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## English as a lingua Franca in Kurdistan Region: Erbil Golden Zone as an example

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### Abstract

With a rapid change of Kurdistan Region's socio-economic life following 2003, the English language has quickly emerged as the new must-have language for this millennium. This article explores the way teaching of English as a foreign language has become popular in the past two decades and how the large influx of international expats has brought different cultures and languages into the workplace and society, especially in Erbil city. This study investigates the use of the English language as a lingua franca in Erbil, and it has therefore chosen the golden zone as a typical area in Erbil where there is a high density of international people for whom English is a means of communication when they interact with speakers of other languages. This study follows the research methods of linguistic landscape (LL), which tackle the coexistence of English with local languages (e.g. Edelman, 2006; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Backhaus, 2007). However, there is very few research on how English interacts with other languages in multilingual destinations in the expanding circle. To investigate this further, three locations are selected (a café/restaurant, a real estate agency, and a barber shop). The owners of these venues are invited to participate in one-on-one in-depth interviews. Findings indicate that there are three categories of population in the Golden Zone in Erbil which can be classified as people who speak only English, people who speak Kurdish, Arabic, and English, and people who speak Arabic and English. The responses from the three interviewee groups indicate that when these three categories of people meet, it is inevitable that English will be used as a lingua franca for ease of communication.

**KeyWords:** lingua franca, language strategy, multi-lingualism, linguistic landscape

ئىنگىلىزى وەك زمانىيەكى ھاۋىيەش لە ھەرئىمى كوردىستاندا: ناواچەي زىرىنى ھەولىپر وەك نمونة

رهشوان رهمهزان سالح

یهشی زمانی نئنگیزی که لری زمان زانکوی سه لاحه دین. هه ولز، هه رنگ، کوردستان، عراق.

یو خته‌ی توئن‌نه‌وھ

له گهله گورانی خیرای زیانی ئابوری کومه‌لایه‌تی هه‌ریمی کوردستان له دواى سالی ۲۰۰۳، زمانی ئینگیزی به خیرای وەک زمانیک نویی پیویست بۇ ئەم سەد نوینیه سەریهەلداوه. ئەم بابهە به داداچون بۇ ئەو شیوازه دەکات كە فیئرکەن زمانی ئینگیزی وەک زمانیک بیانی له دو دەھیە راپردودا بۇھە جىچى بايەخ و چۈن لىشماۋى زۆرى كە سە نىودەولەتىيە كان و كولنور و زمانی جىاوازى ھىنداوەتە ناو شۇتىنى كار و كۆمەلگا، بەتايىھەتى لە شارى ھەولىر. بە داداچون بۇ به كارھىننائى زمانی ئینگیزى وەک زمانیک ھاوبەش لە ھەولىر دەکات، ھەریویه زۆنى زىرىنى وەک ناواچەيە كى تايىھەت لە ھەولىر ھەلپۇرداوه كە رېزىيە كى زۆرى خەلکى بیانى ھەيە كە زمانی ئینگیزى ئامرازىكى پەيوەندىيە بۇ ئەوان كاتىك كارلىك لە گهله قىسە كە رانى زمانە كانى تر دەكەن. ئەم توپىزىنە وەيە پېرىھوی توپىزىنە وە كومه‌لایه‌تى زمانەوانىيە كانى بوارى زمانەوانى (LL) دەکات كە مامەلە لە گهله پىكە وەزىانى ئینگیزى لە گهله زمانە ناوخۇيىيە كان دەكەن، بۇ نۇمنە (Edelman, 2006; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Backhaus, 2007). بەلام لىكۆلەنە وەيە كى زۆر كەم ھەيە لە سەر چۆننەتى كارلىكى ئینگیزى لە گهله زمانە كانى تر لە شۇنە فەرە زمانە كاندا لە بازنهى فراوانىدا. بۇ لىكۆلەنە وەي زياڭر لەم بابهە، سى شۇنەن ھەلدى بېتىرىدىن (كافى/چىشىتخانە، نوسىنگە خانوبەرە و سەرتاشخانە). خاوهەنی ئەم شۇنەن باڭھەيىشت دەكرىن بۇ به شدارىكىرىن لە چاۋپىكە و ئەنلىكە سەل و بە تەننیا. دۆزىنە وە كان ئامازە بەھو دەكەن كە سى پۇلى دانىشتوان لە ناواچەي زىرىن لە ھەولىر ھەن كە دەتوانىت پۇلۇن بىكىرىن وەك ئەوانەي كە تەننە بە ئینگیزى ئاخاوتىن دەكەن، ئەوانەي بە زمانى كوردى و عەرەبى و ئینگىزى ئاخاوتىن دەكەن، ھەر وەها ئەوانەي بە عەرەبى و ئینگىزى ئاخاوتىن دەكەن. وەلامە كانى سى گروپى چاۋپىكە و تو ئامازە بەھو دەكەن كە كاتىك ئەم سى پۇلە كە سە يەكتىر دەبىيەن، ئەوا بە شىۋەيە كى راستە و خۇ زمانى ئینگىزى وەک زمانىك بۇ ئاسانكارى پەيوەندىكىرىن بە كارداھەتىزىت.

