

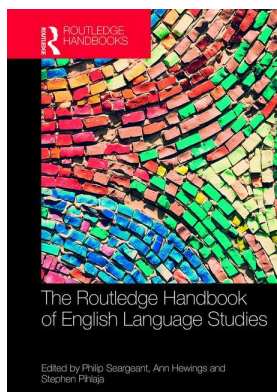
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### **The relevance of English language studies in higher education**

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# The relevance of English language studies in higher education

*Ann Hewings*

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## Introduction

My aim in writing this chapter is to contextualise the position of English language studies (ELS) in higher education (HE), and to offer views on why it is a relevant and important area of study in the 21st century. It is written from my institutional perspective of frequently needing to explain to others what ELS is and why it is worth studying. It is also written within a particular historical context. At the time of writing, the United Kingdom recently voted to leave the European Union, a decision which has caused many to reflect on the language of political discourse, and the need for an open, tolerant and informed electorate able to evaluate complex and conflicting information. Such qualities are ones many of us in education would seek to promote in all university-level study, but I argue that ELS is particularly well placed to promote informed critical reflection and has the methodological tools to interrogate complexity in an interconnected world. So, while much of this volume deals with what ELS is about, in this chapter I deal with why university students should study it and academics research it in the context of 21st century HE.

Motivations for researching or studying ELS are clearly contextual and contingent on the history and scope of the discipline in different HE systems. They reflect, among other things, the role of English as a national language, a medium of instruction or an academic lingua franca. They may be influenced by the prevailing market-orientated discourses of HE worldwide, where the purposes of study are linked to the perceived needs of the economy and institutions are urged to be competitive and entrepreneurial in a marketised HE system (Brown 2015). Motivations may be instrumental, reflecting the relevance or otherwise of the English language to a variety of careers, particularly in non-Anglophone dominant countries (Baxter 2012; Gupta 2016). They also depend on what is meant by ELS in different countries and institutions and what purpose HE is designed to serve. My main context is the UK, particularly England, but evidence from curricula and research elsewhere serves to broaden the perspective and provide contrasting rationales for ELS.

### *ELS in UK universities*

Within HE in the UK, the study of English language has a pedigree stretching back to the philological approaches of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (English 2012;

Gupta 2015), and the trace of this remains in studies of older varieties of English in some departments today. Often this is linked to the study of English literature from past eras and is part of the academic training of students studying for degrees in ELS, English literature and English language and literature. It often starts with sketching the roots of modern English from Anglo-Saxon or Old English through Middle English to current dialects and varieties of the UK and beyond. It can focus on understanding the language of Beowulf, Chaucer and Shakespeare or concern itself with issues such as spelling variation and vowel shifts.

Currently in the UK, ELS operates within the overall expectations of degree-level study set by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which also aligns with the European Qualifications Framework incorporating 47 countries within the Bologna Process. Embedded within statements related to understanding key aspects and techniques of a field of study, honours degree graduates are expected to have ‘an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge’ and be able to ‘critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements . . .’ (QAA 2014a: 26). In addition, there is an emphasis on skills for employment such as analysis, problem-solving and effective communication, and qualities such as exercising personal responsibility and decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations (QAA 2014b: 26). Relevant specifically to ELS is the QAA description of English Language as one of the three contributing strands of the university subject ‘English’ which may be studied separately, together or in combination, and the relevance of the subject English to contemporary society lies in its ability to develop the ‘capacity to understand the world from a variety of perspectives’ through focusing on the ‘production, interpretation and negotiation of meaning’ (QAA 2015: 5). It is the understanding of how meanings are made and interpreted, and whose meanings are valued and by whom and in what specific contexts that ELS contributes to the wider understanding of the world in which English and other languages are used. ELS spans both the Arts/Humanities and Social Sciences and provides rigorous analytical tools and training alongside topics of personal and societal relevance. Applications of theoretical and real-world insights inform practice in areas as diverse as immigration policy, education and medical training. For students, it promotes critical reflection on and development of their own language use and that in the world around them. It fosters understanding of the power of language to entertain and to promote understanding, or to manipulate and dominate others. ELS graduates are equipped to enter careers that require attention to detail, good analytical and communication skills, and an understanding and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity. ELS researchers contribute to an understanding of society and culture through explorations ranging from the language of poetry, humour and political speeches to mental and physical health, and conflict resolution.

