

## Students' Views and Attitudes towards English and ELF in an Italian University

This book is the result of a doctoral research that investigated the views and attitudes towards English, English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of a population of undergraduate students at an Italian University. The research developed out of an interest in the Italian students' views of what English is and does, and their own perceived needs as learners of a language whose status appears to be undergoing a shift from that of a foreign language towards that of a seemingly de-nativized, de-territorialized and culturally neutral transactional currency for lingua franca communication. *Students' Views and Attitudes towards English and ELF in an Italian University* is situated in the context of the global expansion of English and its unprecedented advance in key societal domains of the non-native English-speaking countries of the Western world. The book provides a fresh perspective on the contemporary realities of English and contributes to the task of assessing the prevailing pedagogical models of English as a foreign language (EFL) that inform English language teaching in the Italian education system.



### Marco Bagni

Marco Bagni holds a PhD in English Studies with a Doctoral Thesis on university students' attitudes towards English and English as a Lingua Franca. He is currently an adjunct lecturer at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy), where he teaches courses in General English and English for Specific Purposes. He has also taught English Linguistics at the Fondazione UniverMantova (Italy) and has a long experience working as a foreign language teacher in Italian upper secondary education institutions. His research interests include the Sociolinguistics of English in the contemporary world, English Language Variation, English as a Lingua Franca, Linguistic Imperialism and Linguistic Human Rights, English Language Education and Multilingualism, Global English Language Teaching, EFL/ESL teacher education.

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Marco Bagni

*This is dedicated to the memory of my father, Paolo Bagni.*

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## 1. Introduction

This introductory chapter begins by outlining the objectives of the research. The background of the research study is then summarized in two distinct sections. Section 1.2 situates the research in the wider theoretical framework of reference. It provides a brief outline of the latest developments that have characterized the field of applied linguistics against the background of the changing sociolinguistic realities of English. Section 1.3 introduces the methodological framework of this research study by arguing for the importance of language attitude studies in the perspective of assessing and revising the ELT practices. Following this, the present research study is introduced, and its rationale is explained against the backdrop of the context and purpose of the research (section 1.4). Subsequently, the research questions are stated (section 1.5) and finally the thesis structure is summarized (section 1.6).

### 1.1 Objectives

This research consists of a study that investigates the views and attitudes towards English and its teaching of a population of students of three Departments of the Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE), located in Italy. The term view is used here in its general meaning of opinion, perspective, idea. As a distinct concept from views, attitudes are more latent and implicit than the overt opinions (Garrett 2010), hence they are only inferred from the data collected through the research instruments (refer to chapter 3). The students' views and attitudes are examined through the lenses of the contemporary 'global' dimension of English, the unprecedented expansion of its functions and roles in key societal domains of the expanding circle<sup>1</sup> and particularly its role of 'lingua franca' for international and intercultural communication. The objectives of this research study are: 1) to contribute to assessing the prevailing pedagogical models of English as a foreign language (EFL) that inform English language teaching (ELT) in the expanding circle; 2) to point to possible future directions for both research in applied linguistics and

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is made here to Kachru's (1985, 1992) model for the expansion of English, which distinguishes three concentric circles: inner, outer and expanding. The latter conventionally indicates the countries where English is traditionally learned as a foreign language. Despite its limitations and oversimplification of the sociolinguistic realities of English, Kachru's model has become common standard in applied linguistics research as a useful shorthand for classifying contexts of English world-wide (refer to section 2.1.1 for a further discussion of Kachru's model).

ELT practitioners regarding a paradigm shift towards a pedagogical approach that embraces the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Ideological positions are embedded in attitudes to language, and while the ideology of the standard language and “native speakerism” (Holliday 2006) have informed ELT theory and practice for a long time, this research aims to explore the possibility that the perceptions of the students involved in this study may also reveal an awareness of and a favorable orientation towards English as both a polycentric language and a de-territorialized and de-nativized lingua franca.