وشه سهره کييه كان: لينگوا فرانكا، ستراتيزي زمان، فره زمانه وازن، ييکهاته هي زمانه وازن)

## 1. Introduction and Justification

English has become the dominant lingua franca in global workplaces, transcending national boundaries and cultural differences. As businesses increasingly operate on an international scale, the use of English as a common language has become imperative for effective communication. This study examines the utilization of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in a particular setting within Erbil city, situated in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The concept of ELF emerged as a result of globalization, migration, and the internationalization of business. Historically, English has been established as the primary language for trade, diplomacy, and academia, leading to its widespread adoption as a lingua franca in professional settings. The term ELF refers to "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7). Ostler states that "languages such as Egyptian, Chinese, French, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, or Arabic all held a status of lingua franca in the past" (2010: 39). These languages acted as a contact language among those who did not share their first language. These languages achieved such status either by military expansion, economic power, or by religious power (ibid: 39).

The common characteristics of the languages mentioned above is that they all developed a significant position as lingua franca languages in separate parts of the world. However, English is a language that has spread around the globe and surpassed all languages that had the potential to achieve a dominant role in the past. It is stated by Graddol that "currently English is a mother tongue to more than 375 million speakers, a second language to around 375 million speakers and a foreign language to additional 750 million foreign users" (1997: 10). One of the significances of ELF is that English has not only spread amongst its speakers but has also entered most spheres of society. It is an official language of many world organisations, air transport; it is dominant in technology, science, publishing, education, media, international trade as well as politics (Zikmundová, 2016: 8). Due to such great impact of English in the present world, English can nowadays be marked as "the world's lingua franca" (Björkman, 2016: 32).

A notable scholarly contribution of this investigation resides in its meticulous examination of the intricate dynamics governing the interplay between English and other languages within a diverse community characterized by multiple cultures and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the study endeavors to elucidate the perceptions surrounding these linguistic interactions within the framework of Kachru's taxonomy, particularly addressing the context of a nation categorized within the "expanding circle" (Kachru, 1985).

## 2. Previous Studies

Prior research has delved into the phenomenon of English as a lingua franca in diverse academic and professional contexts. For instance, Tange and Lauring (2009) conducted a study which aims at observing communicative practices stemming from organizational decisions to adopt English as the corporate language within traditionally Danish-speaking organizations. Their investigation reveals that

within such work environments, individuals often form linguistic clusters corresponding to their national backgrounds. This phenomenon manifests as "informal gatherings between the speakers of the same national language" within the multinational workplace (Tange and Lauring, 2009: 224). Similarly, Ljosland's doctoral thesis offers insights into the role of English within academic settings, conceptualizing it as "concentric circles of influence operating across various levels" (Ljosland, 2011: 991). Central to Ljosland's inquiry is a detailed case study of the Industrial Ecology department at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. However, this case study is embedded within broader considerations of language politics and policies at both international and national levels. Furthermore, a study by Karakas and Jenkins (2022) tackles policy and practice of English in a wider academic context. They explore language policy actors' perspectives about their institutions' academic English language policies and practices, informed by quantitative and qualitative data collected through survey questionnaires and interviews with Turkish lecturers from three EMI (English-medium instruction) universities.