The wider educational potential of ELS as set out above is not that well understood in both HE and society in general. As a contributing strand to subject English in UK HE, ‘brand recognition’ of ELS is fuzzy and disciplinary networks are dispersed. English Language may be invisible as a label within English departments, or it may be allied to education, languages, communication, media or (applied) linguistics. This is in contrast to its position as a school subject in the UK where it has gained greater recognition with the advent of English Language as a choice for ‘A’ level examinations. The syllabus specification indicates that school students are expected to cover, for example, diverse methods of analysis – phonetics, phonology and prosodics, graphology, lexis and semantics, pragmatics, and discourse – and use them to understand language, the individual and society (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance; (AQA) 2014). Specifically, within the AQA syllabus, students study language diversity and variety with the aim of understanding how and why language varies because of ‘personal,

social and geographical contexts' (p.14), and through this to develop their critical knowledge and understanding of different views and explanations. The previous iteration of this syllabus (AQA 2013) tied the knowledge and understandings more closely to developing a critical perspective on communication and specifically referenced critical discourse analysis (CDA). While school students base understandings of a subject on what they are taught, which is largely circumscribed by examination syllabi, within HE the discipline area is often harder to demarcate. In 2010 a group of academics in the UK attempted to rectify this situation by producing an English language benchmark statement under the auspices of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the English Subject Centre and the Language and Area Studies Subject Centre (HEA 2011). The benchmark statement aimed to help teachers advising on the choice of university courses, academics introducing or reviewing a degree in English language, and employers wishing to understand the qualification obtained by a job applicant with a degree in English Language. The defining principles were set out as follows:

Students study the linguistic systems underlying English, as well as language in use and the relationship between language and context, the society and the individual. They typically study both written and spoken language, with multimodal texts also a focus on some programmes. English may be studied in its cultural, contemporary and historical background; it may be related to literary texts, everyday discourse, and the structure of languages other than English. Descriptive analysis will be combined with more critical and theoretical work which develops students' understanding of texts and/or language systems. (p.3)

Despite this effort, it is often difficult to find ELS on UK HE websites, to know what label to search for it under, or what university faculty or department to search for it within. For example, in the online subject information within *The Complete University Guide* (2016), ELS is invisible and 'English' is largely synonymous with English literature. However, one of the videos on the site in which students talk about their experiences of studying English features a person who was actually a student of Linguistics. This lack of clarity and visibility serves to obscure the potential and reach of the subject on its own and in combination with others.

### *ELS in non-UK university contexts*

The situation in other English-dominant countries is somewhat different as ELS is not a recognised subject label, although elements of it may be embedded within the curriculum. In the USA, English as a designation in HE is mostly synonymous with literature; however, rhetoric and composition classes have kept a language focus that has had a history in university education since the 19th century (Russell 2016). Aspects of ELS are mostly distributed among other disciplines such as Linguistics and Education. Writing from within a US tradition English (2012), in his book looking at futures for English Studies, begins his discussion by conflating English with literature, but later expands from a US focus to a global examination of English which includes English as a foreign language, creative writing and cultural studies. The (in)visibility of ELS in HE qualifications continues in Australasia, where English is again mostly associated with the study of literature written in English, and in both Australia and New Zealand aspects of English language study are likely to be found in other schools and departments such as Linguistics or Arts and Media.

Moving from Anglophone settings to those countries with a colonial heritage of English as an additional language, the visibility of ELS is greater but its role is often different.

The National University of Singapore offers English Language and English Literature as single honours options, the University of Malaya offers English (literature) and English Language and Linguistics. The University of Hong Kong's School of English offers both English Studies, which combines language, literature and creative writing, and Language and Communication. In contrast, Hong Kong Polytechnic University focuses on applied English language skills with their English Studies for the Professions degree programme. This last signals the importance of developing proficiency in using the English language as a foreign or additional language. Despite English being a second or official language in many of these countries, there is still demand for it also to be taught at university as a foreign language. Gupta (2016), in a discussion of English in Indian universities, notes a tension between academics in English departments who are trained in literature and the demands of students, and to some extent governments, to focus on English language often for motives of future employment and economic advancement.

