Reassessing English Proficiency: Implications of English as a Lingua Franca for Language Testing in South Asia

By

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Abstract

This position paper explores the implications of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) for international English language assessment systems, particularly within the South Asian context of Bangladesh. While global proficiency testing systems such as IELTS and TOEFL continue to rely on native-speaker norms, this paper argues that such benchmarks are increasingly misaligned with the communicative realities of multilingual English users. Drawing on evolving theoretical perspectives on second language (L2) proficiency, including Communicative Language Ability and ELF-informed research, the paper critiques the narrow constructs underlying standardised tests. It also reviews the limited responsiveness of the assessment industry to ELF-driven insights and examines local practices in Bangladesh as an illustrative case. Despite incremental changes in some international tests, local systems remain largely unchanged and deeply influenced by traditional ideologies. The paper advocates for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to assessment that reflect the dynamic, hybrid nature of English in use across South Asia. In doing so, it aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy debates about fairness, validity, and linguistic diversity in English language testing.

Keywords: Bangladesh English education policy, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English language testing in South Asia, language assessment, second language (L2) proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of English has significantly reshaped understandings of language use and proficiency. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), a concept describing English used as a common means of communication among speakers of different first languages, challenges long-held assumptions underpinning standardised English language assessments. While international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL have gained wide credibility for measuring English language ability, their underlying constructs seem to continue to privilege native-speaker norms. This misalignment poses serious questions about the fairness and validity of assessments administered to the growing majority of English users who are multilinguals from non-Anglophone contexts. This position paper critically examines how ELF complicates native-speaker-centric models of language testing and explores the extent to which such insights are reflected in contemporary assessment systems, both globally and in the South Asian context of Bangladesh.

The paper begins with a review of evolving conceptions of L2 proficiency, followed by a discussion of ELF and its theoretical and practical implications for assessment. The Bangladeshi context is used as a case study to examine local language education policy and testing practices. The paper concludes by proposing directions for more inclusive and context-sensitive assessment frameworks that align with contemporary global linguistic realities.

CONCEPTION OF L2 PROFICIENCY

In general sense, L2 proficiency refers to someone's knowledge about a L2 (knowing what) and ability to do something with the L2 (knowing how) (Harsch, 2017). The conception of L2 proficiency came into limelight in 1970s, when the researchers became interested in the "communicative" aspect of language testing to assess the language performance or skills rather than the language knowledge (Harsch, 2017). This ground led to emerge many theories of communicative competence, among which Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model of Communicative

Language Ability (CLA) appear as more comprehensive in the sense that it includes all the components of L2 proficiency as theorised by their predecessors i.e., Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence, Hymes' (1972) communicative competence, and Canale and Swain's (1981) grammatical and sociolinguistic competence.

By comprising all the components, CLA is constructed on three inclusive dimensions, which are organisational competence (knowledge of grammar and discourse), pragmatic competence (illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence), and strategic competence (knowledge and skills of how to combine organisational and pragmatic competence) (Bachman, 1990).Therefore, CLA views L2 proficiency as an ability to apply the communicative competences appropriately in the target context with proper usage of grammatical, textual, sociolinguistic and strategic knowledge of a L2.

Alternatively, Cummins (2000) perceptualises L2 proficiency in terms of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) that are required for real life communication, and Communicative Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)- a knowledge and skills that are required for academic tasks.

However, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages, which is a well-known L2 proficiency measurement grid, favours CLA's construct and defines proficiency as "what someone can do/knows in relation to the application of the subject in the real world" (Council of Europe, 2011, p.183). The CEFR categorises learners into Basic user (A1 and A2 level), Independent user (B1 and B2 level) and Proficient user (C1 and C2 level) in terms of their proficiency scale (Council of Europe, 2011). The scale is consisting of three major variables i.e., understanding (listening and reading), speaking (spoken interaction and spoken production), and writing. The scale reflects Palmer and Bachman's (1981) ideology that proficiency is divisible which can be segmented into smaller chunks. Currently, the CEFR framework represents a benchmark for how L2 proficiency is perceived now-a-days (Harsch, 2017). The recent world's pedagogy and assessment systems possess a similar view that L2 proficiency is multifaceted with various communicative skills, strategies, and linguistic competences (Harsch, 2017).

