

Exploring Bhutanese English teachers' attitudes toward English as a lingua franca in Bhutan

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This study explored attitudes toward English as a lingua franca (ELF) among in-service English teachers in Bhutan. Employing a mixed-method design, we collected data from 191 participants through surveys and interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of teachers held positive attitudes toward ELF. They identified English as a communicative lingua franca in Bhutan and suggested a shift in English teaching priorities toward enhancing learners' communicative skills, increasing exposure to English varieties, and moving away from the native speaker-centric model. Additionally, the participants were inclined to believe that imitating native-like accents and pronunciation is not essential for Bhutanese English speakers/learners. However, concerns were raised about potential adverse effects on Bhutanese English learners' English proficiency test scores, such as IELTS and TOEFL, which play a crucial role in determining the educational and career opportunities for most of them both within and outside the country, if ELF was to be prioritised in the context. The study concludes with suggestions on the potential integration of ELF-informed materials in the Bhutanese context and beyond.

Introduction

English undeniably stands as a global language and it has transcended all international boundaries, extending far beyond Kachru's (2005) inner circle of native English-speaking countries. While the precise number of English language users worldwide remains uncertain in the literature, it is evident that a significant number of non-native English-speaking countries now embrace English as a second or foreign language. Consequently, for the past few decades, English has been seen as a language of communication between two or more culturally different people from either the same or different countries who use different first languages or as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 2009). This underlying ideology that sees English as an important intra- and inter-communicational language or as an ELF (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001), has consumed many countries in outer and expanding circles, to the point where English language proficiency now determines one's employment and educational opportunities (Curran & Chern, 2017).

ELF has gained popularity as a topic of discussion among TESOL and ELT scholars. Consequently, they have attempted to research various facets of ELF, with particular emphasis on examining teachers' attitudes toward it. Understanding teachers' attitudes, such as toward ELF in the case of this study, is crucial as teachers serve as agents of change (Wangdi & Shimray, 2022a), playing a pivotal role in shaping the success of educating learners. Numerous studies examining teachers' attitudes toward ELF have been conducted in various non-native English-speaking Asian contexts, including Thailand, Taiwan, Iran, Indonesia, China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and many more (Asakereh et al., 2019; Barzegar

Rahatlou et al., 2018; Curran & Chern, 2017; Kim, 2021; Lee & Kim, 2019; Nguyen & Lo, 2022; Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021; Si, 2019; Zhang, 2022).

The literature, however, revealed a dearth of research evidence that addresses teachers' attitudes towards ELF in the Bhutanese context. This comes as no surprise because of the limited involvement of Bhutanese teachers in research endeavours (Wangdi & Tharchen, 2021), especially within the field of English language teaching and learning (Wangdi & Kachchhap, 2023). Therefore, a need for a study was felt in the context wherein English has been used as a lingua franca since the early 19th century. Bhutan is a multicultural and multilingual society with 19 different spoken languages (Van Driem, 1994) with approximately 800,000 people. Both Dzongkha (national language) and English languages serve as the lingua franca across the country, and they are used extensively in various domains, including offices, businesses, mass media and communication.

Prior research in the Asian context concerning English as a lingua franca has successfully established strong evidence that Asian English learners should be exposed to the global diversity of language, culture, tradition, and accents (Jenkins, 2006) to fit into global citizenship (Hammond & Keating, 2018). Bhutanese English learners are by no means exceptional in this regard, as several factors contribute to their need for proficiency in English as a lingua franca. The foremost among these reasons is that many Bhutanese students pursue their higher education abroad after class 12 in countries such as India, Thailand, New Zealand, Australia, the USA, and Canada, just to name a few where English serves as the only communicative lingua franca for them. Similarly, Bhutanese citizens working abroad across different countries, also rely on English as a lingua franca for communication.

Recognising this significance, and in light of previous educational stakeholders' positive attitudes toward the inclusion of ELF-informed materials in English language teaching (ELT), this study was carried out to inform policymakers and practitioners about possibilities for integrating ELF-informed materials in the Bhutanese context. Our study explored the Bhutanese in-service English language teachers' attitudes toward ELF based on four dimensions: (1) models of English; (2) English as a communicative language; (3) the role of English and culture; and (4) language use in classrooms, as proposed by Curran and Chern (2017). The emphasis of our study was on ELF because it is believed that the inclusion of ELF-informed materials such as translated audio and video materials (Vettorel, 2021) and reading materials in the English curriculum enhances learners' English language achievement, confidence to speak, reduces their inferiority complex (Irham et al., 2021), and prepares to use English for real-life purposes (Karakas, 2019), which is very important for Bhutanese learners.