The role of English as a global language is reflected in the number of universities teaching it in parts of the world that have no strong historical ties to English-dominant countries. As a foundation for intercultural communication, language learning – and nowadays particularly *English* language learning – is significant in many HE contexts, either as a subject in its own right or in support of other curriculum areas. Like the study of modern foreign languages within Anglophone settings, it has an important role to play in pluricultural and plurilingual contexts. European English undergraduate degrees often contain study of both language and literature together with aspects of society or culture (English 2012; Gupta and Katsarska 2009; Hultgren 2016), often taught within a department or school of philology or languages. English Language at undergraduate level focuses on proficiency in English as a foreign or additional language, often alongside knowledge of Anglophone history, culture and politics. Increasingly, curricula around the globe are also taking account of the reality that most communication through English is between non-native speakers (Mauranen 2012; Xiaoqiong and Jing 2013).

While not specifically part of ELS, the desire or need for proficiency in English language has projected English in universities worldwide beyond the English department and into other subject areas where qualifications are increasingly being taught in English. In Europe, the growth in undergraduate and master's courses taught through the medium of English since the beginning of the century has been charted by Wächter and Maiworm (2014). The number has grown from 725 in 2002 to 2389 in 2007 and 8089 in 2014. Academics more often find themselves needing to use English in their teaching and/or their research, thereby contributing to the increasing demand for a working knowledge of the language which enables them to participate in the Anglophone-dominated education arena. While there is much to criticise about the dominance of English as an academic lingua franca (Lillis and Curry 2010), those students who study through it do have access to an additional linguistic and cultural lens. For most, its importance lies in having access to more resources related to their subject, but it may also contribute an additional view on their education more generally through the ability to critically consider the role of language and culture more broadly. Students, both Anglophone and non-Anglophone, rather than simply using the language, can use the opportunity of studying the English language and studying through the English language to reflect on views around the hegemony of English internationally, and/or to reflect on usage in their own and other contexts.

This brief snapshot of ELS within the university sector highlights the variety of conceptions internationally of the subject matter and the reasons behind some of the confusion about what exactly ELS is. However, it also begins to illustrate how it is well positioned to

develop not just subject-specific knowledge and skills but also less tangible qualities of the type often listed as the generic or transferable skills so favoured by governments (Collini 2012; McMahon and Oketch 2013). Two of these transferable skills particularly relevant here are:

- the ability to assess the merits and demerits of contrasting theories and explanations, including those of other disciplines.
- the ability to think and reason critically, to evaluate evidence and argumentation, and to form a critical judgement of one's own work as well as the work of others, both in academic and non-academic domains. (HEA 2011: 6)

These come from the English Language Subject Benchmark document and help to encapsulate the current relevance of ELS to society. In the discussion of current critical issues and future directions that follows, it is these wider attributes that are the focus.

### Current critical issues and topics

In this section, I review a number of research areas in ELS in relation to the curriculum choices that they permit and their influence on pedagogy. The choice of components for degrees in ELS is broad and continuing to evolve. The critical issue then is: what should be studied and why? The UK QAA subject benchmark statements for English (that is, English considered more broadly, not specifically English language) indicate that

The study of English language addresses all types and varieties of English, including national, regional, social, historical and contemporary forms. Students investigate the structure, function and use of varieties of English, and the influence of historical, social, geographical, cultural, political, stylistic and other contextual factors.

