House work and Student Work: A Study in Cross-cultural Understanding

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1 Introduction

The title of this volume refers to translation, language acquisition and intercultural communication, and to living with more than one language. In a way, our contribution has to do with all of these, but from our particular perspective of textual pragmatics.

Textual pragmatics is, of course, a particularly appropriate topic for this volume, and so is the text we have taken for analysis. For it is a recent paper by Juliane House herself, entitled "Developing pragmatic competence in English as a lingua franca" (House 2002). What we propose to do is to consider what kind of reaction this paper gives rise to among a group of its readers, readers in fact who are themselves developing such a competence in the language, and to speculate a little on the general question of how readers assign significance to texts in different ways. Such a question, of course, involves the kinds of issue that arise in cross-cultural pragmatics and translation. The readers whose responses we are examining were asked to read the paper (we shall for convenience refer to as 'developing pragmatic competence' or 'DPC' in what follows) from their own point of view as students and prospective teachers of English. They were therefore encouraged to interpret the text, and render its significance in the light of their own cultural assumptions. In this sense, their responses can be taken as various translated versions of the original.

2 The pragmatics of written text

We begin with general points about the nature of written text, and how meaning gets inscribed in it, and derived from it. What appears on the page as a well-formed textual product has a complex pragmatic history. Now that we have electronic means of composition at our disposal, this history is usually effaced, leaving no trace of the false starts, the crossings out, the scribbled inserts that in manuscript or typescript bear witness to what T. S. Eliot refers to as "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings". No doubt there are writers with the gift of extempore eloquence who, like Shakespeare (so it is said) never blot a line, but writing, even that which is apparently effortless in its simplicity and eloquence, is often only achieved by strenuous wrestling. In a letter to his publisher about his novel *1984*, George Orwell made the comment: "[...] of course the rough draft is always a ghastly mess having little relation to the finished result." But even after producing what appeared to be the finished result, Orwell then made a ghastly mess of it: for on the first page of the typescript of the novel almost every word is crossed out and changed.

Such a survival of early drafts is unusual, even among those who claim the status of verbal art for their writing. Those of us who write on more mundane matters are unlikely to keep an archive of our earlier efforts. Even in the pre-computer days when we perforce produced records of the tortuous pragmatic process of trying to make sense for ourselves and our supposed reader, they were not revealed. Far from it: the evidence was suppressed as somehow incriminating, and our earlier drafts went into the paper basket. So what readers are presented with, then and now, is a finished article. And all those first thoughts, those points that seemed so significant at the time and jotted down for inclusion in some appropriate place, all those lines of thought not followed up are all edited out of the final version and are then gone for ever. And in finalising it we impose an arbitrary closure on the process of composition. The paper in print is one outcome of this process, and it gives no indication of the variant papers that might have been but never saw the light of day.

Although what we have is the finished article in the sense that it is a completed and well-formed text, in a pragmatic sense it is not really finished at all. Indeed, from the reader's point of view, it has not even started. The text presents us with the partial trace of a discourse made orderly for the record. But the text is in itself inert and has to be activated by reading, whereby a discourse is derived from it. So not only does a text have a complex pragmatic past, it has a complex pragmatic future too. It gives rise to all kinds of interpretative reaction. No matter how carefully the text may have been constructed to record the discourse intentions of the writer, readers will inevitably place their own construction upon it, changing the emphasis, making their own connections, and sometimes indeed reading back into the text what the writer thought had been edited out in the final version.

Looked at from this pragmatic point of view, the meaning of a text is a function of the different reactions to it. Naturally there will be some degree of consensus based on the common knowledge of the language and conventions for its use, and there will generally be a degree of convergence between what the writer means by a text and what the text means to the reader. But writers cannot control interpretation or retain custody over their meanings. Printed texts are public property and their significance depends on how they are understood. Whether or not a particular interpretation matches what the writer intended is, even if discoverable (and writers do not always have access to their original intentions) a trivial matter. It is what they are taken to mean, in the passive, that really counts. Writers do not, of course, always remain passive. They frequently complain of distortion and write indignant responses (we have done it ourselves often enough), in an effort to restore their intended sense. But our indignation will not prevent readers engaging in the entirely normal pragmatic process of meaning appropriation.