Furthermore, the study's findings are expected to shed light on the ongoing debate over whether English, particularly in ESL/EFL contexts, should continue to adhere to native English speakers' (British and American standard) norms (Jenkins, 2006), or if efforts should be directed towards incorporating ELF-informed teaching materials (Si, 2019) or in other words English varieties. By investigating the attitudes of Bhutanese in-service English language teachers toward ELF, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to this

discussion. Importantly, the findings may offer valuable insights for policymakers and educationists in Bhutan to reconsider English teaching and learning models and materials such as textbooks. The current English curriculum in Bhutan follows the British English model, which was passed down from India (Namgyel & Rinchhen, 2016).

Literature review

English as a lingua franca (ELF)

The literature lacks a clear definition of ELF as it is a complex phenomenon (Sifakis, 2019), which can be defined based on how language is being used to interact by individuals in specific communicative situations (Jenkins, 2015). ELF, on the one hand, is defined as the English language used to communicate by two or more speakers from the same or different cultural backgrounds who have different first languages (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins, 2015; Sifakis, 2019). On the other hand, Jenkins (2000) and Seidlhofer (2001) stated that ELF is an international communicative language. ELF, however, in a simplistic way can be understood as a language used by non-mother tongue speakers (Jenkins, 2006). ELF recognises the diversity of English speakers worldwide and emphasises successful communication as the primary goal.

Unlike standard varieties of English with native speaker norms, ELF is a dynamic and adaptable form of communication that arises when speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together. It challenges traditional notions of "correct" or "standard" English, emphasising effective communication over adherence to specific grammatical rules or pronunciation. ELF is particularly prominent in multicultural and multilingual settings, where individuals from different countries and language backgrounds regularly interact. Kachru's outer and expanding circle, which includes regions where English is used as a second or foreign language, is an area where ELF is commonly encountered (Sifakis, 2019). The popularity of ELF-informed materials among scholars, researchers, and practitioners has surged significantly due to their benefit on ELT practices and students' language development (Irham et al., 2021; Karakas, 2019; Mocanu, 2022; Vettorel, 2021).

ELF-informed materials

ELF-informed materials are educational resources specifically designed with a focus on ELF principles. The ELF-informed materials are characterised by their comparison with English as a native language (ENL-informed) materials based on language ownership, language exposure, language activities, and cultural content (Si, 2020). The ENL-informed materials typically claim language ownership by native-English speakers, while ELF-informed materials acknowledge English as a global communication tool used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The ELF-informed materials prioritise effective communication and intercultural understanding, considering the linguistic diversity in global English interactions. They help learners develop the necessary language skills to communicate effectively with other non-native English speakers in international contexts. ELF-informed materials foster flexibility in language use, promoting learners' competence

and confidence as users of English in multilingual environments (Irham et al., 2021, Karakas, 2019).

Table 1: ELF- and ENL-informed teaching materials (adopted from Si, 2020)

Indicators	ELF-informed	ENL-informed
Language ownership	All English users	Native English speakers
Language exposure	Dynamic/varieties of English use	Native English speaker of standard English
Language activity	Communication-oriented	Accuracy-oriented
Cultural content	Pluricentric	Monolithic

Teachers' attitudes toward ELF

To establish the groundwork for this study, this section discusses the findings of recent and relevant studies (e.g., Asakereh et al., 2019; Barzegar Rahatlou et al., 2018; Curran & Chern, 2017; Lee & Kim, 2019; Nguyen & Lo, 2022; Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021; Si, 2019; Zhang, 2022) conducted in various outer and expanding circles and particularly Asian contexts. We reviewed studies that shed light on how teachers in their settings perceive English as a lingua franca. Related studies were reviewed for this study so that we can compare perceived differences and similarities in ELF among teachers across different contexts, including Bhutan. The underlying belief is that comparing ideas and research findings would lead to a deeper understanding of the target phenomenon.

