

Tensions around the teaching and testing of English as a lingua franca

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Some considerations

- Is English somehow different to other languages in terms of teaching and testing because of its global lingua franca status?
- Do learners and teachers need a standardised form of the language as a learning and teaching goal?
- How do we account for the variability and diversity of Englishes when teaching and testing?
- What makes a good communicator, particularly across linguistic and cultural boundaries? Is linguistic precision a key element?

Jabberwocky

BY LEWIS CARROLL

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand;
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42916/jabberwocky>

Source: The Random House Book of Poetry for Children (1983)



Hafsat Abdullahi ("Havfy" 2023)
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/s7crZc9tJx4>

Language is...



...creative

...dynamic

...diverse

...variable

...strongly linked
to identity

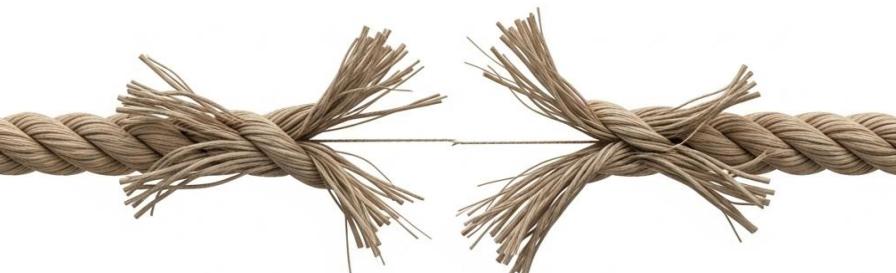
Lingua francas...

- 'Contact' languages
- Trade, migration
- Speakers bring their own L1s, identities, cultures
- Strongly impacted by colonisation and globalisation

But... language
tests...

