In this paper, I shall argue that, despite the energetic promotion of the ELF concept, it is open to criticism on a number of counts. I will examine the ELF phenomenon through five main questions:

- What exactly is ELF?
- Does it account for the complexity of English use globally?
- Is it of any practical value?
- Why do we need to submit it to critical scrutiny?
- What are the alternatives?

It will emerge that the statistical basis for ELF is open to question, both in terms of the total numbers of NNS users and the frequency with which they deploy English. The failure to clearly distinguish between learners of English, consumers of English and active users of English further undermines the statistical support.

The theoretical basis for ELF is also inadequate: by excluding NS and Outer Circle nativised varieties, it fails to account for the complex totality of uses of English globally. The existence of an ELF speech community, without which a variety cannot develop, has also yet to be demonstrated. The 'core'/non-core' items so far identified are few in number and can hardly be used as the basis for an ELF variety. The core notion also fails to account for the role of context in determining intelligibility.

It is unworkable in practice. Apart from a deep resistance to the notion, however regrettable, from sponsors, teachers and learners, there remains the practical question of precisely what teachers are expected to teach. The ELF project is a nice example of the theory-practice divide in action.

In conclusion, I shall argue that a preferable alternative would be a focus on tolerance for variation, strategies/processes for accommodation, and cultural context.