To begin, Ramadhani and Muslim (2021) investigated the attitudes of 50 Indonesian EFL teachers toward ELF. They found that Indonesian teachers were aware of the importance of ELF and had a positive attitude toward the inclusion of ELF-informed materials into ELT in their context. Further, the authors asserted that Indonesian teachers, in general, believe that English in the Indonesian context should be taught and learned to communicate with other English speakers and not to sound like native English speakers. A similar study conducted by Nguyen and Lo (2022) explored the attitudes of 125 Vietnamese EFL in-service teachers and 151 high school students toward ELF. Their findings suggested both teachers and students in Vietnam held positive attitudes toward ELF. Identical findings were reported in the Chinese context (Zhang, 2022). In another study, Barzegar Rahatlou et al. (2018) examined the attitudes of 183 Iranian English teachers toward the principles of ELF (namely, acceptance of other accents, authority to own the English language, and legitimacy of English used). In doing so, they found that Iranian English teachers held ambivalent views about ELF. Meaning, that while some of their participants believed that imitating native English speakers' accents is not crucial for learners, others viewed otherwise. This finding was not so different from the findings highlighted by Lee and Kim (2019) in the Korean context, a study that involved 65 pre-service English teachers from the University of Seoul. The authors highlighted that while their participants displayed favourable attitudes and intentions toward employing ELF in their setting, many felt that English teaching should follow a native English speaker's model.

Examining the attitudes of Taiwanese pre-service English teachers towards ELF, Curran and Chern (2017) identified a similar pattern of findings akin to those observed by Barzegar Rahatlou et al. (2018) among Iranian English teachers and Lee and Kim (2019) among Korean teachers. Taiwanese English teachers also possessed mixed feelings towards ELF in that some of them supported English curriculum being based on native English models (especially British and American English), whereas others sensed the importance of considering English varieties materials as part of their English curriculum. In summary, while the majority of teachers in the previously discussed contexts were positive about the ELF, Iranian and Taiwanese teachers had mixed feelings. The majority of the Korean teachers, on the other hand, continued to support the native English model for English teaching materials, despite their positive attitudes toward the ELF in general. The findings of studies reviewed thus far have shown that there is a variation in teachers' attitudes toward ELF, suggesting more studies are needed to draw a robust conclusion on teachers' attitudes toward it. Hence, this study was conducted, seeking to answer the following research question.

What attitudes do Bhutanese in-service English teachers hold towards different dimensions of English as a lingua franca: (a) the English learning model; (b) English as a communicative language; (c) the role of English and culture; and (d) English used in classrooms?

Method

Research design and participants

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method research design (Creswell et al., 2003). We employed a mixed-method design because it helps researchers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The belief is that both quantitative and qualitative data complement each other (Riazi & Candlin, 2014), and this in turn, improves the credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness of findings. To achieve our research objective, we used a snowball sampling method to gather data from 191 in-service English teachers from three western districts (both from rural and urban settings) of Bhutan, who volunteered to participate in this study. The participants were fully trained regular English teachers with diverse teaching experiences (5 years to 30 years) and ages (24 to 50 years). Their qualifications included a diploma in education (2.2%), a bachelor degree in education and English language-related fields (80.2%), and a masters in education and English-related fields (17.6%). They were teaching in secondary and primary schools in Bhutan at the time of our study. Out of 191 teachers who completed the electronic survey, 16 (5 male, 11 female) agreed to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Nine of these participants held masters and seven had bachelor degrees. All had completed the electronic survey questionnaire. The pseudonyms T1, T2...T16 were used to protect their identity.

Research instrument

The study used two research instruments to collect the data. The first was a survey questionnaire (adapted from Curran & Chern, 2017) comprising seven items for demographic information and 20 items covering four dimensions of ELF (listed in Tables 2-5). The first dimension with ten items focused on participants' attitudes toward different English models, the second dimension with two items related to participants' views of the English language; mainly focused on whether the English language should be learned for real-life communication and whether or not the English language should be learned to converse with other non-native English speakers. The third and fourth dimensions consisted of four items each emphasising participants' perspective on the role of language and culture in the English language classroom and participants' attitudes toward the medium of instruction in the language classroom respectively. The same research instrument has been used extensively in several recent studies (e.g., Asakereh et al., 2019; Curran & Chern, 2017; Zhang, 2022), suggesting that it is a reliable instrument. Nevertheless, to further establish the reliability of the instrument used in our study, Cronbach's alpha value was calculated with 15 random participants, finding .86.

We developed the semi-structured interview questions based on the research objectives, with six questions focused on teachers' attitudes toward ELF in general and their awareness of ELF (Appendix A). The qualitative data was collected primarily to help researchers gain a deeper understanding of participants' thoughts and views about ELF. Before proceeding with interviews, the questions were sent to experts for review. After some adjustments based on suggestions and comments given by experts, we conducted a pilot interview with the final set of questions with two randomly selected English teachers from Bhutan to improve its accuracy. The questions were found to be appropriate and accurate for the present research. The data gathered from the pilot interviews were not included in the final report.

