

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

Nordic Speech Research Forum  
10 February 2026  
Dr Sheryl Cooke



# Acknowledgements

***University of Jyväskylä***

***Prof Ari Huhta***

***Dr Elina Vasu***

***British Council***

***British Council colleagues***

***Non-British Council Brand images generated using Google AI Studio***

# 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>

...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

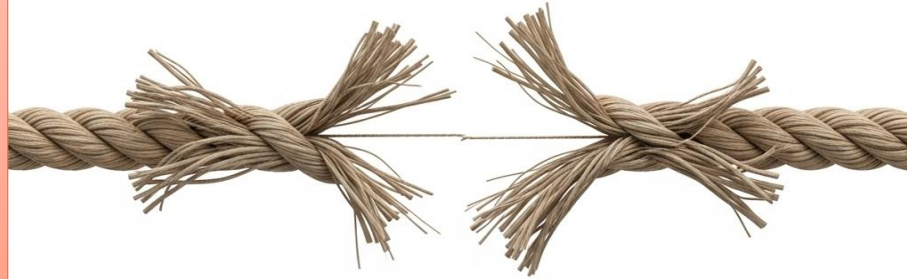
But... language  
tests...



...function like a  
linguistic  
straight-jacket



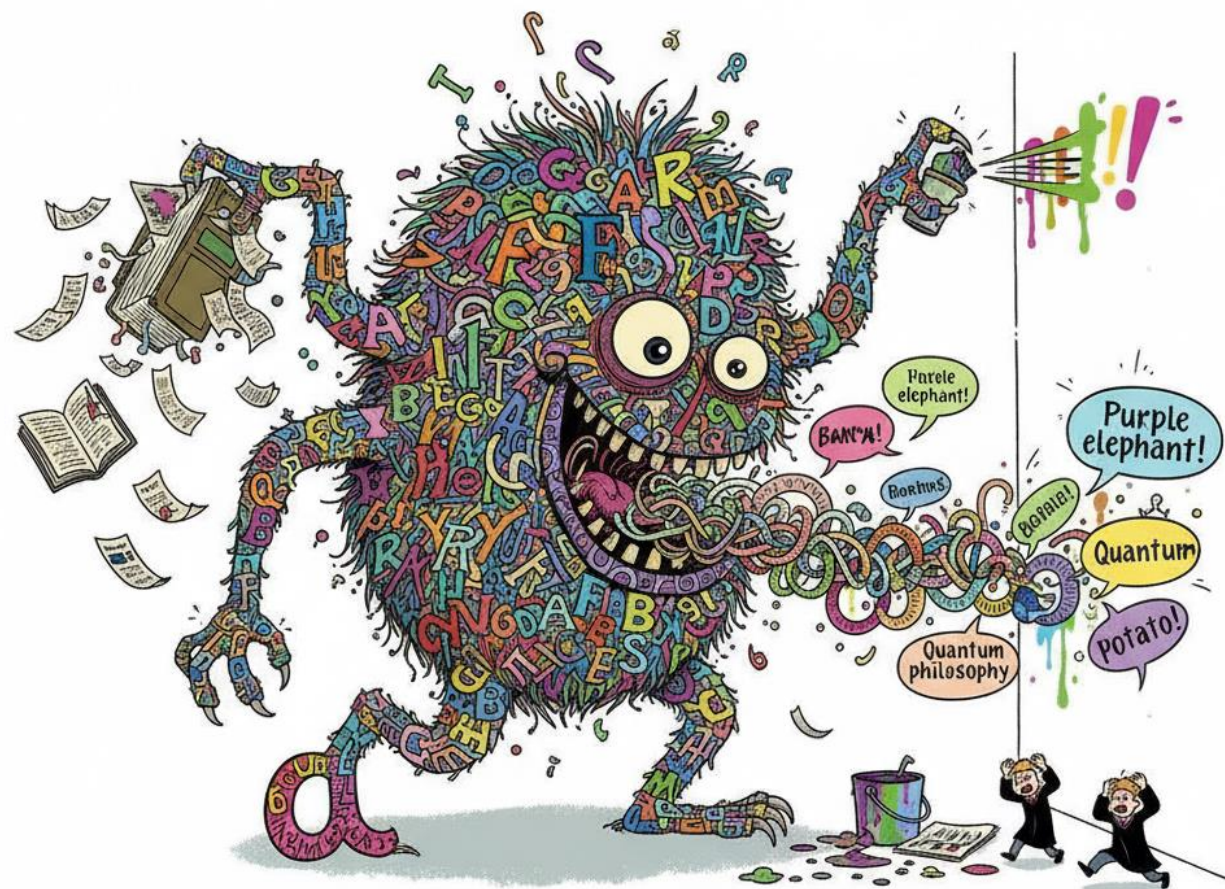
ELF



Standardised  
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

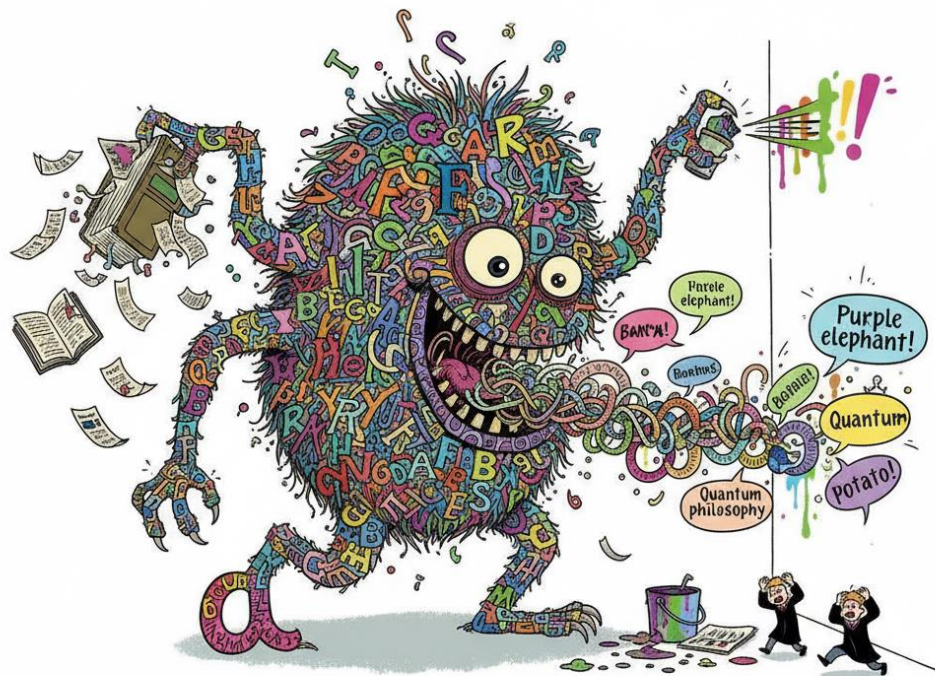
- English as a tool to communicate
- Not one variety of English
- Features recognisable as being from an English repertoire
- EL1 and EL2 speakers and listeners



*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*

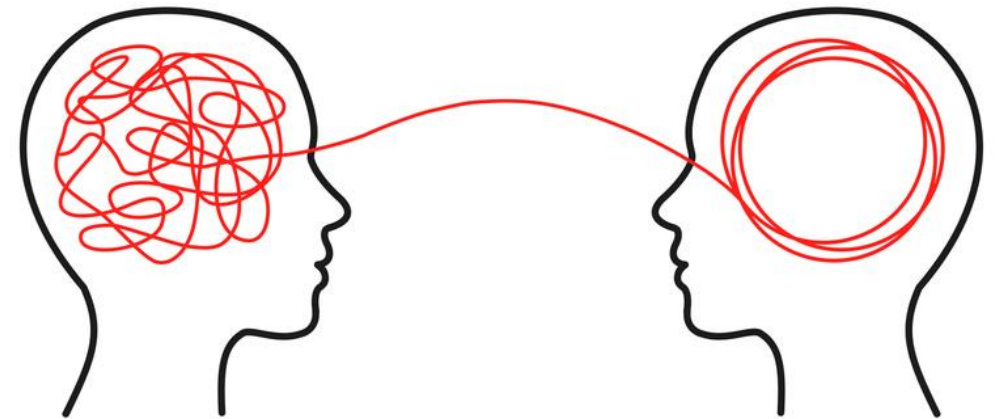
Goal is achieving communicative outcomes (Seidlhofer, 2009a);  
Primary focus is on meaning, not form.

*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.



# References

- Carroll, L. (n.d.). Jabberwocky. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42916/jabberwocky> (Original work published 1871; Reprinted from The Random House book of poetry for children, pp. 10–11, by J. Prelutsky, Ed., 1983, Random House)
- Havfy. (2023, March 19). To the girl in English class [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/s7crZc9tJx4>
- Kachru, B., Kachru, Y., & Nelson, C. (2006). *The handbook of world Englishes*. Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405111850.2006.00003.x>
- Kachru, B.B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk and H. Widdowson (Eds.). *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures* (11–30). Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, Y. (2008). Cultures, contexts, and interpretability. *World Englishes*, 27(3), 309–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2008.00569.x>
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J., Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2011). Review of developments in research into English as a lingua franca. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 281–315. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000115>
- Mauranen, A. (2018). Conceptualising ELF. In J. Jenkins, W. Baker, & M. Dewey (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of English As a Lingua Franca* (pp. 7-24). Routledge.