(QAA 2015: 6)

This breadth of both historical and geographical sweep alongside the ability to analyse personally relevant linguistic and multimodal contexts using a variety of means is arguably where current intellectual concerns cross with the traditional grounding in phonetics, phonology, pragmatics, syntax and so on. To narrow the focus, I look at two of the major influences affecting language study. The first, is headed 'Language, text and technology'. The ability to communicate using a variety of (new) media has influenced language practices, and the use of computers to collect and analyse data has expanded the questions that can be posed and the range and quantity of evidence that can be interrogated. Secondly, 'English language and power' highlights the increased significance that critical examination of language and power in the personal and private sphere, as well as the public and political, is having. I refer to this as a critical-social turn in ELS. It brings together work on the varieties of Englishes from an individual to an international level, together with concepts of ownership and identity over time and space, and the social, cultural, political and economic consequences of Englishes past, present and future. These two developments within ELS help to indicate how it accords with the focus noted earlier on contemporary relevance and the capacity to understand the world from a variety of perspectives (QAA 2015: 15). There are many other 'current' trends and developments, but I use these two specifically to address the aim I set for this chapter of justifying why ELS should be studied and researched in HE in the 21st century.

*English language, text and technology*

Much undergraduate training to enable analysis and reflection on language starts with elements of segmentation – phonology, grammar and lexis. This is where ELS is most closely allied to linguistics. However, the linguistic skills of analysis and the metalanguage acquired are applied within ELS to understanding texts in context, whether written, spoken or multi-modal. Traditionally the application of English language study focused on texts in old versions of English, a practice that Cameron (2012) likened to the philological study of English which helped at its foundation to establish intellectual rigour. This has now been largely replaced by analyses of more contemporary literary and non-literary texts. Significantly, both the means of analysis and the focus of the analyses have evolved with texts such as courtroom discourse, web pages and tweets being as likely to be examined as literature.

The application of various technologies over the last 70 years or so has influenced research questions and the choices of texts, and subsequently influenced the subject matter in the ELS curriculum. An example is work on spoken language. The ability to record speech is arguably one of the most profound technological changes in language analysis, and one that is now often taken for granted. The large-scale study of naturally-occurring speech began in Britain with the Survey of English Usage launched in 1959. A significant output from this was Svartvik and Quirk's (1980) *A Corpus of English Conversation* which consists of over 700 pages, 170,000 words, of conversation orthographically transcribed and marked for prosodic features. Along with the prosodic information, each grammatical category was separately recorded on slips of paper and filed at University College London for the use of researchers from across the world. In 1975, academics at Lund University, Sweden, began the massive process of making all the information from the Survey of Spoken English available in machine-readable form on magnetic tape for those researchers who were beginning to have access to computers. For researchers of English language, spoken and written, this was the beginning of access to large amounts of naturally-occurring data and a move away from descriptions of the language based largely on introspection or small data sets. The availability of this data and other later corpora influenced both research and the wider community, particularly the embedding within educational contexts of an understanding and valuing of variety and difference, and the relationship between dialects and standard English (Crystal 1987).

Moving forward to the first decades of the current century, research at the University of Nottingham, for example, has taken forward the work of the Survey of English Usage, particularly with regard to speech. Powerful computers store, enable and enhance the interrogation of huge amounts of data. Researchers continued the work on aspects of speech, but rather than concentrate on dialect or prosody, their focus is grammar and specifically how the grammar of speech and writing differ (see also O'Keefe and Mark, this volume). Students studying English language now benefit from and work within the shifting understandings of language that are emerging, understandings that chime with the needs of the 21st-century citizen to work with uncertainty and ambiguity. Researchers, teachers and students are now able to appreciate that there are rules governing speech that are different from the rules governing written language. The dialogic, real-time, social and interpersonal constraints of conversation do not usually give rise to fully formed sentences. Rather, '[w]hat seems more important is the production of adequate communicative units and the taking of turns' (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 165). One of the outcomes of research on spoken and written grammar for English language curricula is an appreciation of difference. Variety is both celebrated and normalised. So-called 'non-standard language' is as interesting, if not more so, than standard English.