Data collection

The data was collected in two phases, taking researchers two months to collect both survey and interview data. First, using the snowball sampling technique, the electronic survey questionnaire (*Google Forms*) was shared with English teachers through colleagues and acquaintances, and 191 responded. This was followed by semi-structured interviews. A total of 16 English teachers agreed to participate in the interviews and were later contacted back via email and *Facebook Messenger*. *Zoom* meetings were scheduled at their convenience. The semi-structured interviews, conducted in English (based on participants' choice) averaged 35 minutes duration. The researchers ended the interviews when the participants had answered all the interview questions and when the researchers observed data saturation. All the interviews were recorded for analysis with the participant's permission.

Data analysis

For quantitative data, which primarily dealt with teachers' attitudes towards the four dimensions of ELF, a descriptive analysis (percentage) was performed using *SPSS 26* and then it was tabulated (Tables 2-5). As for the qualitative data, a thematic analysis of transcribed data was performed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps, which involved data familiarisation, initial coding, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and producing the report. The data familiarisation and initial coding were performed separately by two researchers because O'Connor and Joffe (2020) suggested that there should be at least two different coders to improve the reliability of coded data. Next, to ensure that the generated codes are meaningful, two researchers jointly compared, read, and re-read generated codes several times (Creswell, 2008). This was then followed by searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. In this stage, researchers followed Nowell et al.'s (2017) guidelines to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the process involved in thematic analysis. Additionally, several efforts were put in to improve the credibility, validity, and trustworthiness of the reported themes/findings in this paper by considering the researcher's positionality as both insider and outsider for instance, performing member checking with participants, and the audit trail with an expert (scholar/researchers' colleague). In so doing, we received some minor comments and suggestions from both participants and experts, which we revised before reporting in this paper. Thus, the general findings were considered valid, credible, and trustworthy.

Results

Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings of participants' attitudes toward the four dimensions of ELF are tabulated in three columns, namely, strongly agree/agree, neutral, disagree/ strongly disagree (Table 2).

The first finding from the survey on the first dimension of ELF (see Table 2), which dealt with teachers' attitudes toward different English learning models revealed that the majority of participants acknowledged that native-like pronunciation is not necessary to sound proficient in English (items 3 and 19). Only 31.9% (item 2) felt that English learners should sound like native English speakers. While 44.0% (item 18) of current participants agreed that native English speakers should be role models for Bhutanese learners, more than 50% of them disagreed (items 1 and 12). In the same vein, around 70% of participants agreed that English learners in the context should be exposed to English varieties (items 5, 8 and 12).

The second dimension of the ELF (Table 3) was the participant's attitudes toward the purpose of learning English in the Bhutanese context. Almost all (92.4%) favoured that English teaching in the context should focus on teaching learners how to use the target language in real-life communication (item 14). Similarly, a larger part of the participants agreed that the English program in Bhutan should be centralised in preparing learners to communicate with second-language English speakers (item 15).

Table 2: Participants attitudes toward English learning models (N=191)

Items	Strongly agree/ Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
1. I think that English teaching materials in Bhutan should only use native-speaker models.	26.4%	23.1%	50.5%
2. I think it is important that the Bhutanese students try to sound like native speakers of English.	31.9%	20.9%	47.2%
3. I do not think my students must sound like native speakers to be proficient speakers of English.	72.6%	9.9%	17.5%
5. I think it is important that the Bhutanese students be exposed to English spoken by a range of native speakers (e.g., Australians, Indians, Africans, etc.).	70.3%	23.1%	6.6%
6. I think it is confusing to introduce students to many different English accents in class.	63.7%	15.4%	20.9%
8. I think it is important that students be exposed to English used by proficient second-language speakers.	75.8%	19.8%	4.4%
12. I do not think it is important that classroom materials provide a single model of English, either American or British.	41.7%	13.2%	45.1%
13. I think it is important that classroom materials provide a range of models of English used by L1 and L2 speakers.	78.0%	16.5%	5.5%
18. I think native speakers of English should be role models for Bhutanese students.	44.0%	20.9%	35.1%
19. Being proficient in English means being able to behave like a native speaker of English.	16.5%	18.7%	64.8%

Table 3: Participants attitudes toward using English as a communicative language (N=191)

Items	Strongly agree/ Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
14. I think the major focus of an English program in Bhutan should be teaching students to use the language in real-life communication.	92.4%	3.3%	4.3%
15. I think an important focus of an English program in Bhutan should be to prepare students for communication with people who are not English native speakers.	72.8%	16.5%	10.7%

Table 4 illustrates participants' attitudes toward the role of language and culture in the English classroom. The findings unveiled that participants held positive attitudes toward all four items. They (89.1% of participants) considered it crucial to teach learners how to use English for sharing information about their own culture (item 4). Many participants also acknowledged that Bhutanese English teachers should help learners understand the culture and traditions of people from other countries both native and non-native English-speaking countries (items 7, 9 and 10).

