The pragmatics of English as a lingua franca in the international university: Introduction

This special issue grows out of the CALPIU’08 (Cultural and Linguistic Practices in the International University) conference that was carried out at Roskilde University, in Denmark, in December 2008. The CALPIU network (http://calpiu.dk/) was established in 2007 with the purpose of “coordinating Danish, Nordic and international research into a new theoretical understanding of internationalization processes currently underway in universities and other institutions of higher education”. The 2008 conference was the first open conference arranged by the network (“to be followed by a second conference in April 2012”) and had as its focus the very topical notion of transnational student mobility and its consequences. One of these consequences is the increasing use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in the international university.

Although research into ELF started relatively recently, the proliferation of investigations that have been carried out on different aspects of it has been quite dramatic, partly owing to the release of two large corpora (namely VOICE, Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English, www.univie.ac.at/voice, and the ELFA Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings, http://www.eng.helsinki.fi/elfa/elfacorpus.htm) as well as a number of individual research projects. The increasing use of English as a lingua franca in a wide range of settings opens up possibilities for carrying out studies of varying natures. Of these settings, the international university is perhaps the most interesting one, especially considering the relatively sudden change of the medium of instruction from the local language to English in many universities throughout Europe and elsewhere. There is yet much to explore regarding the effectiveness of English as an academic lingua franca.

Compared to social settings, in instructional discourse, the demands on communicators are considerably higher. The high-stakes nature of instructional settings is a key issue here. In particular, using another language than one’s own for high-stakes communication requires heavy investment in the communication process. Any lack of communication or steering away from the topic would lead to the incompletion of the task, and this would adversely affect the performance of the students and/or the teachers involved. So the aim in real high-stakes interaction is to communicate in a practical and functional fashion and achieve the desired outcome. In such settings, one needs to acquire an appropriate pragmatic competence to achieve effectiveness in communication.

The aim of this special issue is to bring together some of the most recent and relevant research in the area and provide a useful overview on this very topical issue. It comprises six papers which discuss the pragmatics of English as a lingua franca in the international university. Appropriate to the nature of the CALPIU’08 conference and to the present special issue, the papers report on research carried out in international university settings. The issue opens with two papers discussing important normative issues regarding using English as the academic lingua franca. In the first article, Jennifer Jenkins elaborates on accommodating to ELF in the international university and discusses issues concerning the usage of ELF as well as language norms for international universities. This segues into Hartmut Haberland’s paper on ownership and maintenance issues when a language is used for transnational use. We then turn to four papers from different Scandinavian and European universities: Sweden (Björkman), Finland (Hynninen), Germany (Knapp) and Norway (Ljosland). The papers exhibit variation in mode (speaking, speaking and writing), settings (different European countries and universities), fields (general, technology, etc.) and method of data collection/analysis (authentic primary data: recordings, interview results).

While the papers differ nicely with regard to the organizational criteria mentioned above, they all have the pragmatics of English as the academic lingua franca as their focal point. The authors elaborate on several important notions, such as the definition of the successful English user (as ‘skilled user’ in Jenkins and as ‘effective communicator’ in Björkman), what being an ‘international’ university should entail at different organizational levels (Jenkins, Haberland, Björkman and Knapp), ownership issues (Haberland, Jenkins), the ways in which speakers in academic ELF settings strive to communicate successfully (Hynninen through ‘mediation’, Björkman, through a variety of pragmatic strategies) as well as concerns regarding the importance of cultural and linguistic elements in successful ELF communication (Knapp and Ljosland).

The special issue opens with Jennifer Jenkins’ article “Accommodating (to) ELF in the international university”. Jenkins discusses the findings of prominent ELF research through its journey from earlier descriptive work focusing on
lies in the fact that all the articles report on the need for support for those who operate in international university settings where English is the academic lingua franca. Her discussions include whether the domain and code-switching theories are in agreement with Bourdieu’s theory of switching in her data seem to function as signals of a shift in focus during the interaction in the form of topic, interlocutors or roles. She focuses on learning-related activities where Norwegian comes into the picture and relates between the local language and English in the setting. She closes in on the ways in which English interacts with Norwegian in university settings, including lecturers and students.

Hartmut Haberland’s contribution “Ownership and maintenance of a language in transnational use: should we leave our lingua franca alone?” follows up on Jenkins’ discussion of norms for International English. He too considers both spoken and written use of English as a lingua franca in international contexts and does so by following a macro-sociolinguistic approach. In this discussion, he first provides a very useful discussion of differences between ownership and maintenance discourse. To Haberland, the issue is not in which of these discourses the ELF paradigm is placed but rather where in the maintenance discourse it is. He then applies the Public Goods Theory (Coulmas, 2009; Kaul et al., 1999) to the notion of language where a language is described as ‘non-rivalrous’, i.e., using a language does not leave other users with less of the language as goods, and ‘non-excludable’, that it is difficult and inadvisable to restrict the use of a language. Haberland concludes by referring to the inapplicability of the ‘native speakers versus others’ dichotomy to international settings.