In response to that, it is relevant to mention Bangladeshi English language education system's understanding of L2 proficiency, as an example of Southeast Asian context. Bangladesh- one of the "outer circle" countries (Kachru, 1992) with 200 years of British colonial history that begot a deep-rooted antagonism toward English language learning and with a strong nationalistic sentiment for Bangla since the language movement in 1952, is still in haphazard condition regarding formulating English education policy (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). Only recently, the 2010 National Education Policy of Bangladesh mandates English as a L2, and a compulsory subject to be taught and as the medium of instruction at tertiary level .Though, primary and secondary level of education were informed by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from 1990s, it really did not produce any tangible impact on the learners in terms of developing their real life-based communication skills due to the misfit of CLT with Bangladeshi pedagogic context (Rahman & Pandian, 2018).The decade-old local practice of teacher-centred teaching could not radically get transformed into the western practice of student-centred interactive teaching (Siddique, 2004). Besides, though the English language curriculum promotes CLT to improve students' communicative competence, surprisingly, it still does not include speaking and listening tests in the board examinations (Jamila & Kabir, 2020). As a result, a country which views English as an "international link language" but "hardly a tool for interpersonal communication" (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p.5) is in a serious conceptual crisis in realising what L2 proficiency actually denotes.

CHANGING CONCEPTION OF L2 PROFICIENCY

The CEFR grid, which conveys the current world's understanding of L2 proficiency has been challenged with the emergence of the theoretical developments in language cognition by Hulstijn (2011), expanding notions of communicative competence by Elder et al. (2017) and the emergence of ELF by Jenkins (2013). Hulstijn (2011) proposes basic and higher language cognition (BLC and HLC) for conceptualisation and measurement of L2 proficiency, where BLC is the common speaking and listening skills in all healthy adult native speakers, and HLC is the reading and writing skills that vary according to age, education level and the like which can be attained only by the persons with higher cognitive capacity. Thus, the superiority of native speaker's proficiency is limited only to BLC level. As a result, CEFR scales are unable to consistently differentiate between language development and proficiency as at a certain time, L2 learners with higher intellectual and educational profiles may perform "both better" in HLC and "more poorly" in BLC than native speakers with lower profiles (Hulstijn, 2011, p.229).

Moreover, Elder et al. (2017) argue that L2 proficiency cannot be gauged only by language skills rather by communication skills with considering the deployment of the related content, goal and context of the communication. They (2017) question the L2 proficiency testing scales for exempting native speakers from language proficiency tests rendering them as the standard for communicative effectiveness while they themselves like L2 speakers may lack communicative competence in using language for specific purposes.

Similarly, Jenkins (2013) postulates that when in the current world, the L2 speakers outnumber the native speakers in terms of using English language as an ELF for communication purpose, the so-called "standard" native version of English can no longer be a good fit for the assessment of the L2 speakers' proficiency. Besides, the nature of ELF communication being "variably variable" and 'highly successful" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.3), the conventional non-flexible scale of L2 proficiency is greatly challenged.

This study mainly addresses ELF debate and its implications for and impacts on the assessment industry worldwide.

ELF'S THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ASSESSMENT INDUSTRY

ELF, which was also known as EIL (English as an International Language) during 1980s to 1990s, "refers to English used as a contact language among speakers of different first languages, whether from choice or through some kind of coercion" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.1). The notion of ELF emerged with the breaking monographs of Jenkins (2000) and Seidlhofer (2001), which is inspired from the World Englishes (WE) ideology but considerably different than WE (Fang, 2017). The idea of WE got enriched by the work of Kachru (1992) who identified post-colonial varieties of English in the inner circle countries (i.e., USA, UK) where English is the native language, outer circle countries (i.e., Bangladesh, India) where English is a L2, and expanding circles countries (i.e., China, Indonesia) where English is a foreign language, and the cluster of English users in this circle are the largest than the other two.

The WE is similar with ELF in the line of argument that with the dominance of the non-native English speakers in the current world, there should be a paradigm shift from the nativised model of English proficiency used in the assessment industry. However, ELF is distinctive from WE in the sense that it does not promote any nation-bound varieties rather implies the use of language as "a set of practices" (Sewell, 2013, p.4) which are hybrid, fluid and diversed in nature (Jenkins et al. 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). Some common lexico-grammatical features of ELF that do not hinder communication as noted by Seidlhofer (2004) are-

- Using the base form of verb with all subjects in simple present tense, e.g., She like tea.
- Not using definite or indefinite article in front of nouns, e.g., They have house.
- Using "isn't it?" as a common tag question e.g., he must come, isn't it?
- Using "that-clauses" rather than infinitive-constructions e.g., I want that we go.
- Overusing explicitness e.g., red colour

The phonological features that do not hamper comprehension as given by Jenkins (2009) are-

- Pronouncing /θ/ as /t/ or /s/
- Pronouncing /ð/ as /d/ or /z/

Most importantly, ELF values L2 interlocutors' accommodation strategies used to manage difficulties and uncertainties in real communication as "co-construction of meaning" and "ad hoc creativity" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.4) for which they " do not require sanctioning by native English speakers" (Jenkins, 2011, p. 931).Moreover, when the use of "language is messy, and lingua franca use is even messier", the so-called international language tests with a "preset template" seems "futile" and limited in assessing the "diverse English contexts" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.10).