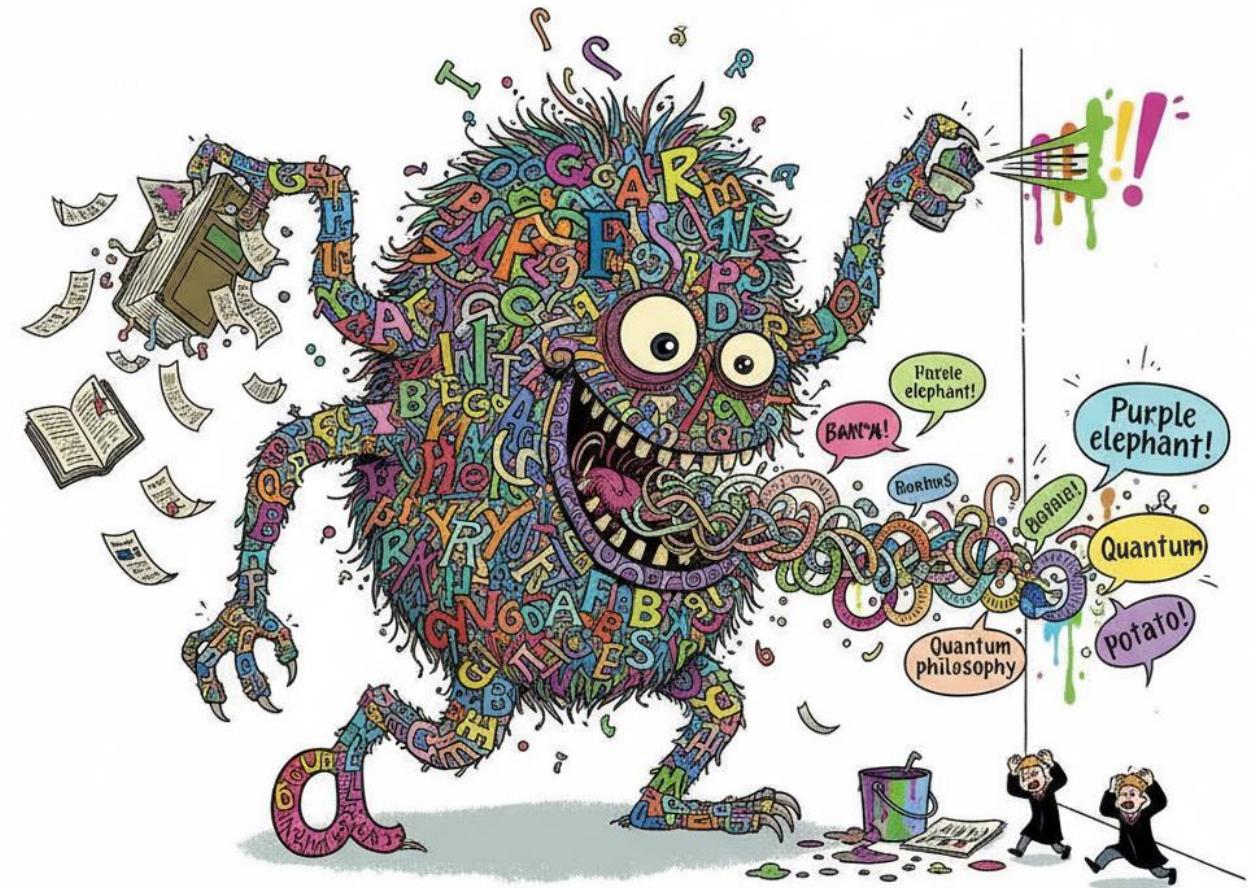


...function like a
linguistic
straight-jacket

 ELFStandardised
Testing

“while ample research is available about [ELF], the language tests continue to overlook it and to use standard native criteria and goals.” (Shohamy, 2018, p. 586).

So, how do we test (and teach) such a misbehaving linguistic beast?



Some broad (and well-known) approaches...

Standard
Forms

World
Englishes

International
English: LF
core

...and their pros and cons.

...and a potential alternative...



Standard Forms

- 'Inner Circle' forms (Kachru, 1985)
- Typically UK, US 'standard' forms; typically privileged forms of the language
- Based largely on codified, written forms of the language of the elite



- Provides a fixed benchmark
- Familiarity for teachers & learners
- Copious materials
- Perceived 'fairness': Everyone is teaching and testing to the same form



- Does not reflect communicative reality: has consequences for real-life communication
- Maintains imbalanced Inner Circle supplier status quo
- Sets an unrealistic goal that costs learners time and money

World Englishes

- 'Outer Circle' (Kachru, 1985) – Multiple, equally valid standards
- Response to post-colonial independence from the UK
- Tests use and accept local 'differences' and topic areas



- Provides a localised fixed benchmark
- Takes into consideration local identities and experiences
- Accommodates diverse Englishes
- Aligns with developing 'World English' literatures



- Not valued in the same way as standard UK/US forms
- Locally-bound: fails to account for cross-national and international communication realities
- Could disadvantage speakers entering an 'international space'

International English: LF Core

- Jenkins (2000) posited a 'shared' inventory of phonological features; based on features associated with L2 miscommunication and own experience
- Attempts to accommodate variation in pronunciation and focus on communication, moving away from 'native speaker' models



- Credited as 'first wave' of ELF studies
- Recognition of shared – but not identical – repertoires of English
- Based on observation of communicative events



- Has never really been fully defined or operationalised
- Paucity of evidence – 27 speakers
- Does not include L1 speakers, potentially entrenching a two-tier system
- Attempts to codify a fixed inventory associated with a shared 'variety'

ELF: English as a Lingua Franca

- English as a tool to communicate
- Not one variety of English
- Features recognisable as being from an English repertoire
- EL1 and EL2 speakers and listeners



ELF is “... a contact language between speakers or speaker groups when at least one of them uses it as a second language.”
(Mauranen, 2018, p. 8)

Which brings us back to the beast...



...how do we
'measure' something
so unruly?

English is the lingua franca of an **enormous variety of social and cultural contexts**, of which only a fraction has been investigated. Looking into **new contexts** calls for **new ways of seeing context and situated language use**. We need new **conceptual** and **methodological tools** for making sense of these often transient, frequently multilingual and always complex **social and linguistic** configurations that typify ELF-using situations.

Mauranen, 2009, p.3

“new ways of seeing...”

“context and situated language use”

A shift from form to communicative outcome.