Another way of looking at texts, especially perhaps academic articles, is to think of them as interim outputs of a more general discourse process and as such continually subject to revision. The article that appears properly edited and corrected as a publication is a final version only in the sense that it has been prepared for press. But it is not therefore complete in any conceptual sense. Convention requires that it takes on a well-formed and finished appearance. But this appearance is deceptive: it imposes a kind of closure on the shifting, inconclusive and fugitive nature of intellectual enquiry, it misrepresents its essential instability. The inconclusiveness and instability then assert themselves in the reading. If one thinks of academic articles as transitional phenomena of this kind, it would make sense to continue the revision process beyond publication, explicitly reformulating and developing ideas into different versions and variants of the 'same' paper by taking reader reactions into critical account.

Of course, you would still need to be selective about which reader reactions to take into account and which particular points their interpretation focuses upon you would wish to clarify or pursue. Nevertheless, the idea of working out one's ideas by a process of reactive and recurrent revision has considerable appeal. Whether Juliane House would wish to write a variant of the paper of hers we focus on in reaction to how it is read by this particular group of readers is another matter. But it is worth a thought.

3   The readers of the text

Who, then, were these particular readers, and what were their reactions?

At the English Department of the University of Vienna, there is a course entitled 'EFL Methodology' that all students who have chosen the teacher education option ('Lehramtsstudium') are required to take. These are students in their third or fourth (or nth) year of study. The courses they have taken so far have focused on the language as such ('Sprachübungen' as well as a practical phonetics course, 'Sprechpraktikum'), linguistics (mainly descriptive), literature, 'Landeskunde' and a mere two hours of practical introduction to language teaching ('Fachdidaktik'), spread over two semesters. One of the present authors, BS, sometimes teaches the Methodology course, and she regards it as a challenge to get the participants acquainted with as many teaching-related aspects of applied linguistics as possible - a daunting task for two hours a week over one term.

Considering the curriculum of the 'Lehramtsstudium' sketched above, it is not surprising that students have, generally speaking, imbibed the predominantly purist normative attitude to English prevalent in the department, and have thoroughly assimilated the notion that as far as their own proficiency is concerned, they are expected to get as close to native-speakers as possible - with rewards waiting for those who do well and sanctions for those who do not. Given this background, the Methodology course as taught by BS thus comes, to put it mildly, as a surprise to many of these students: suddenly, and in contradiction with many of the messages they have been getting so far, some well-established certainties are called into question, such as the native speaker of English as the model to emulate and the a priori 'superior' teacher, the relevance of 'authentic' materials, the axiomatic primacy of communicative language teaching, the proscription of L1 and translation in the English lesson, and so on. And then, to top it all, students are asked to read this paper by the infidel Juliane House, which overtly challenges such orthodox ideas, asked to summarise and comment on her arguments, her data and analysis, and on the significance of the pedagogical-didactic consequences she draws from her observations for their own future teaching. The main question, then, is how students who have on the whole been studying in a very native-speaker oriented department for several years react to the heretical ideas put forward in DPC, and in particular what they make of them as future teachers of English.

In the following, we report on how we read the essays 48 of our students wrote in the summer term 2002 in reaction to 'Developing Pragmatic Competence'. All students gave their permission to use extracts from their essays for publication and to be identified by their first names when we quote from their papers. We hope the author will enjoy this mediated insight into the reactions of a group of readers who must surely be a particularly relevant target audience for what she has to say.

4   Reader reactions in profile: KeyWords

But how do you get a handle on what 48 students said in the 130 pages or so that they produced? Well, one way is to approach the matter quantitatively and ask the computer. The software programme Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1997) is an "integrated suite of programs for looking at how words behave in texts" (Scott 1997 [Manual]). Among many amazing things it allows you to do with texts, it has a tool called 'KeyWords'. As explained in the manual,

> KeyWords are those whose frequency is unusually high in comparison with some norm [...] "key" words are not the most frequent words [...] but the words which are most **unusually** frequent in [a particular text]. Key words usually give a reasonably good clue to what the text is about. A word which is *positively* key occurs *more* often than would be expected by chance in comparison with the reference corpus. A word which is *negatively* key occurs *less* often than would be expected by chance in comparison with the reference corpus.

In a KeyWord list produced by Wordsmith Tools, words appear sorted according to how outstanding their frequencies of occurrence are. Those near the top are outstandingly frequent and thus provide clues as to what a text deals with.