Numerous research endeavors have explored the dominance of English as an academic lingua franca, with a particular emphasis on its role as a medium of instruction (EMI). The impetus behind the adoption of EMI often stems from the interplay between internationalization efforts and the prominence of English within higher education (Liddicoat, 2016). Within this framework, programs delivered in English are often perceived as possessing elevated status, rendering them more appealing to the increasingly mobile student demographic. However, the rapid expansion of English as a lingua franca has surpassed the pace of scholarly inquiry in this domain. Despite a notable surge in research activity over the past decade, numerous pivotal issues remain unresolved (Dafouz, 2014; Dearden, 2014). An additional concern regarding EMI policies pertains to its delineation of countries or jurisdictions where English does not constitute the primary language for the majority of the population, such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This aspect presents potential challenges as it effectively excludes Anglophone internationals from communicating in local contexts. Moreover, the geographical positioning of many mono-lingual English speakers within superdiverse urban hubs implies that people are more likely to encounter multilingual environments rather than a singular dominant first language (L1). Consequently, the communication between these monolingual English speakers and the local multilinguals would take place in English.

Knapp and Meierkord (2002) conducted an inquiry into the employment of lingua franca languages within a European context, with particular attention directed towards discourse and pragmatic aspects. Their empirical findings predominantly revealed that, notwithstanding the diversity of speakers utilizing lingua franca languages, these languages exhibit shared linguistic structures and fulfill a multitude of communicative purposes.

Mauranen and Ranta (2009) is the first edited volume devoted to ELF research. They address fundamental issues in ELF, including attitudes, approaches, conceptualisations, universality, and comprehensibility. They also describe ELF in different communities, including business and education. These studies provide empirical findings from authentic data together with surveys and interviews. The sections of this book are

also concerned with ELF features in interactions. All the studies in this book are based on an authentic recorded sample of ELF interactions. Key strategies used in successful ELF dialogues are also discussed (see Also Mauranen, 2006; Cogo & Dewey, 2012).

Mauranen and Ranta's (2009) influential work represents an inaugural edited volume dedicated exclusively to research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Their comprehensive examination investigates core issues surrounding ELF, encompassing attitudes, methodologies, conceptual frameworks, universality, and intelligibility. Furthermore, the volume explores ELF dynamics across various societal domains such as business and education, drawing upon empirical evidence derived from authentic data sources, including surveys, interviews, and recorded interactions. Notably, the studies featured in this volume underscore ELF's main characteristics within communicative exchanges, offering insights into successful dialogue strategies. This scholarly endeavor builds upon prior research by Mauranen (2006) and Cogo & Dewey (2012), thereby contributing significantly to the evolving discourse on ELF.

### **3. Research Questions**

The current study diverges from the predominant focus on English as a medium of instruction within academic settings by shifting attention to its role as a lingua franca in non-academic contexts. This research attempts to answer questions such as: *whether English is prevalent as a lingua franca in Erbil City of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq? In what contexts and to what extent is English used as a common mode of communication in Erbil city?* In response to these questions, this study scrutinizes various facets, including the functions and conceptualizations of English and other languages within multilingual communities, as well as the imperative for comparative investigations across diverse contextual settings.