As an example, if we just look at how CEFR defines the B2 level speakers' ability of conversation: "can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker" (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 76), some unacceptable implications as presented below comes forth-all L2 communication is to do with native speakers (Jenkins & Leung, 2017).

- Native speakers are "devoid of miscommunication" (Pitzl, 2015, p. 91).
- L2 speakers' code switch and breakdown in communication are unnatural and unacceptable phenomena, and use of strategic competence to show sensitivity to the culture of the context and unity to a particular community is relevant, thus "multilingual knowledge is a liability" (Shohamy, 2011, p.418).
- English should enjoy the status of international language while its international users can not own it by acculturation (Hall, 2014).

Hence, it implies that the international assessment systems "continue to focus narrowly on native English norms, while no substantial adjustments have been made …with contemporary developments in English" (Jenkins & Leung, 2014, p. 1613). Their approach seems discount the fact that L2 language is used by human beings in real contact and the use of situated L2 cannot be measured in vacuum (Pennycook, 2009). Thus, it seems that the assessment industry is in disapproval of the diversity and denial of the "internationality" of the tests (Shohamy, 2006).

Moreover, Davidson's (2006) doubt to the validity of the construct of such tests are logical as these tests are more suitable for Anglophone contexts rather than the outer and expanding circles where the L2 communication takes place more than in the inner circles. Additionally, the fairness of the tests may also be questioned as "by not reflecting the sociopolitical reality of non-native varieties, [the tests] may unfairly discriminate against speakers of these varieties" (Lowenberg ,2000, p. 69).

Elder and Davies (2006), Canagarajah (2006), Harding (2012) (cited in Harding & McNamara, 2018) recommend some criteria to be considered as ELF competence which can be the starting points for developing ELF-informed language assessments. These are- the ability to comprehend different varieties of English, to negotiate an ambiguous meaning, to use intelligible features of phonology and pragmatics, and to adjust with any conversation situation with unknown interlocutors.

Henceforth, the ELF movement provides some significant implication for the English language assessment industry, firstly, to admit that there is a need for change in the field of English language assessment systems where monolingual natives will no longer be the benchmark for the multilinguals' English proficiency, rather the multilinguals will set the norms since translanguaging is the nature of language practices (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Thereafter, to acknowledge the fact that ELF has already emerged as a "stable variety" for

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which "normative references in terms of language forms and/or use for testing" are considered so strictly, so in this regard, it is now "impossible to assess ELF by conventional psychometrically oriented standardized tests of the kind that were currently being administered around the world" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.5).

CHANGES IN ASSESSMENT INDUSTRY FOR THE INFLUENCE OF ELF

A close look at the very common international English language tests like IELTS, TOEFL, and GMAT can give an insight whether the assessment industry is accommodating any changes by being influenced by the above-mentioned debates.

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is a British/Australian test jointly run by British Council, IDP: Australia and Cambridge Assessment English for the prospective students of English medium graduate institutions. It aims to "set the standard for English language testing today" (British Council, 2021) and standard English here means the very conventional British English (i.e., "s" cannot be replaced by "z' in verb spelling).

TOEFL iBT (TEST of English as a Foreign Language) is an American test administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS) for prospective graduate students pursuing programmes delivered in English. It accounts only American English (Karpinski, 2019).

GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test) is an American administered test that is offered for MBA admissions. The verbal reasoning section of the test aims to "conform to standard written English" (GMAT Exam Official Site, 2021) that indicates American English.

Therefore, it is observed that the prominent assessment agencies demonstrate "no inclination to take ELF communication into account in their test design" rather continues to gauge L2 speakers' proficiency with reference to "putative native English norms" (Jenkins & Leung, 2017) p.5), a kind of English that is not fully known and practiced by the ones who learn it as an additional language living in outer or expanding circles, and penalising them for not using it might be considered as a form of discrimination (Davies et al., 2003).

However, a change must come with the "so far-reaching" impact of ELF on the use and users of English (Jenkins & Leung, 2017, p.4), for which Taylor (2006) admits that the task of the examination boards is now more difficult than ever.

With this spirit, though some locally developed English proficiency tests appeared, they were not very successful for a startling fact that is a new revelation for the ELF researchers. For example, a test was developed in Indonesia by Brown and Lumley (1998) authorised by SEAMEO to assess the proficiency of Indonesian English teachers. It included Indonesian testers and local texts to mirror local classroom realities but could not gain popularity over international large-scale tests. The College English Test (CET) in China (Zheng & Cheng, 2008) is another locally designed English proficiency test for non-English major Chinese undergraduate students which is interestingly "based on standard American English or standard British English" (p.410) to ensure the high standard of the test. Similarly, in Hong Kong, the Graduating Students Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA), a context-sensitive test which was designed by reflecting the needs of English in the Hong Kong employment context, is no more in use for not being favoured by the locals (Lumley & Qian, 2003).