Having prepared electronic text files of both the original version of House (2002) and the discussion part of the students' essays, we ran the KeyWord programme over them (with the 1-million word sampler of the British National Corpus as the bigger reference corpus) and got the following results: For DPC, 108 positive key words were identified, and 272 for the students' essays. What interests us here are the words that were most 'key' (and thus most indicative of what the texts are about), so it suffices to look at the first 15:

Original Version	Students' Comments
1 ELF	1 ENGLISH
2 DISCOURSE	2 ELF
3 ENGLISH	3 LANGUAGE
4 INTERACTANTS	4 SPEAKERS
5 PARTICIPANTS	5 NATIVE
6 SPEAKERS	6 TEACHING
7 INTERACTIONS	7 CULTURAL
8 LINGUA	8 PRONUNCIATION
9 FRANCA	9 LINGUA
10 INTERACTION	10 FRANCA
11 DATA	11 HOUSE'S
12 LANGUAGE	12 LEARNERS
13 GAMBITS	13 COMMUNICATION
14 BEHAVIOUR	14 COMMUNICATIVE
15 STUDY	15 PRAGMATIC

Clearly, both Juliane House (JH) and our students (Ss) are concerned with English as a lingua franca (though for JH, ELF comes first and for Ss ENGLISH). But apart from this obvious overlap, it is clear that JH is indeed primarily concerned with ELF DISCOURSE, how INTERACTANTS as PARTICIPANTS, or SPEAKERS, in INTERACTIONS in a LINGUA FRANCA engage in INTERACTION that provides DATA showing how they use the LANGUAGE, e.g. in the form of GAMBITS to engage in interactional BEHAVIOUR: very much a report on a STUDY.

Ss, students of the LANGUAGE of which the model speakers are typically NATIVE, are particularly concerned with TEACHING, with CULTURAL aspects and with PRONUNCIATION. They pick up ideas about the notion of a LINGUA FRANCA from HOUSE'S paper and discuss what these mean for LEARNERS striving for COMMUNICATION, and which COMMUNICATIVE and PRAGMATIC aspects seem particularly relevant to them.

Although obviously such a KeyWord analysis can only give a very general profile of different conceptual perspectives, it does serve as a useful indicator of what the readers made of the text: which issues they focussed on as of significance to them. Our next step was to look at how these issues were taken up by particular readers. What follows is a selection of those reactions which seemed to us to be especially revealing of the different ways in which the text of DPC can be interpreted.

5   Reader reactions in particular

As might be expected, given that they have been schooled to think exclusively in terms of native speaker reference norms, many students were struck by the novelty of the ELF idea, and the article certainly had the desired effect of raising their awareness of its potential pedagogic significance:

> 'Concerning my own attitude towards the role of English as a lingua franca I have to admit that I have not really thought about its meaning for language teaching before. We were always told that we have to learn English - and nobody mentioned that we will probably just acquire a variety of English.' {Simone}
>
> 'One of the effects this article had on me and my reflections linked to being a future teacher is to raise my awareness about English as a lingua franca in language teaching in general. Up to now I have never really reflected upon this issue and I have now realised its importance, since the future of language teaching will have to point in this direction. So I learned from this text not to see English any longer as being helpful to talk to native speakers, but especially in interactions with non-native speakers all over the world. Of particular interest for me is to see that this question does not have a great impact on the grammatical level of English and teaching forms, but rather on the pragmatic level and how to negotiate meaning.' {Bettina}

But reactions were not confined to this kind of dispassionate evaluation of the idea. The paper by Juliane House not only engages the interest of its readers, but their feelings as well. There is an affective side to their reactions. Here after all is somebody in authority turning against the established creed and encouraging rebellion, saying that there is no need to agonise about not conforming to norms of correctness hitherto held sacrosanct. It is stirring stuff.

> 'As far as my future career as an English teacher is concerned House's essay succeeds to relieve me in many respects. I am a non-native English speaker and will, hopefully, be a non-native English teacher; or to make it sound more positively, I will be an ELF teacher, an expression which does not point to a deficiency right from the start! I often have been thinking: Am I - when I become an English teacher - second choice by nature, never ever reaching the status of a native? How hard I will try I will never "acquire" a native speaker pronunciation, a native speaker command of the language! And here is Juliane House saying that aiming at these issues is misplaced, counter-productive, at least not central for ELF teaching. What a relief!' {Sabine1}

A *cri de coeur* at being relieved of the burden of striving for parity with native speakers which must do the author of DPC good as well! And in the recognition that the difference of ELF does not imply deficiency, there is relief too from the sense of inadequacy that Peter Medgyes expresses with such paradoxical eloquence:

> [...] we suffer from an inferiority complex caused by glaring defects in our knowledge of English. We are in constant distress as we realize how little we know about the language we are supposed to teach. (Medgyes 1994: 40)

One of the most appealing things about the proposals in House (2002) is that they provide an escape from this constant distress and the continual inhibiting fear of failure:

> 'In my experience, teachers have always used to strictly teach grammar and pronunciation rules. This was conducted in a manner that pupils were afraid of raising their hands to say a word or ask a question; but what is the use of learning a language when everybody is afraid of pronouncing one

word. In this respect, I fully agree with House that teachers should enable and support - not direct - the students to remain true to their personalities.' {Teresa}

Relief is not, however, the only feeling expressed. There is also a sense of resentment at the kind of teaching students have been subjected to. If the achievement of native speaker proficiency is not the be-all and end-all, or even especially desirable, why then are students forced persistently into trying in vain to achieve it?

'I would strongly suggest to present her article to those who are, at our Department of English, responsible for the 'terror' of the Sprechpraktikum and the curriculum of the "Lehramtsstudium", in which the importance of literary studies is, to my mind, highly overestimated.' {Susanne}

Other reactions are not so much resentful as rueful.

'I have to confess that being a student at the University of Vienna, which seems to be hardly influenced by the ELF studies in its way of looking at the teaching aims, and having gone through the 'Sprechpraktikum' where I was just told that no English is acceptable than that resembling native speakers' pronunciation (but who speaks RP over there??) I somehow feel that I am not really made sensitive to looking at English as a lingua franca up to now. During my studies I was always told to try to behave as native like as possible, regarding both pronunciation and the conversational behaviour, to be a good model for learners. Therefore British or American Culture and Literature play an important role.' {Angelika}

'I personally find it interesting that the focus in ELF teaching is not on a particular cultural and literary profile or on a native speaker pronunciation norm, because this is somehow the reverse thing which English students at the university of Vienna, for example, are supposed to do. English students are drilled (in the Sprechpraktikum) to improve their pronunciation to make it sound as native-like as possible and English students are also supposed to focus on a particular cultural and literary profile by being able to opt for a course focused either on an American cultural and literary profile or a British profile. In this sense, concerns that are not central for ELF teaching, namely teaching a particular cultural and literary profile and a native speaker pronunciation norm, are at the same time concerns of significant importance to a student of English.' {Martina2}

The students understand, and generally take kindly to, the proposition that learning English does not necessarily involve identifying with its native speakers by aping their language or adopting their culture. The author's point about the difference between language for communication and language for identification is well taken.

'What I liked about Juliane House's article is the positive view on English as a lingua franca. For the majority of ordinary language teachers it would probably be intolerable to accept that speakers of English as a L2 usually do not speak the glorified standard version of British or American English but a version that is marked by their own speaking habits.' {Simone}

'Whenever I talk English I still feel Austrian not American or Australian or Canadian. So I do not identify with the country whose tongue I use to communicate. It is simply an instrumentally opportune medium of communication, not a cultural symbol to identify with. Even if the English gentleman is more polite than I am, I'm not as polite as he is even though I use the same language […] It is important, as House says that you remain true to your personality, your style, wit, humor and social charm, you just should be able to transfer it into the language needed. That is what I as a teacher should get across. The students do not learn English for me or for understanding Shakespeare they learn it to be able to find their way all over the world.' {Julia3}

'Why should one adopt the culture of a country because one uses its language? (What's more, ELF is not 'their' English, is it?) As Juliane House states in her essay, since the language is only used instrumentally and not as a language for identification the learners should be empowered to remain true to their own personality. They should use their individual discourse styles, humour and social charm. So why not stay one's own social persona in the medium of English language and stating, "I'm talking English but I am still an Austrian. I speak English but not yours!"?' {Angelika}

The students then clearly react very favourably to the idea that learning English does not have to be a matter of confinement to linguistic correctness or to cultural conventions of use. Such confinement, they readily recognise, can impede individual expression. It can also actually reduce the effectiveness of communication. The following comments interestingly, and unwittingly, relate what Juliane says about ELF to what Debbie Cameron says about the way conventions are imposed on speakers to reduce communication to a set of rigid ritualised routines (Cameron 2000).

