms, but more tolerance of varieties other than Inner Circle English is also needed.

The assignment discussed in this paper reveals that many international students have problems with English, even those who are familiar with English as an MI. The question to be addressed is which English should be used in an international academic context. That is, should we teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language), whose norms reflect the varieties used by Inner Circle speakers of English (also referred to as ENL, English as a Native Language) or should we teach ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), which is based on the varieties of English spoken by non-native speakers. I will argue that both options are problematic.

ENL may be regarded as a neo-colonial variety which regards itself as superior to the indigenous varieties which have developed over the years. Therefore, ELF may be a useful alternative for international students. Moreover, ELF reflects features (e.g. grammatical and lexical regularisation, commonly regarded as 'simplifications' – see below) which are widely attested in native English as well as in the New Englishes of Africa and Asia (MacKenzie 2014: 71). However, ENL is (still) very dominant, especially in an academic context. In addition, many (if not most) learners want to achieve ENL competence, and they regard their own varieties as 'pidgin-English' (as was reported by one of the African students).

The traditional approach in ELT is very much top-down, with a focus on 'standard' features produced by 'native speakers', who still count as the ultimate authority and who provide the legitimate language model (Jenkins 2012). Native speaker orientation is not only apparent in English language learning and teaching (e.g. course books, grammars, dictionaries), but also in language testing (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL), in journals and many other publications. This focus on native English implies that 'non-native' and 'non-standard' features should be eradicated (Modiano 2009: 209).

However, the notions 'native' (speaker) and 'standard' (language) are becoming increasingly problematic, especially in an international context. It appears that these notions apply to speakers of the Inner Circle only, thus excluding all other speakers. However, in today's world, many speakers of English from the other Circles use the language as their L2 and sometimes even as their L1, and many more use it as a medium of instruction or as a working language. In fact, several of the students in the current study regard themselves as native speakers of English, even though they are not from the Inner Circle. The confinement of the notion 'native speaker' to Inner Circle speakers can be seen as a neo-colonial attitude. Moreover, an increasing number of people in the Inner Circle do not use English as their 'native' language either. The notion 'standard' (language) is problematic too, as it reflects the hegemony of a particular group of speakers (According to Trudgill 2002: 71, standard English is the home dialect of a mere 12% of the British population). Thus ENL reflects particular conventions regarding pronunciation, vocabulary, phraseology, and even cultural references (Seidlhofer 2011: 16). As societies are

becoming ever more diverse, the idea of monolingual and homogeneous native speaker communities has become a fiction (MacKenzie 2014: 101). Last but not least, the very concepts of language and variety are problematic as well, as they do not fit in with today's linguistic and cultural *superdiversity*. There may be some irony in the fact that virtually all European universities stick to native varieties of English (usually British English), even though most communication is between non-native speakers of English who bring other varieties of English with them.

The concept of ELF may be more appealing in an international and post-colonial context. ELF is commonly regarded as a bottom-up approach, in which *communities of practice* (Wenger 1998) negotiate their own rules. In other words, English is reconceptualised as a process rather than a stable object (as in ENL), which should not be subjected to (neo-)standardisation and codification (Motschenbacher 2013: 208). However, it remains an open question how this could work in the context of academic writing, which is very much rule-oriented. ELF implies a tolerance towards other speakers and possible L1 influence. As a result, *form follows function* (Moschenbacher 2013: 22); as the focus is no longer on the native speaker, English becomes common property (Widdowson 2012: 19). This has been referred to as a 'liberation from NS-norms' (Modiano 2009). In the context of my research, this might be termed linguistic decolonisation.

ELF is often perceived as a form of 'simplified' English, or as an 'anything goes' approach (even though this is not what ELF stands for). From a normative point of view, ELF has been referred to as deficient English, for which the acronym BSE (Bad Simple English) has been coined (Reithofer 2010: 144). However, one of the striking features of English is a process of simplification (also in NS varieties, such as the dropping of case endings), due to a long history of contact with other languages. As was pointed out already, many ELF simplifications are widespread in indigenised varieties of English in Africa and Asia (MacKenzie 2014: 36, 57, 61). The students' assignments reflect some of these simplifications as well:

- Non-use of the third person singular (*she think* instead of *she thinks*)
- Regularisation of irregular inflectional forms (eg *feeled* instead of *felt*)
- (Non-) use of articles (*war in Ethiopia* instead of *the war in Ethiopia*)
- (Non-) use of plurals (*informations* instead of *information*)

From a purely communicative point of view, many of these simplifications make sense. Moreover, they reflect a natural process, as languages tend to develop regularised forms. However, these simplifications are far more acceptable in spoken than in written English, which more often conforms to standard norms (MacKenzie 2014: 55, 69). This is definitely the case in formal registers and genres, such as academic writing. Thus ELF can be particularly problematic in an academic setting, in which language is very much norm-oriented. Deviations from ENL, which tend to be described by ELF researchers in terms of creativity or innovation, will be described as a lack of proficiency (MacKenzie 2014: 141, 143).

One of the main problems regarding ELF is that there is no ELF teaching model (Jenkins 2007: 238, Kirkpatrick 2007: 191). This is related to the fact that ELF is a hypothesised concept (Jenkins, Modiano and Seidlhofer 2001), which is unlikely to result in a homogeneous variety of English. From an ELF perspective, this is not a problem, but it may be a problem in the context of

ELT, as language teaching needs models and model speakers. It should also be noted that most ELF researchers are linguists, but not language teachers. As a result, many of them are out of touch with the reality of ELT (see Mackenzie 2014: 175, footnote 4). Furthermore, ELF researchers tend to "overlook the broken English end of the proficiency scale" (MacKenzie 2014: 152). Tolerance towards L1 influence may be a virtue, but it may also affect communication in a negative way.

