From EFL (English as a Foreign Language) to ELF (English as a Lingua Franca)

"The fact that non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers (Firth, 1996), means that new varieties of English emerge which do not depend on either childhood acquisition or cultural identity and which are used in contexts where no L1 English speakers are involved (Graddol, 1999). This is referred to as English as a Lingua franca (ELF), a variety of English which does not assume adherence to all anglo communication conventions and where traditional native-speakerness holds no advantages. Here academic users of English are no less proficient than native speakers of that language and they are not aspiring to speak a standard English variety. What matters is clarity and comprehensibility and L1 speakers may need to adjust their language to new norms of international academic communication."
— Hyland, English for Academic Purposes, 2006, p. 29

A familiar language

During your school years and even beyond, you have probably thought of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In school, it was undoubtedly taught as such—that is, as the language of Great Britain or perhaps of the USA or Australia. The objective is to come as close as possible to correct language it is used by the natives of those countries, "native speakers" of English. Because a language is always culturally coded, this involves, as well, learning about the culture and history of the country.

However, if you use the internet regularly, participate in social media such as facebook, rely on other internet-based services such as YouTube or Instagram or Twitter, chances are that you have learned a great deal of English and acquired a comfort-level with the language that does not come so much from your exposure to the language in school as it does from "what's out there," the great global community of internet users who rely on English because that is the language that commands by far the largest audience and in which the amount of material available is exponentially larger than that in any other language. And you may have noticed that English usage in the internet conforms only partially to the grammar you learned in school; the vocabulary used there depends on the area of interest and the users who care about it. They would pay little attention to a newcomer to a blogspot who undertakes to correct all their "mistakes" or to inform them of "better" or dictionary-authorized items of vocabulary. In fact, such a user is likely to find him or herself ignored or even excluded from that particular community.

What you observe in such cases among internet communities is the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). English is being used not because it is the language of a predominant group or geographic area, but more likely because the people involved come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds and English is the one language they share. Some of them may in fact be native speakers of English, but even these tend not to impose their own idea of correct usage on the others. Moreover, because they have this advantage, they in fact need to take special care to adapt their own English to the way it is used in the particular group or community. Otherwise they risk being the only person in the group who understands what they have said. Or thinks so: if you speak without considering the ability of others to understand you, have you spoken, or simply made noise?

As a multi-lingual country, Switzerland has to try and balance the teaching and use of its different regional languages. The growing use of English often seems to work against this goal. Foreigners who come to Zurich often hear that the German-Swiss population is likely to prefer speaking English with them rather than High German. In addition, English is steadily displacing French or German as the language of preference for communication between the different Swiss language groups. The need to preserve Switzerland's multi-lingual heritage makes this a political issue, but from the lingua franca perspective, using English in such an environment is the natural choice. This is because English, as the lingua franca, is the language recognized as not "native" to any of the speakers involved and is therefore felt as equally available to all. The multi-lingual community Switzerland is tending towards the same choice that is made in such communities elsewhere in our increasingly interdependent world.

Speaking frankly

The term lingua franca comes originally from Italian. In Italian, franca means "open, candid, direct or sincere." The meaning of the word is a good guide to some principles of how to use English as a Lingua Franca effectively:

• consider the community. This language is made by the community that uses it. Your first concern is for clarity and openness of expression. Use language that you feel the other users will recognize and understand.

• consider cultural difference. Because the language belongs to no one, everyone tends to be more careful and to avoid assumptions about how others will react. This can be inhibiting, but it also means that all participants are feeling their way around the situation first and, as are result, are less likely to impose their expectations on the group.

• similarly, a Lingua Franca is often preferred in sensitive situations and negotiations because it puts everyone on equal footing. When you use it, you include the others involved on equal terms.

• if your English is very good, be careful not to let this interfere with others' ability to understand and to participate equally.

Strategies for language learning

Aiming for good use of English as a Lingua Franca also has consequences for strategies in language learning:

- you may need three words rather than one. There are two reasons for this: you need synonyms for words that might prove unfamiliar to others, and you will need to explain a word or idea in English for others.
- it is of less use to "map" English words in your memory to German equivalents, however close they may be. The more you become used to defining terms for yourself in English, the better you can do so for others.
- the difference between spoken English and written English becomes even more important. Where an ELF community can improvise its own English usage, this is not the English you will need for a published article or written texts for a larger audience.
- similarly: know the difference between formal, scientific or academic terms and their equivalents in more familiar English.
- strategies for repetition, summary and reformulation are even more important and useful than otherwise.

    The above are only a few principles and strategies to keep in mind in improving your effectiveness as a user of ELF. The most important thing is to think of the two languages in your communication courses at the ZHAW not as "my language" and the "foreign language," but rather as one language for more internally and locally determined communication and another for more external and broadly inclusive communication—with both of them (although in different ways) as "your languages."