Table 4: Participants attitudes towards the role of English and culture (N=191)

Items	Strongly agree/ Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
4. I think it is important that students should be able to use English to share information about their own culture and traditions.	89.1%	7.7%	3.2%
7. I think it is important that English teachers help students to better understand people from other countries with whom they are likely to use English.	80.2%	13.2%	6.6%
9. I think it is important that students become familiar with the culture and traditions of native speakers of English.	59.4%	23.1%	17.5%
10. I think it is important to teach students to be aware of intercultural differences and encourage them to talk about such differences.	82.4%	11.0%	6.6%

The fourth dimension investigated participants' attitudes toward language use in the English classroom. In doing this, the results (Table 5) showed that close to 70% of the participants strongly agreed/agreed that English should be used as the only medium of instruction in English language classes (item 11). However, half of them reported that a bilingual approach (using both L1 and English) is more effective (item 16), while some mentioned that L1 in an English classroom deprives learners of developing effective meaningful negotiation strategies (item 17). Along the same lines, 60.4% of the participants perceived the importance of teaching learners the strategies of effective code-switching while using a bilingual approach in English classes (item 20).

Table 5: Participants attitudes toward language used in the classroom (N=191)

Items	Strongly agree/ Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
11. I think English should be used as the only medium of instruction in English language classes.	79.3%	5.5%	15.2%
16. I think a bilingual approach where Dzongkha (L1) is used as a support in English language classes is more effective for Bhutanese students.	40.6%	27.6%	31.8%
17. Using Dzongkha in class makes it more difficult for students to develop effective meaning negotiation strategies.	56.1%	24.2%	19.7%
20. I think it is important to teach students strategies for effective code-switching between English and Dzongkha (L1).	60.4%	18.7%	20.9%

Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews are thematically presented in this section with some relevant excerpts. Four themes emerged from interviews: the pursuit of

native-like accents and pronunciations, the role of English as both an intra- and international communicative language, the integration of ELF-informed materials, and the use of L1 in English classrooms.

The pursuit of native-like accents and pronunciations

When the participants were asked whether Bhutanese students should imitate British and American English accents/pronunciation, the majority stated that the fundamental purpose of language is to be able to communicate with each other and with other English-speaking countries and not to sound like native English speakers. They underscored that as long as the spoken language serves the purpose of communication, they do not find the necessity to follow the native English speaker's accent/pronunciation.

Accent and pronunciation do not seem to matter as long as you can communicate and convey the message (T4)

Not really, the core purpose of language be it English or our national language is to be able to communicate with each other and with other people. If it serves the purpose, I do not think we need to stick to one model of language. This can be well justified by the concept of world Englishes (T15)

Furthermore, the participants expressed concerns that imitating native-like English accents/pronunciation may have a negative impact on the pronunciation of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan.

It is not necessary to imitate native speakers. The goal of learning English is to participate in international communication and forums. Imitating native speakers may negatively influence the Dzongkha pronunciation (T16).

The role of English as both an intra- and international communicative language

Next, teachers were asked to describe the role of the English language in Bhutan, a larger part of them expressed that English serves as both an intra and international communicative language, playing a crucial role in the country.

English is the language of offices, entrepreneurship, and a medium of international communications and networking. It is also accepted as official correspondence in Bhutan besides the National language (Dzongkha) (T3).

English is very important for Bhutanese students. We do most of the official correspondence in English and in schools English is our medium of instruction (T6).

English is extremely important for Bhutan and its people. It is because, for a small economy country like Bhutan, we will need support from other developed countries around the world. Therefore, English serves as the main medium of communication language with other countries (T12).