### **4. Methodology and Data**

This current study focuses on the context, mode, and nature of ELF interactions within a specific community. To this end, a qualitative method of research is adopted to investigate and analyse the actual reality of ELF in Erbil city in Iraqi Kurdistan Region. However, numerical data are also presented to support the qualitative claims. For the purpose of acquiring information for this research on the amount of awareness of English as a lingua franca in the city of Erbil, one-to-one interviews were conducted with three venue owners/operators in the Golden Zone in Erbil. The Golden zone refers to a high-end neighborhood in Erbil, which is officially called Empire area, where there is a high density of international population. The interviews aimed at collecting in depth and detailed information on the reality of ELF on the ground in this area of the city. The researcher chose one-to-one, detailed interviews since a questionnaire was not convenient in public places, as the population in that area may not be aware of the communication dynamic over a prolonged period. While the venue owners/operators spend a lot of time

on these premises and interact with the customers all the time, they observe workplace interactions, language use, and communication dynamics in real-time.

The interviews were conducted on three different premises (a restaurant, a café, and a barber shop). The anonymity of the venues is due to suggestions by the business owners that they wanted to remain anonymous. Thus, for adhering to the ethics, I will refer to them as interviewee 1, interviewee 2 and interviewee 3. Also, each of these categories may have multiple individuals contributing to the responses to the questions. However, all responses within each venue are considered a unified response since they work in the same venue, but may have encountered different communication patterns in the venue. The timeline of the data which are collected from the interviews is not significant, because the sample situations in which English was used vary over sporadic periods of time. However, the situations in which English was used as a lingua franca are of interest to the current study. The data were collected over a period of one month, from the beginning of October 2023 to the beginning of November 2023, through three separate detailed interviews with three different venues in Erbil city's golden zone.

For basic identification of the respondents, general questions such as gender, age, nationality and educational degree were asked. Participants represented a variety of native languages, including Kurdish, and Arabic, and Turkish. The respondents answered the questions anonymously. Prior to the interview, the respondents were given a written consent form to sign and agree to participate in the interview. The consent form provided to the respondents also presented the objective of the author's research and gave a brief overview of the project (see Appendix 1).

## 5. Findings and Discussions

Through the course of interaction with interviewees and respondents in this study, it is evident that ELF has a significant impact on cultural identity, shaping individuals' perceptions of self and community in multilingual and multicultural contexts. The interaction between ELF and cultural identity is complex, as it is "influenced by various factors such as language proficiency, social dynamics, and historical context" (Backhaus, 2006, 53). It was noticed that the respondents were aware of their cultural and linguistic identities while promoting English as a powerful communication tool in their line of work and especially considering the area they are working in. This study classifies the findings according to several concepts in relation to Language use and ELF.

### 5.1 Language Proficiency

The majority of participants reported English proficiency ranging from beginner to pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. Approximately 25% indicated proficiency at a beginner level, 45% a pre-intermediate level, and 30% at an intermediate level. Self-reported proficiency levels varied across different language backgrounds, with native Kurdish speakers generally reporting higher proficiency levels compared to non-

native Kurdish speakers. While speaking with the interviewees, it was noticed that proficiency in English is often associated with career advancement opportunities, as it facilitates participation in communication with wider stakeholders and is crucial in networking events. For example, interviewee 2 stated that they are encouraging their staff members to attend an English language training course to advance their communication skills in English. While interview 1 suggested that basic communication skills among their staff are satisfactory, because they are not looking for high proficiency in English since most of their staff have not completed high school education.

## 5.2 Language Use Patterns

Due to the large number of Arab native speakers residing and working in the area, Arabic language has emerged as the primary language of communication within the community, with 95% of participants reporting frequent use of Arabic in their daily interactions. Respondents indicated that English was predominantly used in cases where neither Arabic nor Kurdish was efficient for communication. For instance, Kurdish customers who did not speak Arabic were compelled to use English as a common means of communication with the Arab workers. While English served as the lingua franca, participants also reported code-switching or mixing English with their native languages in certain contexts, particularly when expressing cultural nuances, emotions, or specific requests.