Recognising and crediting the skills of adept communication.

A teaching and testing approach that has mutual comprehensibility as the underlying construct.

Comprehensibility characteristics

“Variability, hybridity and fluidity”

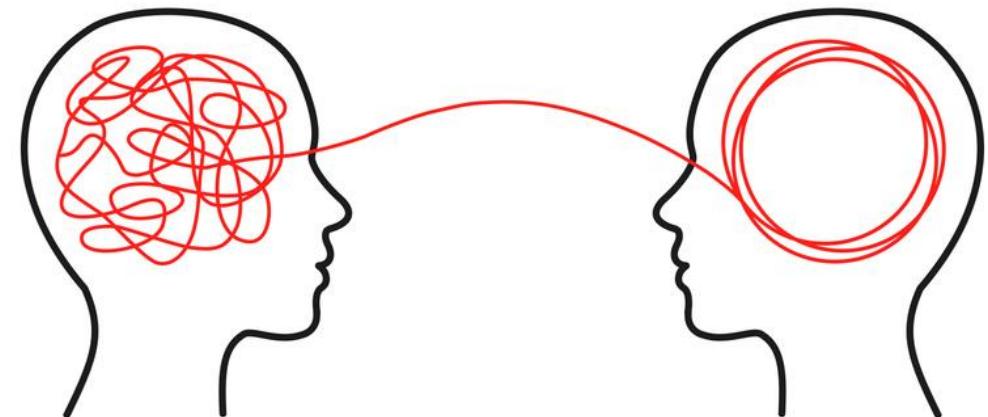
Seidlhofer, 2009b, p. 48

Goal is achieving communicative outcomes (Seidlhofer, 2009a);
Primary focus is on meaning, not form.

Mauranen, 2018

Comprehensibility is...

- Linguistic and non-linguistic features
- Context dependent
- Focused on achieving a communicative goal
- Co-constructed



Testing and teaching should reflect these characteristics.

This gap [between **fluid** ELF and testing theories that build on constructs that are fixed, standard and stable] leads to inaccurate scores and **negative consequences on test takers' lives** and present and future opportunities.

(Shohamy, 2018, p. 583)



How can teaching do this?

- Prioritise the ability to get meaning across.
- Include variations of different L1 AND L2 accents in listening materials.
- Treat accent variation as a positive, something that speakers should be proud of because it's linked to their identity.
- Teach learners to adapt to the context of communication: encourage them to draw on their wider linguistic repertoire(s) to get meaning across to different audiences.
- Seek out and create materials that reflect real-world ELF communication.

How can testing do this?

- Tests that recognise and reward communicative outcomes rather than accuracy.
- Test development that has comprehensibility in specific contexts at the core of its design.
- Further research into the construct of comprehensibility: what are the linguistic and non-linguistic elements that make meaning exchange possible? How does context affect this? How can tests reflect these characteristics?
- Recognition that ELF communication has different demands to ‘native speaker’ speech, and that all speakers of ELF (including English L1s) should be tested on their ability to make themselves comprehensible in an ELF context.

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JYU Dissertation

<https://www.jyu.fi/en/news/sheryl-cookes-dissertation-proposes-rethinking-the-english-language-testing-standards>



Comprehensibility in Language Assessment: A Broader Perspective (UoTP)

<https://utppublishing.com/doi/10.3138/9781800504332>



Open for discussion!