This type of work is enabled by the collection and description of huge amounts of data via corpus studies (see also Philip, this volume). The development of computerised corpora is also facilitating the study and comparison of various other Englishes, particularly via the International Corpus of English (ICE). This project, which began in the 1990s, illustrates the increasing attention paid to Englishes in different parts of the world, with currently 26 projects to collect, analyse and make available for non-commercial purposes English from countries around the world (ICE 2016). The ICE also illustrates the recognition of internal diversity within Englishes through its corpus design protocol. Corpora for this type of comparison are designed to contain a variety of text types, both spoken and written. Speech samples include spontaneous face-to-face and telephone conversations, classroom interaction, scripted and unscripted speeches, and news broadcasts, while written texts are drawn from both private and public writings, fiction and non-fiction. Many corpora now also comprise language used on a variety of digital platforms. These may be designed to focus on discrete interaction contexts (e.g. text messaging, Tagg 2012; micro blogging, Zappavigna 2012) or to enable comparisons of the features of a variety of digital media including discussion boards, blogs, SMS texts and emails (Knight et al. 2014).

These studies provide evidence of the ability of people to be creative with language and the constant evolution of language that is taking place. The point here is that variety in language form and use is now given parity in research with so-called standard English. Therefore, most students studying ELS are exposed to variety and diversity in language not as a deviation from an arbitrary standard, but as a communicative tool for interacting in the world. They learn to evaluate evidence and arguments about English and reason critically to assess theories and explanations in a context where complexity and difference are the norm.

### *English language and power*

The above discussion of the role of technologies in widening the application of ELS has focused largely on the ability to search large amounts of data, and the understandings of linguistic varieties within Englishes that this has helped bring to light. This section moves away from a methodological focus to an ideological one. The two, however, are not separate as technology is a tool used in uncovering issues of power within language. The divide is therefore a convenience for dealing with broader aspects of ELS in HE today. Briefly touched upon above, and relevant here, is the potential of varieties of English, particularly accents, to be used to socially categorise a speaker. ELS is uniquely placed to analyse and challenge any stigmatisation or discrimination against people based on how they speak. In many uses of language the exercise of power, from persuasion to control, is not overt and it is the ability to interrogate language choices which is particularly powerful in helping students to evaluate evidence and arguments within and beyond the subject matter of ELS. Below I focus mainly on research involving critical analysis at the level of text and of linguistic practices and illustrate how it can enable students to recognising the power of language.

The focus on power in language studies in the UK has been closely associated with the work of Fowler and colleagues, and Fairclough and colleagues beginning in the 1970s. Fowler et al (1979) in *Language and Control* foregrounded the role of linguistic analysis in understanding the exercise of power in the developing field of critical linguistics. Fairclough (1989) in *Language and Power* presented a more radical view wherein CDA

emphasises ideology rather than (just) persuasion and manipulation. It views discourse as a stake in social struggle as well as a site of social struggle . . . including class struggle.



It [*Language and Power*] sets as an objective for CDA raising people's consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, as a step towards social emancipation.

(Fairclough 2014: 2)

While the details and methodology of Fairclough's approach have not found favour with all discourse analysts, critical or otherwise (Blommaert 2008; Slembrouck 2001; Widdowson 1995), the significance of language as a means of understanding, exercising or accessing power has been widely taken up in various guises throughout applied linguistics and ELS.

For students, the critical dimension has expanded the types of text which are analysed. Everyday language across a variety of media is studied alongside more traditional literary texts. A particularly powerful notion is that of reader positioning: how texts are constructed to naturalise a particular view, to encourage the reader or hearer to accept the positioning put forward by the writer or speaker. The power of the media to position readers and shape public and private discourse is an obvious example of where critical language analysis may be applied, but one where researcher bias needs to be guarded against. Coffin and O'Halloran (2005), in analysing media texts, advocate applying more than one methodological approach. They used corpus analysis and systemic functional text analysis to reach conclusions about the subtle and persuasive uses of language in *The Sun* (a UK tabloid newspaper with a large circulation) on the topic of European Union migrants. They built up a picture of how certain expressions become imbued with particular connotations for *The Sun* readership over time. As a result, they contend that particular words and phrases which on their own are not value laden take on particular semantic prosodies for a particular readership on the basis of past associations. Learning to systematically analyse language using a variety of methods provides students with the means to approach the everyday texts they encounter in a more critical and analytical way. More recent research on the dynamics of online interaction on Facebook explores how users contribute to and circumscribe the social space in which their communications take place and importantly how their views shape the kind of political debate that they see, not unlike that of regular newspaper readers. Tagg et al. (2017) argue that the internet bubbles in which users of social media have their own views reinforced is a phenomenon that needs to be more widely understood in order for people to evaluate the information that they are receiving, particularly in an era of so-called fake news. The ability to critically interrogate texts is a valuable transferable skill not just in employment terms, but also in enhancing students' capacity to become reliably informed members of the public, contributing to the life of their community.