## 5.3 Perceptions of English as a Lingua Franca

The majority of participants viewed English as a facilitator of communication and integration within the community, citing its role in promoting mutual understanding, collaboration, and cultural exchange. This was also evident in other studies, such as Berns, M. (2009). The reason why non-native speakers expressed appreciation for the inclusivity fostered by English as a lingua franca is that English enables them to participate actively in community activities and engage with members from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Berns, 2009: 193).

However, some participants highlighted challenges associated with English proficiency, such as feelings of insecurity, linguistic discrimination, and power differentials favoring native speakers in communication dynamics. The common ground found in ELF seems to have some degree of universality in WE paradigm and ELF research, as both of which are concerned with “pluricentricity of the language among users of different linguacultural backgrounds involved in interactional work to achieve communicative ends” (Chen et al, 2019: 7). The respondents unanimously stated that English as a lingua franca promotes cultural integration within multinational communities by creating a common platform for interaction and understanding. The data showed that using English as a lingua franca enhances communication efficiency among employees from diverse linguistic backgrounds (interviewee 1, 2, and 3). It reduces misunderstandings, fosters collaboration, and promotes knowledge sharing.

#### **5.4 Cultural Identity and Linguistic Diversity**

Respondents expressed a strong attachment to their native languages and cultural heritage, viewing linguistic diversity as an asset that enriches community life. While English served as a common language, participants emphasized the importance of preserving and celebrating linguistic diversity through cultural events and intercultural exchanges. Most respondents indicated that nowadays, even local children speak better English than Kurdish and Arabic in Erbil's Golden Zone. This might be the result of the overall tendency towards using English as the medium of instruction in the ever-increasing English private schools in Erbil city. The interviewees demonstrated a commitment to promoting multilingualism and intercultural understanding, fostering an inclusive environment where individuals could express their cultural identity and linguistic heritage freely.

#### **5.5 Overall Satisfaction with English as a Lingua Franca**

The majority of participants reported overall satisfaction with English as a lingua franca in the community, citing its role in promoting communication, inclusivity, and cultural exchange. Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of English as a lingua franca included providing language support services, promoting cross-cultural awareness, and addressing linguistic biases to create a more equitable communication environment. However, one of the primary challenges was navigating the linguistic diversity among employees, as proficiency levels and accents varied widely.

Consequently, despite its benefits, English as a lingua franca can lead to miscommunication due to differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural norms. Non-native speakers may face discrimination or bias based on their language proficiency, impacting their confidence and job performance. Some of the responses indicated that the widespread use of English as a lingua franca may overshadow indigenous languages and cultural identities, raising concerns about cultural homogenization.

### **6. Conclusions**

This study has investigated and analysed the ELF context mode and nature of its interaction with other languages in the Golden Zone in Erbil city of Iraq. The vast number of English speakers in Erbil city, including native speakers, second language speakers, and those who use it as a lingua franca, facilitates the use of English as a lingua franca. The growing number of schools that use English as the medium of instruction in Erbil city has resulted in a more and more increasingly larger number of people who casually use English as the favorite mode of communication, especially among children.

This study concludes that English is used prevalently in Erbil City's Golden Zone, and the main reason for that situation is the fluctuating number of non-Kurdish speaking tourists, travelers and expats residing in the area, who use English as a means of communication during their travels has made a de facto effect on

English to be used a common ground for communication. The added pressure on the multilingual Kurdish population who use English alongside their native language for communication in various contexts contributes to the use of English as a lingua franca. These measures provide insights into the widespread use and influence of English as a lingua franca in Erbil's Golden Zone.