- Mauranen, A. (2009). Introduction. In A. Mauranen & E. Ranta (Eds.), *English as a lingua franca: Studies and findings*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2009b). Orientations in ELF Research - Form and Function. In A. Mauranen & E. Ranta (Eds.), *English as a Lingua Franca - Studies and Findings*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Shohamy, E. (2018). ELF and critical language testing. In J. Jenkins, W. Baker, & M. Dewey (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of English as a Lingua Franca*. Routledge.

## 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!





# Thank you



Dr Sheryl Cooke



[Sheryl.cooke@britishcouncil.org](mailto:Sheryl.cooke@britishcouncil.org)



[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)



In partnership with



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

# PGCert in Language Assessment

## Join us

### Starting July 2026

#### Delivered in partnership with the British Council

The programme is delivered in collaboration with the British Council, a globally recognised leader in researching, developing and implementing language assessment since the 1940s.

#### Learn from world-class experts in the field

Learn from the research expertise and practical assessment experience of the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics and the British Council.

#### Advance your career

Enhance your professional credentials, expand career opportunities, and build your professional network of peers and experts in language testing and assessment.

#### Gain master's level credits

We are developing a pathway to allow those who have successfully completed the programme to use credits towards the MA TESOL or other related postgraduate degrees.

#### Fees for summer 2026 entry

£3,500

#### Entry requirements

We usually require a first or second class undergraduate honours degree, with at least 57% in modules related to Linguistics/ English Language. Those with other qualifications and relevant work experience may also be considered.

#### Intensive summer delivery

Complete this 12-week programme, with six weeks of immersive on-campus learning (full-time), followed by six weeks to work on assignments at your own pace.

“The PGCert, taught in partnership with the British Council, is a great opportunity for professional development in designing, evaluating, and implementing language assessments for real-world needs.”

Richard Spiby,  
Head of Assessment Research,  
English Language Research,  
British Council



#### Find out more

For more information, visit the course page, by scanning the QR code.