## **1.2 New perspectives on English and ELT**

The post-national era of globalization has witnessed a turn in the field of applied linguistic research, from the monolingual assumptions inherited from nation-state thinking, towards an interest for the multilingual usages and a focus on the inherent heterogeneity of the speech communities of the West.

Post-structuralist developments in the study of language in society in the era of globalization have emphasized the ideologically constructed character of the notion of language as a self-bounded system linked with a supposedly homogeneous geo-localized community that had underpinned the linguistics and the applied linguistics of the twentieth century (Blommaert & Rampton 2011, Makoni & Pennycook 2005). Accordingly, monolingualism as the norm and the assumed natural character of a supposedly monolingual native speaker have come to be questioned. The complexities of the sociolinguistic urban spaces of the post-colonial and post-cold war West, in particular, have drawn increased attention to the new kinds of multilingualism characteristic of diasporic life, often appreciated in works in linguistic landscaping (Blommaert & Rampton 2011). Rampton conceptualization of “language crossing” (1995), describing the act of code-switching into varieties that are not considered part of a speaker’s linguistic repertoire, as a way of moving across social or ethnic boundaries, was in this respect very influential. Following Rampton’s work on the dialectic between group belonging and ethnic otherness, an interest for the sociolinguistics of migration has grown, with a renewed focus on identity and its symbolic expression in the linguistic behavior.

Applied linguistic research has considered the implications for education of the relationship between language and identity in contexts where communication is mobile and complex (Creese & Blackledge 2015, 2010). In

the field of second language acquisition, Swain's conceptualization of "linguaging" (2006), which described the learner's use of the target language in the L2 class, was very influential too. Foregrounding the key role of linguaging as a way of "making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (2006: 98) in the learning process, Swain highlighted the processual nature of linguistic performance in the target language and implicitly legitimized the non-native speaker's performance that falls short of the native speaker-target. The same concept of the dynamic process of meaning-making through language has been recently repositioned within a post-modernist multilingual-integrative perspective that blurs the boundaries between the learner's L1 and the target language and sees these as non-discrete codes in the act of performance. In order to disentangle the notion of multilingualism from the traditional view that understands it as a sum of more discrete codes, alternative conceptualizations have been proposed, such as "polylinguaging" (Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen, Møller 2011), "metrolingualism" (Otsuji & Pennycook 2010), "urbilingualism" and "lingua franca multilingualism" (Makoni & Pennycook 2012), "translinguaging" (García & Wei 2014), "translingual practice" (Canagarajah 2013).

It is an established fact that the processes of globalization have further entrenched the primacy of English in the world, accelerating its 'spread' in the expanding circle, where the English language has come to play many roles for the non-native speakers of English (NNESs henceforth). More than that, today's students of EFL can easily receive target language input through the new media and can be potentially exposed to diverse Englishes other than the Standard variety of the English classroom.

In this fast-changing context, applied linguistics scholars have been led to borrow the post-structuralist conceptual toolkit that challenged the fundamental assumptions about languages and their group of speakers, and have reconceptualized English in a way that includes both its diatopic variation on the global scale, and its uncertain relationship with the traditionally accepted concepts of nation and culture. Recent research in applied linguistics thus emphasizes the polycentricity of English(es) and its status of lingua franca for intercultural communication. Within this framework, the study of the English language has developed into the distinct though interrelated strands of research in World Englishes (WE henceforth), English as an International language (EIL henceforth), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF henceforth) (see 2.3).

Furthermore, the status of English in today's world has also precipitated a paradigm shift in the specific context of ELT: in view of the tremendous changes that the sociolinguistics realities of the English language have undergone in the last three decades, there is general agreement as to the need to re-assess the approaches adopted in English language education worldwide (see 2.4). The 'global' dimension of English and its increased use as a lingua franca carry several implications for language policy and planning in general, and for ELT in the specific, in the countries where English is traditionally learned as a foreign language. The traditionally accepted EFL pedagogical models appear today outdated and possibly even obsolete. Consensus has grown among applied linguists over the need to adjust the theory and practice of ELT in the EFL countries to the changing nature of the English language outside the classroom. As it is illustrated further on, ELF scholarship has taken on the task of revising and rethinking the general goals of foreign language education, the specific target of English language learning, the curriculum design, the materials and methods, as well as the language assessment criteria and teacher recruitment practices. Research work that contributes to the task of exploring the possibility of adopting an ELF-aware approach that supersedes the traditional EFL pedagogical model is timely. In this regard, the key issues of ownership of English, legitimacy of the non-native English (NNE) usages and the cultural frames of reference associated to the English language demand investigation.