The responses from the three interviewee groups indicate that when these three categories of people meet, it is inevitable that English will be used as a lingua franca for ease of communication. The study concludes that the presence of hundreds of nationalities in Erbil's Golden Zone has rendered English as lingua Franca.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Interview Consent Form

#### Interview Consent Form

I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I would like to talk to you about your experiences working in Erbil Golden Zone community. Specifically, I am conducting research, entitled: “English as a lingua Franca in Kurdistan Region: Erbil Golden Zone as an example”. It focuses on the communication strategies in this area among the various nationalities who are living and working here. I am interested in learning about the main languages that are used in your venue between you and your customers and among your customers.

The interview should take less than one hour. I will ask you open ended questions and I will be taping the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. Although I will be taking some notes during the session. All responses will be kept confidential. This means that your interview responses and any information I include in the research do not identify you as the respondent. You do not have to talk about anything you do not want to, and you may end the interview at any time. Are there any questions about what I have just explained? Are you willing to participate in this interview?

I hereby confirm that I understand the text above and I give my consent.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## 8.2 Interview questions

- 1- Can you describe how English is used in your venue when communicating with international clients?
- 2- How has the use of English as a lingua franca impacted your business?
- 3- In what contexts and to what extent is English used in your venue?
- 4- How do non-native English speakers perceive their own use of English and their identities?
- 5- What are the potential future trends in the use of English and how might these trends affect your business?
- 6- What challenges have you (or your employees) faced when using English as a lingua franca in business settings?
- 7- What are the communication challenges faced by your employees when using English?

## 8.3 Interview transcript samples

### Sample 1: Questions and answers with Interviewee 1

**Interviewer:** Can you describe how English is used in your restaurant when communicating with international clients?

**Interviewee:** Yes, certainly. In our restaurant, English is the primary language when we communicate with all international customers. Whether we're taking orders, conducting table checks, or negotiating the food choices, English serves as the common ground. Even though not everyone is a native speaker, we've found that using English helps us avoid misunderstandings and ensures that everyone is on the same page...

**Interviewer:** What challenges have you faced when using English as a lingua franca in business settings?

**Interviewee:** One major challenge is the varying levels of proficiency among our staff and clients. Some people are very fluent, while others struggle with basic communication. This sometimes leads to misunderstandings and delays. Additionally, cultural differences can affect how messages are interpreted, which requires us to be very clear and explicit in our communication...

**Sample 2: Questions and answers with Interviewee 2**

**Interviewer:** How has the use of English as a lingua franca impacted your business?

**Interviewee:** It's had a significant impact. English is the default language for most international people living in this area, including Arabs, expats, and even children. This has made it easier for us to communicate with our clients from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds...

**Interviewer:** Have there been any difficulties in using English in your daily activities?

**Interviewee:** Definitely. The main difficulty is ensuring that everyone fully understands the nuances of the language, especially when discussing complex or technical topics. Sometimes, important details are lost in translation, and this can lead to misinterpretations of data or crucial details. However, we try to overcome this by double-checking our communications and sometimes even using professional translators for critical documents. We have also encouraged our staff to go to professional English language training courses to improve their basic communication skills in English. Our clients are mainly international expats and foreigners who do not speak Kurdish or Arabic. That's why when we communicate with them it must be in English...

**Sample 3: Questions and answers with Interviewee 3**

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about using English as a common language when serving your customers?

**Interviewee:** I think it's very convenient. Knowing that English is widely spoken gives me confidence when serving my customers and this helps me to have good relations with my clients who do not speak Kurdish. It makes it easier to interact with internationals and even Arabs who live and work here. Some of my employees do not speak Arabic, but they speak some English. They use English to communicate with the Arab clients who do speak or understand Kurdish. They use English as a common language...

**Interviewer:** Are there any drawbacks for not being able to speak English in this area?

**Interviewee:** One drawback is that it can sometimes feel isolating. Not everyone is able to speak Arabic or Kurdish in this area. Those who do not speak some English would not be able to get a decent job in this area. Those who do not speak English in this area worry that they are missing out on more authentic cultural experiences. However, relying on English can sometimes come off as disrespectful to locals who may feel that their language is being overlooked or undervalued...