The integration of ELF-informed materials

The participants consider English as a lingua franca (ELF) to be important in Bhutan. They realised the importance of including ELF-informed materials in the Bhutanese English curriculum. In this context, many participants responded that it is timely for the Bhutanese education system to revise the English curriculum. They stressed that the inclusion of ELF-informed materials, particularly in the undergraduate/ graduate English curriculum would be beneficial, noting its potential benefits in aiding learners' preparation for effective communication with people from diverse linguistic backgrounds (T5)

Well, it will be wonderful if ELF-informed materials are included in Bhutan's English curriculum because it will help teachers and students enhance their knowledge about the English language used by people of other countries (T2)

ELF should be included especially in the undergraduate/ graduate curriculum. Like any other country, Bhutan is becoming a hub for tourists from different countries. To communicate with people from different language backgrounds who use English as a mode of communication, Bhutanese students should be introduced to ELF before it is too late (T12).

I think ELF should be there in the curriculum because this could bring a lot of new perspectives to learning English (T14).

However, some participants expressed reservations about completely excluding the native English model from the Bhutanese English curriculum. T4 and T11 posited that Bhutanese students' educational and career prospects hinge significantly on their performance in English language proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Consequently, they recommended finding a balance between integrating ELF-informed materials and retaining aspects of the native English speaker model within the Bhutanese English curriculum.

As far as the curriculum meets the international standard test materials such as IELTS and TOEFL which Bhutanese students are required to pursue for further studies or to work abroad, the English curriculum in Bhutan should be fine. Completely doing away with British or American English materials may not work for Bhutan (T4).

The use of L1 in English classrooms

Regarding language use in English classrooms, the majority of participants expressed the belief that judicious use of learners' first language (L1) would be beneficial for English language learners in the context. However, it was suggested not to overuse learners' L1. While on one hand, teachers perceived the use of learners' L1 as beneficial for their learning process, on the other hand, it seems that teachers refrained from incorporating learners' L1 into the English classroom, due to Bhutan's policy of English as the medium of instruction.

In my opinion, I think teachers should use L1 occasionally in the classroom when needed to explain difficult concepts of the content or meanings of the new vocabulary. This way, I think students can remember well (T3).

I think we should use Dzongkha sometimes in English classrooms. However, we should not overuse it as it may limit the target language exposure to students. In my case, I hardly use it though because we are encouraged to use only English (T7).

It may be beneficial to use Dzongkha but our policy states to use only English in the classroom. Not only while teaching the English language, even other subjects such as maths, geography, history, etc., are also taught in English medium only.

Discussion

The present study examined the attitudes toward English as a lingua franca (ELF) among 191 Bhutanese in-service English teachers. The findings, comprising both quantitative and qualitative data, revealed that the majority of the participants held a positive attitude toward ELF. Their positive attitudes toward ELF were consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted in other Asian contexts by Barzegar Rahatlou et al. (2018), Ramadhani and Muslim (2021), Lee and Kim (2019), and Nguyen and Lo (2022). Regarding the English learning model, a larger number of participants disagreed with the belief that English teaching in Bhutan should be based on the native speaker's model, emphasising that students should not be taught to sound or pronounce like native English speakers (Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021); rather they should be taught to communicate meaningfully. Even in the interviews, some participants supported the idea of teaching Bhutanese learners to communicate successfully in real-life communicative scenarios, noting that as long as the spoken language serves the purpose of communication, language learners do not necessarily have to follow the native English speaker model such as accents and pronunciations. Elsewhere, Ambele (2023) also acknowledged the significance of meaningful communication between speakers and interlocutors, highlighting that the focus should be on effective communication rather than on nuances of the language such as accents and pronunciation. Another reason behind participants' belief that English language learners in Bhutan should not imitate native-like English accents/pronunciations pertains to their concern that it might have an adverse influence on the Dzongkha (the national language of Bhutan) pronunciation, which is an important national identity of Bhutan that unite people from different regions with diverse first languages (mother tongues).

This said, a minority felt the importance of following the native speaker model in teaching and learning English (cf. Barzegar Rahatlou et al., 2018; Curran & Chern, 2017). Those who valued native English models, such as British or American were particularly concerned about English language proficiency assessment criteria, which are associated with nativeness to some extent. The participants in this study sensed that completely doing away with the native English model may have a detrimental effect on Bhutanese learners' performance in English proficiency tests such as in IELTS and TOEFL, which decide most Bhutanese learners' opportunities for further studies and their employment in and outside the country. A similar concern was reported elsewhere in the Hong Kong context (see Sung, 2020).