'As I attended a Handelsakademie and almost had to stupidly learn business phrases by heart and was tested if I knew them (even at the Matura) by heart and (the teacher even subtracted points if the students did not write the phrases word by word) it is more than relevant to support the concept of individual discourse styles and get rid of native-like requirements in the classroom. I am convinced that it is your personal and flexible discourse style that makes you carry out a business matter successfully rather than formulating native-like business phrases frequently characterised by impersonality and sterility. I am well aware that it is essential to learn such phrases in order to acquire a conceptual frame to be prepared for business negotiations but punishing the students with an enormous reduction of points when having a slight grammatical or orthographical mistake in these phrases is definitely not the right way as grammatical perfection mainly does not influence on an effective conversation. Therefore, I agree with House who states that ELF learners should focus on negotiation strategies.' {Thomas}

The view expressed here that learning the language should involve not the adherence to a set of fixed phrases but the ability to negotiate meaning is, of course, very much in accordance with what Juliane House has to say.

Not all of our readers, however, are so unreserved in their acceptance of this idea. It is all very well to focus on the development of negotiation strategies and a "personal and flexible discourse style", but does this not imply a considerable degree of linguistic competence?

'I really go along with her suggestion of enabling students to remain true to their personalities. Once again, this is a very important point but what if the speakers are limited in expressing English and at the same time do not have the main instrument - words - to state who they are? What if you want to tell a joke but the English word for the punch line is missing? House unfortunately does not offer solutions for this problem.' {Julia1}

These are questions worth pondering (and perhaps Juliane House may want to rise to the challenge and offer solutions in a revised variant of her paper). How far does ELF actually provide the linguistic resource for its speakers to remain true to the personality, style, wit, humour and social charm that would usually be expressed through the subtle nuances of their own language? What degree of competence in ELF do speakers have to achieve (assuming that this is measurable) for them to effectively realise its liberating function as a means of self-expression? If you dissociate English from the culture of its speakers, how does it get re-associated with other cultural features which would seem to be necessary, if it is to be used for the expression of personality?

One reservation, then, was that ELF might be so linguistically and culturally reduced that it is inadequate as a resource for personal self-expression. A number of readers expressed doubts about the notion of a culturally non-aligned means of communication.

> 'If I understood House correctly, she calls for some sort of a-cultural language teaching - learners should develop a certain 'authentic' verbal behaviour without basing it on any particular cultural background. Moreover, they should not base it on their own cultural background either, since the respective cultures do not play any major role in ELF interactions, as has been proved by some of the few studies on lingua franca interaction. (House's study, interestingly enough, does not correspond with this claim.) Anyway, I do not believe that a complete ban of culture would work. […] Even though House herself admits a certain validity of cultural studies, I feel that an important part of any language teaching might get lost when entirely concentrating on an a-cultural pragmatic methodology. After all, it is culture that makes a language alive. […] House calls for an empowering of learners to remain true to their own personalities concerning linguistic behaviour, an attitude I completely agree with. But, isn't culture a feature of our own personality? Thus, it should be included in teaching as well.' {Veronika}

Another good question. If ELF is deculturalized, is it not therefore depersonalised as well? Questions about the cultural and communicative aspects of ELF figured prominently in the readers' responses, as is indeed indicated in the KeyWord profile (CULTURAL, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATIVE, all appear high up in the students' list and all are absent from the top 15 in DPC). Looking through the readers' reactions, two kinds of concern become apparent. One of them is that too exclusive a focus on ELF overplays the instrumental function of language and denies the value of its cultural significance. This, for students who have been nourished on literature and 'Landeskunde' is, naturally enough, difficult to accept.

> 'For the sake of argument, I want to liken the relationship between language and culture to that of body and spirit. The former is a structure which is endowed with organic and dynamic qualities by the latter.' {Dawn}

> 'Although I share Juliane House's opinion concerning the often exaggerated focus on literature and pronunciation teaching (as well as on linguistic competence, which was the starting point for CLT), I am rather critical of a radical reduction of these elements in favor of ELF teaching. English is a means of communication for many people from other L1-backgrounds, but it is not ONLY that. Like German, Polish and Chinese, English is also - a very important - part of a specific culture, or - more exactly - of a number of cultures (British, American, Canadian, Australian, ...). We should therefore not neglect the study of the English-speaking cultures as such - not least because learning about other countries in the wider sense plays an important role in intercultural understanding as well.' {Heidi}

The second concern takes us back to the issue raised earlier about the expression of individual personality and has to do with what communicating actually involves. For is not the case that culture is necessarily implicated in communication?