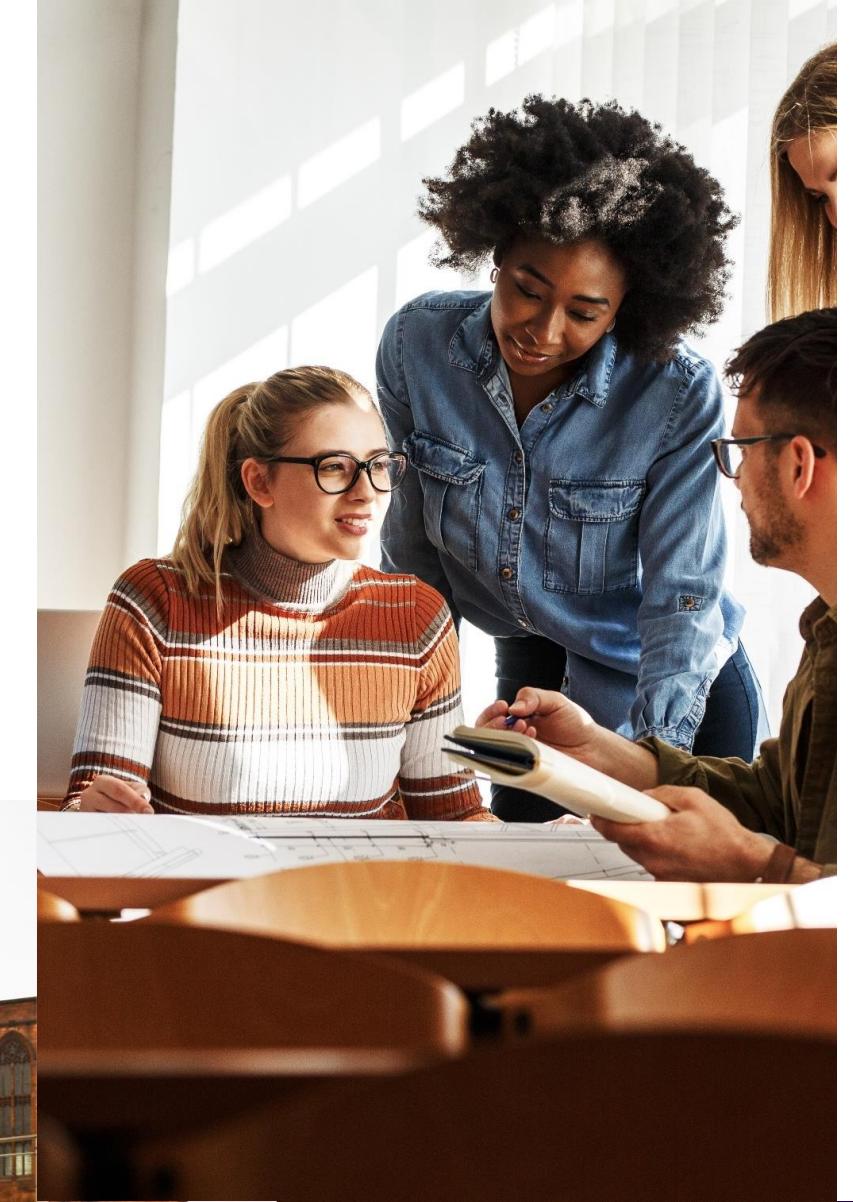
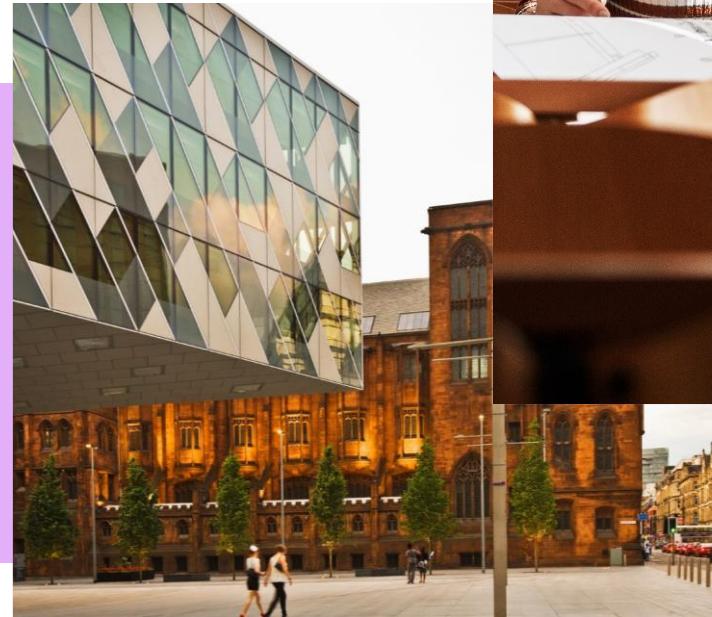
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