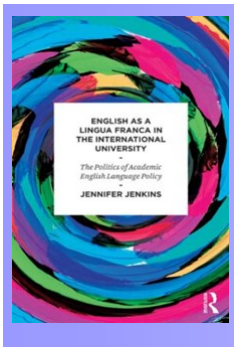
Book Review: English as a Lingua Franca in the International University: The Politics of Academic English Language Policy

By Jonathan Culbert



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In her latest work on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Jennifer Jenkins examines its place in the international university. A discussion of ELF's relation to other approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) precedes a report of her own empirical research into universities' language policies. Following Spolsky (2009), policy is largely understood not only as explicit language management, but also as the practices and underlying beliefs of those in authority. To examine these strands, Jenkins analysed universities' websites, conducted a written questionnaire among university faculty, and held interviews with students.

It may seem that the title of the book is to be taken as a rather dry piece of academic irony. For, as Jenkins demonstrates, at the level of policy there is barely any acknowledgement of ELF in international universities; ELF is nowhere to be seen.

And yet ELF is everywhere to be heard since it is the "sociolinguistic reality" (p. 2) of most students studying in English. For this reason, universities should renounce their adherence to native speaker norms and embrace, in everything from undergraduate entrance tests to PhD theses, the kind of English heard in student cafes.

Jenkins is pro-student, pro-majority. Far from detached irony, this book calls passionately for a democratic revolution in language policy as a response to "the exploitation ... of international students in many, if not all, Anglophone institutions" (p. 80).

This central theme, between how the world is and how it should be, is played out in the macro-structure of the book. The opening three literature-based chapters advance Jenkins' view of ELF's importance. The remaining four chapters, which comprise noticeably more than half the book, report her empirical research into universities' language policies, emphatically showing that few within academia share her view. The force of this juxtaposition, however, is undermined by the predictable nature of the findings.

To a large extent, these are foreshadowed in the opening chapters, which attribute only a marginal role to ELF even within an EAP context. Furthermore, towards the end of the book Jenkins writes that she "already knew the answer" (p. 206) to her initial research question before she started.

In this light it is especially difficult to accept the suggestion of exploitation mentioned earlier. The "sociolinguistic reality" Jenkins identifies is a relatively new one facing universities while the faculty who answered her questionnaire, which asked about their and their institution's linguistic expectations of students, were mostly from non-linguistic disciplines. Interestingly, of the international students she interviewed "all 34 participants subscribed at least to some extent to the 'native English is best' ideology" (p. 201).

However, Jenkins' concept of exploitation is

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closely tied to accusations of hypocrisy and greed. Universities claim to be international, but do little more than bank the considerable tuition fees of international students. With respect to this notion of commodification, it seems that Jenkins misses the point slightly. If, on the one hand, higher education is a commodity, on the other, students are agents, free to make choices in a market-based system. This scenario is actually alluded to, but only to the extent that it would benefit ELF-orientated universities. There seems to be little realisation that international students may wish to study at institutions where there is an emphasis on native speaker norms. For example, in the discussion of off-shore campuses, it is noted that the aim of some universities may simply be to replicate abroad what is on offer in the home (Anglophone) country and that these universities "may present a worst case scenario in terms of promoting Anglophone (academic) culture" (p.7). It is not acknowledged that there may, in fact, be a demand for this.

This one-sided view of commodification is premised on Jenkins' views of communication. For students, "English is simply a tool for communication to enable them to study something else: a means to an end" (p. 202). As a result, "the only criterion should be mutual intelligibility" between speakers (p. 202). It would be inaccurate to say that Jenkins is not aware of how language is much more than communicating content: in a brief discussion of Business ELF she acknowledges that, especially in written communication, native speaker norms are often adhered to because of the prestige they confer. The point Jenkins is making is that the world should not be this way; adherence to native speaker norms should not confer prestige. In fact, the claim is even stronger; for the problem is not native speaker norms in particular, but the whole notion of norms and of certain varieties of English being more prestigious than others. Here the true extent of the proposed linguistic revolution becomes clear; while it may be possible that in the future so called native speakers are not seen as speaking the most prestigious variety of English, it is unlikely that speakers of English will not attach greater prestige to some varieties more than to others. Jenkins is, therefore, effectively calling for a change in human nature.

If there is to be a linguistic revolution in higher education, it is a revolution with little idea of what to do once the status quo has been overturned. For although the answers to the research questions were already known, there is no pretense to know how ELF will, or should, be incorporated into international universities' policies.

Even defining ELF is "problematic and controversial" (p. 24). Since it is not a variety of English per se, it seems virtually impossible to codify, with the attendant consequence that it would be equally difficult to identify an error. This, in turn, raises the question of how ELF would be taught.

In fact, throughout the book pedagogical concerns are not addressed, the implication being that universities accept the English already being used by students. This is supported by framing ELF within a 'difference' paradigm as opposed to a 'deficit' paradigm; that is, considering users of ELF as linguistically different from, rather than inferior to, native speakers. However, no allowance is made for students who may be deficient with respect to their academic discipline, in the sense that their language is neither precise nor nuanced enough to fully participate in it. This is especially important in writing, perhaps the more significant medium for academic communication, where there is a greater communicative burden on the author. Interestingly, Jenkins notes that the vast majority of research in ELF has focused on spoken language and that, regarding written ELF, there are "insufficient findings from which to draw any major conclusions about its nature" (p. 30).

The inconsistencies highlighted in this book between how students use English and how they are expected to use it may inform debate in the coming years. However, that ELF is widely used is not the only consideration for policy makers.

Reference

Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language Management.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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