> 'Communication is part of every culture and therefore communication is also different in every culture. Speakers cannot just leave their culture behind and communicate on an ELF level, I suppose. I experienced a lot of ELF communication during my stays in England and, looking back, I cannot say that culture was irrelevant in those conversations. There was a difference between speakers of European languages and speakers of Asian languages. I could not lead such "deep" conversations with Chinese or Japanese people as I could with students from Spain or France. The friends I made in England were all Europeans. I think culture is an extremely important factor in life and cannot be ignored in any conversation.' {Karoline}

'Yet unfortunately, the problem is a much bigger one in so far as that members of different cultures have different ways to communicate with each other (see e.g. Mauri's view on the outcome of a discussion, p. 261) according to their traditions or norms. It is the fact that cultures can be so very different which makes cross-cultural understanding so difficult: Even if all speakers have the same tools, i.e. some sort of ELF, they'll probably use them differently - according to their own personalities which are of course defined in context to their cultural background. As a conclusion I'd therefore say that the problem of teaching a 'universal language' in order to achieve some sort of 'universal understanding' is far more complex. It is just not enough to provide learners' with the same language. One has to take into consideration different historic/cultural backgrounds and different speakers' mentalities as well.' {Barbara1}

These two sets of comments would seem to raise problematic issues arising from the discussion of ELF in DPC which are of particular interest and pertinence. If one accepts the usual pragmatic view that communication is a matter not of issuing linguistic tokens but of using language to negotiate some kind of contextual convergence between the interacting participants, and if one accepts that contexts are necessarily informed by cultural assumptions, then it would seem to be the case that culture must be implicated in ELF use in one way or another. If ELF is uncoupled from the culture of native speaking communities, then if it is to function as communication, it must be re-connected with the assumptions that its users bring from their own cultures. We can expect, therefore, as Barbara points out in her comments above, that ELF communication will vary considerably depending on the cultural differences that are to be negotiated. And this would account for the difference that Karoline experienced in her interactions with ELF users from Asian and European backgrounds.

It would account also, perhaps, for some of the features of the interactions that Juliane House identifies in her data as distinctive of ELF communication (see House 2002). The Asian participants' pursuit of their own agenda might be a case in point. A number of readers note that there may be other variables at play which affect how these interactions are conducted, and which therefore make them unreliable as evidence of ELF pragmatic strategies as such. Some of these, it is suggested, have to do with the methodological design of this particular study, so that the findings may simply be a function of the way the data were elicited.

'I doubt whether all the findings are due to the fact that the taped conversation was carried out in English as a lingua franca. As House claims, the interaction was only quasi-natural, which means that some of the findings may also be due to the fact that the students knew that they were being recorded. It may well be that they were that eager to pursue their own topic just because each of them wanted to appear as 'dominant'. Furthermore, in some instances the fact that questions simply were not answered may also be due to the whole set-up. Since the topic was not chosen by the subjects and maybe they did not know each other very well, they probably just were not really interested in what was being talked about and did not care about the others' concerns. A natural, authentic conversation among friends on a topic they have chosen themselves and are really interested in, may well lead to (slightly) different results, since I suppose that the participants would pay more attention to the other's contributions. However, these are things you can never be sure about, and I think the findings by House are nevertheless convincing and very relevant for our future as teachers.' {Karin}

Given these quite substantial reservations, it is, on the face of it, surprising that Karin remains convinced by the findings. Such ambivalence, which is evident in other reactions too, represents, perhaps, a necessary transitional phase in coming to terms with new ideas. Other reactions are rather less ambivalent, rather more severe, and the author is taken to task for inferring too much from her data.

'On the other hand I have to admit that I did not really like the part of House's study that she presented in the article and on which she partly based her assumptions. I do not know the results of her other studies but as far as this particular discussion group is concerned I do not understand how she can generalise and say that communication in ELF is a self-centred affair, that no real interaction is going on, etc. This simply was not a real discussion! It was a superficial situation created by someone. I tried to put myself in those students' place and thought: how would I have behaved in this situation? I have come to the following conclusion: I would have behaved similarly mainly for two reasons. First of all, this is, as I have already said before, a rather superficial discussion. Students are given a text on the topic and should spontaneously and, let me say, under pressure, discuss it within about 30 minutes. Secondly, they know that they are recorded. This important fact certainly contributes a lot to this monologue-like discussion. If I had known that I would be recorded I would also have tried to talk as much as possible, regardless of what I say and in what order of the discussion. These topic changes simply occurred because they did not want to take the risk of being silent, which is certainly not welcome in a discussion.' {Ingeborg}

It is interesting, and heartening, we might note in passing, that students should be so perceptive of problems of extrapolation and the observer's paradox that are so familiar in empirical research of this kind.