Another contribution relates ethnography and the study of social practices to the study of language. Now often referred to as Linguistic Ethnography, it grew out of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which moved away from considering literacy as a set of mental process such as decoding information, making inferences and so on. Rather, in NLS readers and writers are seen as taking part in social and cultural activities or practices in which literacy is a part. By viewing literacy as a social practice and embedded within multiple practices, it is possible to problematise what counts as literacy. The question of whose literacies are valued and whose are marginalised or resisted is a central concern (Street 2012: 27). This 'practices' perspective has been applied to literacies in HE with Lea and Street's (1998) research into academic literacies in HE bringing into focus the deficit view of literacy, in which the 'literacy problem' is located with the student while no account is taken of the social or institutional context and the relations of power and authority in which academic literacies are practised. Lillis (2003) moves academic literacies toward a theoretically grounded pedagogic approach, building

from a model based on ‘critique’ towards one based on ‘design’. She highlights the need for students to understand that they are writing within institutional settings where power and authority are unequally distributed. Building on this understanding, she argues that students should be enabled to draw on approved bodies of work and models of writing, but also to move it forward in directions of their own choosing, to contribute to new designs for academic writing. The effective closing down of certain ways of contributing in the academy is not confined to students. Lillis et al. (2010), through ethnographic, bibliographic and corpus studies, have illustrated the ways in which scholars from non-Anglophone contexts are also disadvantaged by the academic literacy contexts and norms in which they are expected to write. This is closely tied up with the power of English as a global language.

The role of the English language in global politics and economics has prompted much polemical writing. Phillipson (1992) is particularly associated with the view that the spread of English is linguistic imperialism; that is, nations such as the USA and the UK encourage the spread of the English language in order to exercise power over less powerful nations and therefore increase their economic and political power. Samuelson and Freedman (2010), for example, chart the change to English-medium education in Rwanda, and Gray (2012) indicates the role of the quasi-governmental British Council in this switch. Such moves privilege English over indigenous languages, thereby diminishing their role and promoting that of English. Studies also indicate that schooling is negatively affected by the use of a language relatively unknown to the child, and Williams (2011) provides evidence of language policy adversely affecting educational attainment in a variety of African countries. While the degree to which governmental influence is responsible for the rise of English is disputed, the role of businesses is well documented. In a globalised economic system, the use of a single dominant language facilitates the work of multi- or transnational companies. A recent study by Lockwood and Forey (2016) uses CDA and systemic functional linguistics to capture some of the difficulties that this creates in virtual meetings held by multilingual teams. Their analysis demonstrates the exercise of power and dominance through English and the effect on opening up or shutting down discussion. Consideration of the political and economic impact of the English language is now an integral part of many ELS curricula (Hewings and Tagg 2012).

As noted above, academia has embraced the use of English as a lingua franca, particularly for publishing. This not only may disadvantage those forced to publish in a language that is not their own but also influences research agendas in favour of the linguistically dominant contexts of the USA and UK (Lillis et al. 2010). Alongside scholarly publication through English, there is a trend towards increasing use of English in education itself at all levels. The dominance of English as an HE subject sees the language studied alone or in combination with literature and Anglophone cultures in many universities across the world. Gupta and Katsarska’s (2009) volume on English in Eastern Europe illustrates well the variety within English, American and Irish Studies and the motivations behind its popularity. Gupta’s (2016) work on English Studies in HE in India concludes that motivations of economic advancement based on knowledge of English outweigh desires to learn about Anglophone culture or literature, a situation that is at odds with the outlook of many of the academics teaching the subject. Hadley (2015) draws attention particularly to the growth of teaching positions in English for Academic Purposes in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone institutions. English as an academic lingua franca also enables the establishment of branch campuses of Anglophone HE institutions across the world. In Malaysia, for example, three Australian and one British university have set up campuses offering a variety of degree courses (Malaysia University Portal n.d.).