The reason behind the failure of the locally designed tests in the very ELF setting is the local stakeholders' own perception of native English as "the gold standard" (Elder & Harding, 2008, p.34.5). Elder and Davies (2006) claim that the ELF users may adore their identity derived from their local Englishes, but they themselves are the first ones to stigmatise it and prefer high prestige varieties while learning and being assessed. Another finding by Zhang and Elder (2014) posits that the non-natives testers are found more dogmatic about the accuracy of language use than the native testers. In similar tone, Field (2004) alerts that using different local varieties of English in listening tests might be more difficult to the test takers' listening comprehension, as all of them might not have exposure to all kinds of accent rather might be accustomed to certain varieties' accent which they commonly practice as standard version.

LOCAL IMPACTS AND RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF BANGLADESH

Despite the prevalence of ELF features in academic and social English use in Bangladesh, local language assessment practices have shown little alignment with these realities. British English remains the de facto norm in most public education contexts, and American English is selectively embraced in some private institutions (Islam et al., 2021). Language policies, while nominally promoting communicative competence, continue to reinforce standardised native norms as benchmarks for proficiency.

A notable gap persists between policy rhetoric and assessment practice. Although CLT has been officially adopted since the 1990s, high-stakes examinations at the secondary and tertiary levels largely assess reading and writing, with limited or no attention to speaking and listening (Jamila & Kabir, 2020). These omissions arguably reflect not only logistical constraints but also deeper ideological resistance to non-standard varieties and learner-centred evaluation.

Attempts to introduce localised or context-sensitive assessments have met with limited success. Similar to other Asian contexts, such as China and Hong Kong, local stakeholders in Bangladesh often perceive native English norms as inherently superior, which affects both policy and practice (Zhang & Elder, 2014; Kamal, 2017). As Elder and Harding (2008) note, even users of local English varieties may view their own forms as inferior, thereby reproducing hierarchical ideologies.

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The lack of institutional initiative to develop contextually grounded assessments is partly explained by the social capital associated with international standardised tests. As Kamal (2017) argues, international test results are often seen as more credible, influencing both employment and educational mobility. Consequently, local assessment reform remains stalled, even as linguistic practices on the ground increasingly reflect hybrid, ELF-informed norms.

While some global test providers have begun to acknowledge ELF dynamics- e.g., through diversified accent use or more flexible scoring rubrics- the pace and depth of reform remain limited. In Bangladesh, where English proficiency is tightly linked to socioeconomic advancement, test-takers continue to be evaluated by benchmarks that may not reflect their communicative capacities in real-world multilingual settings.

EMERGING SHIFTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although global assessment systems remain largely conservative in their orientation, signs of change are emerging. Some testing bodies have taken incremental steps to integrate more inclusive practices, likely in response to increasing pressure from researchers and educators advocating for ELF-sensitive approaches. For instance, Pearson's PTE Academic has incorporated non-native speaker accents into its listening components (PTE Academic, 2021), and the TOEFL iBT now references intelligibility rather than native norms in its speaking rubric (Harding & McNamara, 2018). These shifts, although modest, signal a growing awareness of the limitations of traditional models.

In parallel, scholars have proposed alternative frameworks for assessing English language proficiency in global contexts. Taylor and Wigglesworth (2009) have advocated for paired speaking tests that better reflect real-world communication, while the ALTE Can-Do Statements represent an effort to evaluate communicative function rather than structural accuracy. Such initiatives offer a pathway toward more flexible and context-aware assessment practices.

Nevertheless, systemic change is unlikely to occur without rethinking the ideologies that underpin language assessment. Native-speakerism continues to dominate both perception and practice, particularly in high-stakes contexts where gatekeeping functions amplify existing inequities. Test-takers in regions such as Bangladesh face a dual burden: mastering communicative competence and conforming to norms that may be irrelevant to their linguistic environments.

To move forward, assessment systems must explicitly recognise the legitimacy of ELF-informed language use. This includes valuing intelligibility, negotiation, and adaptability as central components of proficiency. Equally important is stakeholder education- teachers, policymakers, and learners must understand that linguistic diversity is not a deficit but a resource. Without this shift in perception, reforms risk being cosmetic rather than transformative.

CONCLUSION

While the theoretical and pedagogical arguments for ELF-sensitive assessment are increasingly well established, their integration into mainstream practice remains slow. This paper has argued that meaningful change requires both structural and ideological reform. For South Asian regions like Bangladesh, where English proficiency is tightly tied to socioeconomic mobility, the stakes are particularly high. Embracing more inclusive, realistic, and equitable forms of assessment is not only a pedagogical necessity but a matter of social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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