Other readers identify other factors that might explain what is going on in these experimental groups. The participants might be following different agendas, for example, not because they are using ELF but because they are just not motivated to be conversationally co-operative. They are more concerned with relating the topic of the discussion to their own contexts of knowledge and interest.

'The four speaker study different subjects and all four of them are trying to relate the theme of English as lingua franca to their specific area. Wei studies history and is trying demonstrate how English became the major foreign language in a context that is familiar to him, namely the Chinese. Mauri's field is business administration and the only purpose she sees in leaning English as a lingua franca is for business matters. Joy and Brit study applied linguistics. While Joy seems to be rather shy and not talkative at all, Brit is trying to see the problem from a linguistic perspective. Therefore she can refer to Nigerian English, to Indian English, to the use of language for identification (Welsh, Irish), to problems with pronunciation, etc. In other words, she is more competent to talk about the topic, because it belongs to her special area. House argues that the Asian students are having 'parallel monologues', whereas 'Brit, the German speaker, who seeks several times, and always in vain, to lift the discussion up onto a more 'serious', more analytic-critical level is the exemption here' (p. 257). I find this comment very inappropriate for two reasons. First, each of the four participants (including Brit) are pulling the string in his or her own direction. Brit is trying to lead a linguistic conversation with a future historian and a future business administrator. They are simply specialised in different areas than her own. Secondly, I do not see why is Brit's discussion of Whales language or Nigerian English more serious that the global impact of English in Asia. When the three Asians (seriously) discuss the latter, the only thing Brit can say is: 'I've seen several Japanese movies recently' (p. 253). She does not want to 'lose face' and asks questions about the de facto situation in Asia; as the other speakers do not want to ask in more detail about the themes that she has mentioned. In my opinion, the main problem here are not linking words or inability to express one's own ideas, but rather lack of shared knowledge. Therefore every person is trying to make some meaning out of the topic in their own terms. I assume that the same problems would take place if the participants with different special areas had the same native language, but were originally from different parts of the world. I also do not think that the solidarity and the 'let is pass' behaviour hides misunderstanding, as House claims, but fear to enter another person's special area and preference to stay on safe territory. The conversation does not reveal a language problem, but rather the importance of shared knowledge …' {Marija}

The issue that is raised in these comments is a crucial one. The interactions in which the participants are required to engage are of their nature at a remove from the naturally occurring contexts of conversation, and so how are these subjects to decide what role is appropriate to the occasion? If the normal motivation for negotiating interaction is absent, then their behaviour cannot really be interpreted as an inability to interact.

'My first impression of the research-data was that it seems to be very artificial. In my opinion it is not really representative material for ELF-interaction (as would be telephone conversations from business partners). It more or less resembles discussions of pupils in school, where they have to "make up" an opinion about a topic that maybe does not interest them at all. In "real-life" ELF-use people have to communicate in English for important reasons and they often must achieve a common aim: e.g. they have to negotiate with their business partners, etc. In this case, both interlocutors have the same background; they work in a similar context and therefore understand each other. It is clear for me, that in such conversations the persons negotiating with each other show consensus-oriented conversational behaviour because their interaction has to be successful. Moreover, I am sure, that in a business-context it is not possible that the interacting persons talk in monologues about different topics, as it happened in House's study with the students. For me it was not really a surprising finding that in the study each student was "pursuing his/her own agenda", because they were taken from totally different contexts. In their discussion it was not only a lack of pragmatic competence that led to the failure of the interaction, but the main reason was, in my opinion, the lack of a common context. Juliane House could have asked the four students to talk about organizing a student's party together in their residence, or, to talk about the last party they had been to, etc. So they would have had a topic to talk about that really interests or concerns all of them.' {Katja}

The suggestion these readers are making, then, is that what the author of DPC identifies as distinctive features of ELF pragmatics can also be interpreted in reference to other factors that have a bearing on how interaction is managed and communication negotiated. And these factors - of cultural convention, personality, motivation, contextual interpretation - apply just as much to native speaker as to non-native speaker interactions. So the features that Juliane House identifies as typically marking ELF talk - non-smooth turn-taking, monotopical focusing, and so - are actually, in the view of these readers, of more general pragmatic occurrence.