The growth in English-medium HE instruction can be linked to the forces of globalisation and economics discussed above and is in part an attempt by both Anglophone and

non-Anglophone institutions to attract students from across the globe through instruction delivered in the world's current lingua franca. Students and scholars across the world are not only reading research literature in English, but are publishing PhD theses, articles and books in English. Siiner (2010), in a discussion of university courses taught through the medium of English, writes of anxiety about the impact of English on relatively smaller languages such as Danish, particularly in terms of domain-loss relating to scientific language. Hultgren (2016) provides statistics on the number of enrolments on BA programmes in Denmark in 2013 which demonstrates that English Studies attracted nearly five times as many students as the next most popular language, French. While there is concern about certain languages, the use of English as a lingua franca may alternatively be seen as a benefit in that it may facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange across multiple languages. Researching and teaching about the position and impact of the use of English around the world, as well as of the power of language in general to influence and persuade, to close down or open up choices are vital understandings for citizens of the future. The emphasis on the critical and the social within ELS today can contribute to those understandings.

### Future directions

Much of the above is relevant in any discussion of future directions for ELS. Here I single out just three topics, from the many possible, to outline briefly: English as a lingua franca, superdiversity, and multimodality. First is the growing emphasis on English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an academic lingua franca (EALF) as a distinct variety. ELF refers to communication in English between speakers with different first languages, mostly between those who are additional language speakers of English. Its importance rests on the fact that there is more use of English between speakers of various other languages than between so-called 'native' speakers and others. Graddol (2006: 87) described the teaching and learning of ELF 'as probably the most radical and controversial approach to emerge in recent years'. Two significant implications are firstly that changes to the English language are emerging as a result of the huge numbers of English as an additional language speakers using the language, and secondly that the native speaker is therefore no longer in the same position of power vis-à-vis English. Scholars, particularly in European universities, have researched the characteristics of ELF (Jenkins 2000), including significant corpus investigation (Mauranen 2012; Seidlhofer 2012) and have applied their findings to the teaching of English. However, the concept of ELF is one that is vigorously debated (O'Regan 2014) and touches on many of the issues of power and ideology in English usage, together with its global status. Given the global reach of English, its potential to enable communication between many different language speakers, but also its association with forces of globalisation that favour richer nations, debates of this kind are likely to continue. An alternative trajectory sees different varieties of English become more separate and mutually incomprehensible.

Secondly, the notion that languages are fixed and bounded by particular geographical or national regions is the subject of much critical questioning by researchers (e.g. Blackledge and Creese 2008; Garcia 2009; Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). The concept of a discrete national language linked with national identity is viewed by many as imposing an ideology, bound up with the creation of new European nation states in the 18th century, on our understandings today. Ethnographic research into language in use, particularly in urban contexts where people from different cultures with different linguistic repertoires are mixing, is revealing the complexity of communication and the possibility of divorcing it from its fixed association with nations and national identity. Indeed, Simpson (2016: 2) notes examples of

public statements by politicians in which the disturbance to ‘notions of linguistic fixity and boundedness’ are linked with undermining ‘social homogeneity and even national cohesion’. ELS scholars (Blackledge et al. 2017) frame this in term of the sociological concept of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), where the mixing of very large numbers of people of different cultures, religions, ethnicities and linguistic backgrounds makes existing sociological and linguistic categorisation of little explanatory value. Seen as a meaning-making resource in contexts of diversity, language (spoken, written and multimodal) is less a set of traditional rules and more a functional system for getting things done and for expressing feelings. The value for ELS students of this more fluid approach to language and communication is one of broadening perspectives. As it is a sufficiently distinct theoretical position from that which is likely to be held by many potential students, it can help to foster ‘the ability to assess the merits and demerits of contrasting theories and explanations’ as outlined by the HEA benchmark statements (2011: 16).