### **1.3 The importance of language attitude studies**

A re-orientation of the ELT models and strategies would arguably serve the double purpose of making the teaching of English more motivating to today's learners, and also more effective, in view of the demands that are placed upon future users of the language in a societal context that puts increased emphasis on English language communication skills. However, before any changes in English language education can be confidently suggested it is arguably important to understand the perceptions and the opinions of the ELT stakeholders; in this sense, the study of language attitudes bears particular relevance in the perspective of facilitating a paradigm shift. The importance of attitude studies related to the context of ELT has long been recognized and more and more studies of attitudes of ELT practitioners and learners of English in the expanding circle have appeared over the last two decades. As it is illustrated in chapter 3.4, several attitude studies, with various foci, have

investigated the teachers' and learners' attitudes towards English in educational contexts, in the core English-speaking countries, and in the expanding circle countries where for many users and future users of English a shift is arguably occurring from EFL to ELF. Existing studies include attitudes towards different accents and varieties of the language as learning target models, attitudes towards native and non-native English speaker teachers, attitudes towards the teaching methods, the learning contents and materials, attitudes towards ELF, and also attitudes to English-medium instruction (EMI). Over the last decade, the need for a paradigm shift in ELT has gathered momentum, and more studies of attitudes towards ELF in the expanding circle have started to appear, some of which were explicitly carried out with a view to sensitizing in-service and prospective instructors towards an ELF-informed pedagogy, and to integrating ELF and WE into the English language curriculum.

As it is shown in chapter 3.4, most studies of attitudes towards English and ELF were conducted in specific ELT contexts of the expanding circle; that is, they investigated either the attitudes of non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs henceforth) or the attitudes of NNEST students who were studying English, as a major academic subject or in a free-standing language course. The preference for a native English (NE) model that was found to prevail among teachers and students was thus an arguably predictable outcome, as the context in which the studies were carried out positioned them in those very specific roles, overriding other potential roles as users of the language outside the classroom. However, the population of users of English in lingua franca communication is larger and more varied than that of the students who specialize in English studies or foreign languages. At the time of the investigation, not many research studies had examined the attitudes of users of ELF from the expanding circle who are not directly involved in ELT as practitioners or learners, including university students who are majoring in other fields of studies than English.

It must be also observed that English is today learned more widely in the education systems of Europe, and in the European countries of the Mediterranean region, where the last two decades have seen the most dramatic changes in the local societies' relationship with the English language, English is now a mandatory subject from an early age. Therefore, there is a growing number of people who have received and receive English language instruction during their formal education, regardless of their willingness and motivation

to learn English. In other words, every European youth, although to an extent that may vary considerably, can be said to have a stake in ELT, and can be regarded as a potential user of ELF. All this considered, there is arguably need for more research in attitudes towards English and ELF that is carried out in the expanding circle, where the need to bridge the gap between the traditional EFL models and ELF is more urgent, and that involves a more heterogeneous population than most of the studies conducted so far have done.

#### **1.4 This study**

This study was carried out in three different Departments of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE): the Department of Communication and Economics (DCE henceforth) and the Department of Education and Humanities (DESU henceforth), where the students who were reached for the investigation were attending traditional Italian-medium courses, and the Department of Studies on Language and Culture (DSLCL henceforth), where the majority of the students who participated in the study were receiving English-medium instruction.

With the aim of offering the stakeholders' viewpoint on issues where their voice would otherwise go unheard, it is the rationale of this research that an investigation into the opinions, beliefs, and the underlying attitudes towards English, ELF, and English language pedagogy of a varied population of students in an Italian university can contribute to the task of assessing the established EFL models of English language pedagogy, and point to possible ways of fine-tuning ELT to the needs and goals of future users of English who are located in the new frontiers of the expanding circle.