'My own experience also showed me that conversational style did not necessarily depend on the speakers' competence in pragmatic strategies but on their psychological willingness to talk about a topic openly. I have noticed that many native speakers who have a wide range of expressions to choose from, and who certainly do not lack pragmatic knowledge, have often shown as much (or even more) inhibition to contribute to a discussion, and that they insisted on "pursuing their agenda", regurgitating their topic in a monologue instead of commenting on the previous statement. On the contrary, non-native speakers with a very restricted use of gambits and discourse strategies can be very creative in expressing their beliefs and opinions despite their limited pragmatic knowledge. I personally believe that this phenomenon must be seen in a wider psychological context …' {Christine}

'House's comments on the recorded conversation reveal some problems, e.g. participants were self-oriented, did not use linking words, changed topics abruptly, etc. I do not think that such behaviour is more common among ELF speakers than among native speakers. We all know that in such open and more relaxed discussions, where no agreement nor any concrete outcome is required, one jumps from one topic to the next and simply ignores linking words. Further, in such discussions people sometimes concentrate too much on what they want to say and not on the harmony of the

discussion. I happen to catch myself preparing what to say next while the other person is still talking. Of course this is not the right way to contribute to a co-operative discussion, but we have to accept it as a part of our natural way of conversing with people. For this reason I do not think that the problems of non-coherence and disharmony of the conversation indicate language problems, but rather inability or unwillingness to have a linear and structured discussion which would flow very smoothly from one topic to another.' {Marija}

Comments like these seem, paradoxically enough, to be a reaction to what readers take as a negative representation of ELF whereby it is compared unfavourably with native speaker use.

> 'So in my opinion, one cannot say that ELF communication is a self-centred affair that is marked by non-smoothness and forms a contrast to interaction between English native speakers. For my part, I think it all depends on the sort of communication you examine. In political discussions and business negotiations in which English is used as a lingua franca by people of various cultural backgrounds it might well be that you find parallel monologues frequently, but nevertheless one cannot say that the resulting non-smoothness is typical of ELF communication between speakers of different cultural backgrounds who do not have English as their mother tongue. More precisely, one has to bear in mind that the same non-smoothness can also be found in interactions between native speakers, since people are generally striving after their own agenda in political discussions and business negotiations.' {Andrea2}

The features of ELF that Juliane House identifies (non-smoothness, non-coherence, absence of gambits) are indeed couched in negative terms and sound like shortcomings: they are things the ELF speaker does **not** do, fails to achieve. A native speaker norm seems to be presupposed, and readers appear to react against this presupposition, which is, of course in direct contradiction to the explicit message that DPC is trying to get across.

6   Conclusion

The text analysed clearly had the educationally desirable effect of provoking critical reflection. The number and diversity of the reactions to it bear eloquent witness to that. As one student puts it:

> 'Finally, I wish to say that authors like Juliane House and their studies are a real benefit to all teachers and existing pedagogical theories as such. Knowing about the results of House's analysis, I, as a teacher, definitely would reflect on my teaching practise and try to model some activities in class according to what I have learned from House or other authors. As I said before, teachers find themselves in the role of a mediator, and one must always be thankful for some (new) ideas, which one can try out with the hope of a great(er) teaching effect.' {Teresa}

Not all of the reactions we have recorded here will meet with the author's unreserved approval, of course. Some can be read as projections of the readers' own assumptions and cultural mind-set and as such, we might say, they are unwarranted appropriations, meanings taken from the text that are mistaken as far as the intentions of the author are concerned. But this itself is a pragmatic reality which writers of texts have surely to accept and engage with. Particularly in the case of cross-cultural communication, as between academics and students, there is bound to be a continuing readjustment and realignment, a continuing pragmatic process whereby ideas are clarified, modified, made relevant. What our students did was to reformulate what the author said to make it their own, and so in a sense translated her text **in** their own terms, and **on** their own terms. We suggested earlier that reactions to a text might provide the stimulus for a subsequent rewriting of it in different versions. The author might not want to follow that particular line (she has, after all, plenty of other things to do), but we hope

nevertheless that she will find the diverse reactions her paper provoked interesting and enlightening, and that she will take them, as we do, as both testimony and tribute to the inspiring value of her work.

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