Finally, within ELS, language is increasingly studied multimodally alongside other semiotic resources as understandings of the communication process expand. Some might be surprised that multimodality is considered an area for the future, as it has been part of communications research and teaching for many years (see Ravelli, this volume). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) highlighted the growing necessity of visual literacy alongside traditional print literacy, the pictorial as well as the verbal, in order to function effectively in the workplace, and Goodman (1996) made the case for understanding ‘visual English’ as part of ELS. Over two decades on, the pace at which semiotics is combining aspects of the visual and the verbal is increasing greatly. The ubiquity of online communication and the speed of delivery have increased the requirements for ways of conveying affect more concisely alongside information. Emojis in SMS texts, clip art in emails, combinations of different scripts, and font and colour changes in computer-mediated communications are all worthy of study towards a greater understanding of how English alongside, and often interwoven with, other languages functions in different environments. Multimodal texts often rely for their impact on the unusual, memorable or unexpected and therefore are often studied alongside the concept of creativity. Analysis of such texts develops critical appreciation of creative language use, and focuses on the techniques and skills which underpin verbal art. For students, this can provide structured opportunities to try out different forms of writing, to tackle unfamiliar genres and crucially to see multimodal verbal art and language use more generally as a product that they too can design. Analysis and production of multimodal texts can give students opportunities to play with language multimodally in order to entertain, shock, inform and persuade. Through such participation, students can also start to reflect on the messages that they are consuming, to analyse their form, function and impact (Demjén and Seargeant 2016; Hann and Lillis 2016).

## Conclusion

ELS cannot lay claim to being the only subject that promotes generic skills such as critical reflection and critical judgement, evaluation of evidence and argumentation, or understandings of the individual, society and sociopolitical contexts. But it does have a very strong analytical framework with which to interrogate and critique the role of English and communication through English. Its research agendas have significant relevance in current societies and feed into the vibrant subject matter at school and university level. Work within this field provides academics and students with opportunities to systematically analyse and evaluate the texts that surround us and shape society: understanding the history of English,

the politics that underpins its past and current evolution, and the value systems it contains and contributes to. ELS can promote consideration of concepts such as plurilingualism and the porosity of linguistic boundaries, as well as teaching how to critically analyse and create spoken, written and multimodal texts. Some of the knowledge and the perspectives gained from studying ELS can also be woven into teaching where ‘English’ means literature, creative writing or learning an additional language. For example, the tools of stylistics or conversation analysis are relevant to those wishing to truly understand dialogue in all its contextual variation. Those learning the English language can be challenged by discussion and choices of text to consider issues such as linguistic hegemony or the appropriateness of code-mixing. As researchers and educators in the field of English language, we are faced with making selections from the rich array of ELS materials, and I would argue that keeping in mind the wider goals of an educated citizen should influence those choices and maintain relevance for the future.

### Further reading

- Carter, R. (2004) *Language and Creativity: The Art of Common Talk*. London: Routledge. This introduces the systematic corpus study of conversation and argues that creativity is a feature of everyday language deployed by ordinary people in diverse social contexts.
- English, J. F. (2012) *The Global Future of English Studies*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. Written initially from an American perspective, this volume explores the history and future of English Studies including literature, language, creative writing and cultural studies. Taking data from around the world, James English challenges the view of the subject as in crisis and focuses on the transformations occurring to the subject globally.
- Hewings, A., L. Prescott and P. Seargeant (eds) (2016) *Futures for English Studies: Teaching Language, Literature and Creative Writing in Higher Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. This volume brings together international scholars to consider the future of English as a discipline and its component parts. The strength of English Studies is illustrated in terms of its traditional breadth and depth, and also its readiness to adapt, experiment and engage with other subjects.
- Hewings, A. and C. Tagg (eds) (2012) *The Politics of English: Conflict, Competition, Co-Existence*. Abingdon: Routledge. This undergraduate textbook explores policies and practices that affect the use and position of English both nationally and internationally and in combination with other languages.

### Related topics

- The idea of English
- Literacy in English: literacies in Englishes
- Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
- The politics of English
- Multimodal English.

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