With my paper “Pragmatic strategies in English as an academic lingua franca: ways of achieving communicative effectiveness?” the special issue takes an empirical turn. In my paper, the reader will find a setting such as the ones Jenkins and Haberland discuss in their papers. I report the findings of an investigation carried out in an international university setting in Sweden, where English is used extensively. The investigation is based on recordings of authentic spoken English in the domain of Applied Scienceore and has as its focus the communicative effectiveness of ELF as the medium of instruction with reference to linguistic issues, especially the role pragmatic issues play in achieving communicative effectiveness. From the findings, the effective communicator emerges as someone who deploys appropriate pragmatic strategies during communication and not necessarily someone whose speech is ‘correct’ according to prescriptive norms. Needless to say, this could be the case for any high-stakes spoken discourse and is not specific to ELF settings, but I argue that such strategies are especially important for speakers in ELF settings, due to the added complexities in the form dimension. I conclude with implications of this discussion for international university settings, including lecturers and students.

Our focus remains on spoken interaction in Niina Hynninen’s paper “The practice of ‘mediation’ in English as a lingua franca interaction”. Hynninen explores the notion of mediation thoroughly as a situated interactional activity in an English-medium Master’s level seminar course at the University of Helsinki. A question she raises and then provides the answer to is whether mediation in the ELF setting she examined is used as a way of engaging others or of exercising authority. While doing so, she draws on discourse and conversation analysis, and ethnographic approaches. Her results show that mediation is a cooperative strategy that increases explicitness and fosters interaction and is thus a valuable strategy in ELF settings. She identifies three main functions of mediation, namely allowing for all participants to be engaged in the interaction, acting as an organizational device and socialization.

Annelie Knapp focuses on problematic issues concerning learning and teaching through English as a lingua franca in her article “Using English as a Lingua Franca for (Mis-)Managing Conflict in the International University: An Example from a Course in Engineering”. Her paper differs in perspective from Björkman’s and Hynninen’s: While Björkman and Hynninen explore what makes a speaker successful, Knapp asks what comes in the way of being a competent ELF user if effectiveness is not the only thing at stake. She draws attention to the ‘problems’ in spoken ELF communication in the German university setting she has investigated and the intercultural and linguistic factors that could account for some of these problems. She provides a very useful discussion on how and where ELF and Intercultural Pragmatics paradigms intersect. The participants in her data use lingua franca effectively when it comes to communicating about the subject matter; however, certain problems surface when a larger variety of communicative functions come into the picture. Speakers from certain cultures may find certain communicative functions difficult, e.g. disagreeing, especially with holders of power. In addition to exemplifying such situations thoroughly, the paper includes suggestions for reducing these complications. There is certainly room for more research dealing with such cultural aspects of ELF communication.

Finally, in the article “English as an academic lingua franca: Language policies and multilingual practices in a Norwegian university” by Ragnhild Ljosland, we turn to a Norwegian university setting that has switched to English, abandoning Norwegian completely, at least nominally. Ljosland’s study differs from the other papers with its inclusion of the interplay between the local language and English in the setting. She closes in on the ways in which English interacts with Norwegian in an English-medium program. She focuses on learning-related activities where Norwegian comes into the picture and relates Fishman’s domain theory to code-switching theory (Fishman, 1970; Auer, 1995; Heller, 1988). Some instances of code-switching in her data seem to function as signals of a shift in focus during the interaction in the form of topic, interlocutors or roles. Her discussions include whether the domain and code-switching theories are in agreement with Bourdieu’s theory of language and symbolic power and Anderson’s theory on imagined communities. She finishes her paper by pointing to the need for support for those who operate in international university settings where English is the academic lingua franca.

These six papers offer a comprehensive picture of ELF use and usage in international university settings. Another strength lies in the fact that all the articles report on real ELF settings and not on language-learning environments where both form and pragmatic moves would have been different, thus they provide real data. They illustrate successfully that an awareness
of ELF is necessary in every international university and demonstrate clearly the need to adjust university language policies and practices accordingly. The notions discussed here and the results of the empirical work should be of interest to all scholars who are interested in the use/usage of English as a lingua franca, those who are active in this research area as well as policy and decision makers in higher education.

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