Although ELF research has identified core and non-core features in English, some aspects remain problematic. One of the most notorious trouble spots in ELF concerns idioms, many of which are culture-specific (Seidlhofer and Widdowson 2007; see discussion in Motschenbacher 2013: 22-24). Due to this *unilateral idiomaticity* (a term coined by Seidlhofer; see MacKenzie 2014: 108) students translate literally from their L1 into English. Although these *calques* may result in perfectly understandable English for speakers sharing an L1 (e.g. Chinese), more often they will be unintelligible to an international audience.

Last but not least, it has been argued that ELF "puts all participants on an equal footing" (Motschenbacher 2013: 194). Yet, one may doubt whether this really is the case. As I have argued, not all Englishes are equal (van Splunder 2013). Some varieties of English have more prestige than other varieties, which is apparent in an academic setting (students are also aware of this, as they refer to their variety as *pidgin*). Moreover, speakers of languages related to English (mostly students from European countries or students familiar with European languages) have an obvious advantage, not only from a linguistic point of view (e.g. cognate grammar or lexis in their L1 and English), but also from a cultural point of view. That is to say, they are more familiar with the Western education system and the surrounding cultural context, a 'critical' way of writing (which many non-European students are not familiar with) and the use of certain formats (such as a research paper). One of the Chinese students believed it was more difficult for him to master academic English than for any other student due to the distance between his L1/culture and English. This view is also reflected in the literature, which states that European and Latin American learners are closer to Inner Circle culture than Asian learners (see Mackenzie 2014: 173). This view reflects the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which we see the world along lines laid down by our L1. Thus greater *cultural distance* (see MacKenzie 2014: 85) between one's L1 and English may be an additional setback for certain students. One of the features marking cultural distance is the notion of critique, which appears to be problematic for many non-Western students. For instance, most Asian cultures tend to avoid explicit criticism (MacKenzie 2014: 146). One student from Bangladesh merely listed different views in her literature review, but she did not critically compare these views, as she was expected to do. Thus different cultural practices can lead to misconceptions of (Western) academic requirements.

Conclusion

Whereas the promotion of ENL may be regarded as a form of linguistic neo-colonialism and thus no longer acceptable in an international context, ELF may likewise be problematic because of its lack of clearly defined (but much needed) rules. As pointed out by MacKenzie (2014: 166), "you cannot turn all English classes into lectures on […] communication strategies". In other words, rules are necessary in ELT. This does not mean that the focus should be on ENL models only.

Learning and teaching language forms necessarily include many ENL constructions (MacKenzie 2014: 166), but the students' linguistic repertoire will have to encompass ENL (L1 standard) as well as ELF variants (Ferguson 2012: 179).

The 'standard' variety should act as a linguistic model. However, a model should be understood as an idealisation which offers orientation but from which divergence is possible. There should be no dogmatic insistence on ENL norms and there should be a certain tolerance of errors (Gnutzmann 2005: 117). On the other hand, not all errors can be reassessed as 'natural developments'. Some kind of interference 'from above' (not necessarily from a native speaker) is necessary. Written language will be more norm-dependent than spoken language, where errors can more easily pass. Even Seidlhofer (2007: 154) admits that there still need to be standards, "otherwise teachers and learners would be in limbo" and "no teaching or learning would be possible". Thus, "ELF must present some kind of model" (MacKenzie 2014: 167), in spite of more recent tendencies in ELF research to shy away from providing models and focus on self-regulatory communities of practices.

ELT should spend less time on some ENL forms (e.g. some idiosyncratic elements of English grammar), especially if they are not often used in other varieties (Dewey 2012: 163). We should become more tolerant and leave room for innovations from all users of English, native as well as non-native. Proficiency does not imply nativeness but should be defined in terms of efficient communication. In other words, variation is acceptable as long as intelligibility is ensured. This implies that native speakers will have to adapt too, especially in an international context in which most people do not speak English as a native language.

One should not expect international students in Development Studies to write Inner Circle English. From an ELF perspective, traces of an L1 (especially in spoken language) are acceptable and might even be considered as an expression of identity. On the other hand, many aspire to ENL, and they do not want to be identified as 'foreigners'. Especially speakers in the Dutch language area, Scandinavia and parts of Germany may want to share an identity with native speakers of English, as they speak languages related to English and with whom they share extensive cultural links (MacKenzie 2014: 139, footnote 30). As far as spoken language (and accent in particular) is concerned, most Expanding Circle students would rather pass for a native speaker, whereas Outer Circle students prefer the accent of their country (e.g. India, Pakistan) (Timmis 2002).

Whereas the expression of linguistic and cultural identities may be important in a post-colonial context, it can cause huge problems with intelligibility, as not all varieties of English are widely understood. Even if one rejects the ENL model, another model is needed. The model in academic environments should be "the 'educated speaker of English' without strings to nativeness" as Mauranen (2012: 235) puts it. An *educated* speaker is not necessarily a *native* speaker, even though most students learning English think they should be learning native(like) English (see MacKenzie 2014: 120).

Whereas indigenised varieties of English are perfectly acceptable in a national context serving national or local purposes (as in Ethiopia or Bangladesh), they will not suffice in an international context, where the focus should be on much wider-ranging intelligibility. 'Distinct flavours' are acceptable (even positive?), but language may not deviate the attention from content. In other

words, rules are needed, and tolerance has its limits. English as a post-colonial language should accept varieties other than the ones spoken in the Inner Circle, but the ultimate criterion is international intelligibility.

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