Thus, if the English language is functioning as the language of intra or intercultural communication or as an ELF and it is accepted throughout the Kachru's outer and expanding circles, we argue that there should be different criteria or rubrics to assess English

language learners/speakers of outer and expanding circles identical to widely accepted English language proficiency tests' rubrics (e.g., IELTS and TOEFL). We find it timely to have a distinct assessment criterion/rubric for the benefit of non-native English speakers, because evidence indicates that the world has more non-native English speakers than native English speakers. Thus, future researchers may focus on devising distinct indicators or criteria to effectively assess the English language speakers of outer and expanding circles, taking into account various dimensions of ELF and English varieties.

Jenkins (2000) and Seidlhofer (2001) observed a shift in the way the English language operates, with its transformation into an intra- and intercultural communication language or a lingua franca, particularly in outer and expanding circles. The participants (over 70%) in the current study also shared a similar perspective. They recognised English in Bhutan as an intra and intercultural communication language. The qualitative findings provided additional support for this recognition. The first rationale pertains to Bhutan's status as a multicultural and multilingual society with 19 different spoken languages (Van Driem, 1994). It appeared that Bhutanese individuals commonly use Dzongkha, English, or a combination of both when engaging in casual communication with strangers or individuals with different first languages. However, within formal settings such as offices, institutions, schools, businesses, and the tourism sector, English is employed more frequently. The second reason why current participants viewed Bhutan as a context that uses English as ELF was ascribed to its dependency on India and other nations, where English serves as a main medium of communication. The reliance on the English language extends across various sectors, including education, tourism, business, and development, amongst others.

The role of English as an intra and international lingua franca in Bhutan underscores the evolving role of English in Bhutan. The findings suggest a need for immediate action from policymakers and curriculum developers concerning awareness of English varieties among Bhutanese educators, learners, and the Bhutanese at large. Considering the inclusion of English varieties and ELF-informed materials into the English curriculum in Bhutan, as suggested by present participants, may prove advantageous to Bhutanese English speakers/learners. Furthermore, Hammond and Keating (2018) and Jenkins (2006) suggested that Asian English learners should be exposed to the global diversity of language, culture, tradition, and language accents, to be on par with global English speakers. Similarly, we encourage Bhutanese policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators to look closely at potential strategies to offer Bhutanese learners additional exposure to English varieties and ELF-informed materials so that they are well-equipped for global engagement.

The participants in this study also agreed that it is timely for the Bhutanese English curriculum to be revised in light of ELF. They see the importance of integrating ELF-informed materials into the English curriculum in the Bhutanese context. This finding was consistent with the findings of research studies conducted in Indonesia (Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021) and China (Zhang, 2022). The integration of ELF-informed materials into English curricula is believed to bring substantial benefits to English learners. One advantage is that learners gain comprehensive knowledge of, the principles, and functions of ELF, which they can apply effectively to real-life English communication, as highlighted by Karakas (2019). Another benefit of including ELF-informed materials in ELT is that it not

only boosts English learners' confidence to speak English but also helps them reduce their inferiority complex (Irham et al., 2021). Furthermore, various research studies highlight the significant positive impact of integrating ELF-informed materials into ELT on students' language development (Irham et al., 2021; Karakas, 2019; Mocanu, 2022; Vettorel, 2021). Altogether, these findings suggest timely consideration of English varieties and ELF-informed materials in Bhutan and beyond, in other outer and expanding circle countries where English varieties and ELF-informed materials have not been introduced yet.

To enhance the quality of language teaching and learning, Bhutan can align itself with countries like China, Thailand, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam, which have already given importance to the inclusion of English varieties and ELF-informed materials in their ELT. In the initial stage of evaluating the effectiveness of incorporating English varieties or ELF-informed materials in Bhutan, as suggested by Asakereh et al. (2019), language teachers should be encouraged to create their self designed materials and supplementary resources tailored to meet the linguistic needs of students in light of English varieties and ELF. In the Bhutanese context, it seems that English varieties and ELF-informed materials are not formally integrated into the English curriculum and textbooks, thus leading to a potential mismatch between the learners' linguistic needs and the materials used. Yet, we could not find any studies in the Bhutanese context that evaluated English language textbooks, materials, and content in the light of ELF, to support our assumption. Bhutanese applied linguistics scholars might find it interesting to conduct a comprehensive textbook analysis within our context, to confirm to what extent the textbooks used in the context are aligned with the linguistics needs of Bhutanese English learners, that is English language as an intracultural, intercultural communication, i.e. ELF.

Regarding the use of the first language (L1) in English classrooms, more than 70% of participants reported that English should be the medium of instruction at institutions in Bhutan. On the other hand, 40% acknowledged using bilingual (Dzongkha and English) as an effective instructional practice in the English classroom. Teachers favouring of English only in the classrooms could be attributed to the long-standing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) policy in Bhutan (Wangdi & Kachchhap, 2023). Teachers in Bhutan are encouraged to adhere to EMI policy to the greatest extent. Nevertheless, in the interviews, some participants commented that teachers should be allowed to use L1 judiciously, especially to explain difficult contents and meanings of the vocabulary. The benefits of using L1 judiciously in English language classrooms were also underscored elsewhere in the Thai context (Shimray & Wangdi, 2023; Wangdi & Shimray, 2022b).

The contradiction between teachers' views about the use of L1 in English classrooms as beneficial and the EMI policy in Bhutan is interesting. It seems apparent that researchers and educators need to work on evaluating the effectiveness and feasibility of the EMI-only policy, especially in rural institutions in Bhutan. During the interviews, the majority of rural English teachers expressed occasionally using learners' first language (L1) in the classroom, unlike urban English teachers. They said that learners in rural schools are less proficient in English than in urban schools. This is partially confirmed by Wangdi and Kachchhap (2023), who found that the English vocabulary knowledge of rural students was significantly lower than urban students. Since the emphasis of this research was not upon comparing rural and urban teachers' perspectives on the fundamental principles of ELF, our research did not

address this divide. Future researchers could accord a priority to comparing the effectiveness of the EMI policy on learners' language development in rural and urban schools, and also their preferences for medium of instruction.

Conclusion and limitations

Due to the growing number of English speakers in the outer and expanding circles, English as a lingua franca or intra-intercultural communication medium is being extensively discussed, particularly in Asian contexts. However, there was a paucity of literature on this topic, particularly on how Bhutanese English teachers perceive ELF and ELF-informed materials. Thus, our study investigated Bhutanese English teachers' attitudes toward the four dimensions of ELF (Curran & Chern, 2017). Our findings revealed that the majority of participants held positive attitudes toward the four dimensions of ELF. This finding aligns with previous studies conducted in various Asian contexts, including China, Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, and others. On the whole, it can be concluded that many Asian countries, including Bhutan, regard English as a communicative lingua franca.

This indicates that it is timely for policymakers and educational stakeholders to work on how to increase awareness of ELF and ELF-informed materials among English teachers and learners in outer and expanding circles, and most importantly in the Asian region. Such awareness could enhance the effectiveness of integrating ELF-informed materials into ELT. It could be accomplished by organising workshops, seminars, and training, and most importantly by incorporating ELF-informed materials into the course book and curriculum. We also suggest heads of institutions provide a periodic newsletter with much scope of input from individual teachers on current theories, pedagogies, and materials associated with English as a lingua franca. Furthermore, initiating communities of practice, for example via widely used social media platforms in Bhutan such as *Facebook*, *WeChat*, *TikTok*, and *Telegram*, could help facilitate sharing and discussion sessions on evolving teaching strategies, pedagogies, materials and linguistic requirements such as ELF. Such wider dissemination may bring positive changes in the overall quality of English language teaching and learning in Bhutan.

While this study offers a fresh perspective on ELF from the viewpoint of English language teachers and faculty staff in Bhutan, an under-represented country in the international educational research literature, we acknowledge some limitations. The first limitation pertains to the sample size, which was relatively small, so our findings may not be fully representative of all English teachers in Bhutan. Another limitation pertains to the use of self-report instruments, which are often criticised for potential response biases. We suggest future researchers conduct a similar study in similar contexts but using different sources of data. Collecting data through in-depth interviews and observations may help draw robust conclusions on the importance of ELF and ELF-informed materials, especially concerning urgent inclusion of ELF-informed materials in English language textbooks. Interviewing educational stakeholders such as policymakers, curriculum developers, teachers, and students and then comparing their views might shed more light on the potential integration of ELF and English varieties into course curricula and English textbooks in Bhutan.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Why is the English language important in Bhutan?
2. What role does the English language play in Bhutan?
3. What is your understanding about English as a lingua franca (ELF)?
4. Should Bhutanese English learners/users aim to imitate native English speakers while communicating? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe that ELF-informed materials (e.g., audio, video, reading texts, etc., in Dzongkha or localised languages) should be included in the English curriculum of Bhutan? Why?
6. In teaching English in Bhutan, do you think it is beneficial for English language teachers to use Dzongkha or the students' native language (L1)? Why or why not?

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