Research in NNES students' attitudes to English conducted in Italy is still rather scarce, and the population of non-native speaker students who participated in this research study is also more heterogeneous, in terms of their relationship with English, than that of most studies of students' attitudes to English and ELF that had been conducted at the time of the investigation. The choice of the three Departments in which the study was conducted allowed for comparisons to be explored and establish possible parallels and divergences.

However, the greatest majority of the participants also shared a partially common background as native speakers of Italian who had received formal

education in Italy, where English is taught according to the traditional EFL model, throughout the entire cycle, from elementary to high school. Following a trend of English being learned more widely in continental Europe at large, in the Italian school system the age at which kids start learning English was lowered in 2003 to the first grade of elementary, while also more and more private as well as state and municipal preschools now offer English language classes. The last decade has also witnessed the rapid growth of content-and-language-integrated learning (CLIL) courses in secondary education and the multiplication of EMI programs in higher education. More generally, in the last two decades, Italy has seen English making inroads in domains of language use that were previously reserved to the national language and, as a consequence, the demand for English language skills has grown substantially. The increased emphasis that the processes of ‘globalization’ have placed on working competence in English, as a particularly valuable asset and an ever more necessary skill in higher education and certain professional positions, was therefore a factor of influence on all the participants’ perceptions, influencing their beliefs and opinions on what English is and does.

Also, exposure to English through both the traditional and the new media has nowadays reached a point where English in Italy can no longer be regarded as a completely ‘foreign’ language. This research started from the consideration that all university students, regardless of their major and their disciplinary training, had encountered and possibly used, in their out-of-classroom experience, different Englishes that may not necessarily correspond to the Standard variety of the English classroom nor to any other NE variety. Therefore, all the participants, whatever their personal experience and relationship with English, were thought to be in a position to express opinions on the models for ELT of their home country’s education system, and on what to learn in the English classroom and how best to be taught it.

This study investigated the participants’ general perceptions of the contemporary sociolinguistic profile of English from a number of interrelated foci, and so different topics were brought up: the status, roles and functions of English, and ELF in particular, together with the related issues of ownership of English and the legitimacy of the NNE usages; the participant’s awareness of variation in English(es), as well as the participants’ personal opinions on their learning experience, and their beliefs about how to make the learning of English more motivating and effective.

The views of the participants in this research study were directly elicited by the researcher and their attitudes were inferred from the consciously formulated opinions and beliefs about the topics that were considered, in accordance with the method typical of folk linguistics research (Niedzielski & Preston 2003) and the direct approaches to the study of language attitudes (Garrett 2010) (see chapter 3). To this end, the study integrated a qualitative and a quantitative approach in the analysis of the collected data. Not only was the integration of methods believed to increase the reliability and validity of the collected data, but it also allowed to explore the possible reasons for the attitudes and put forward working hypothesis for further investigation. A limitation of most existing studies in students' attitudes to English is that they did not provide possible explanations for the attitudes, nor did many of them consider the influence of the respondents' previous experience and other background factors. This study took account of the participants' personal experience as an important variable that helped contextualize and explain the student's beliefs and their attitudes.

Also, this study interrogated ELT-related matters that are a concern of applied linguistics research by integrating them within the wider framework of a sociolinguistics of the English language in the 'globalized' world. This integration of perspectives allowed to suggest hypothesis on the ideological and structural factors that influenced the students' attitudes, which may also become the focus of further research aimed at assessing and updating the ELT strategies. The qualitative analysis, in particular, allowed to gain insights into the deeper ideological underpinning of the attitudes, as they were articulated in arguments and counterarguments by the participants.

The attitudes here examined reproduce ideologies related to language and its pedagogy that are socialized at both the micro-level of the English classroom and the macro-level of society at large. As chapter 3 shows, it is proved by the existing studies that the learners' attitudes to English and ELF tend to be strongly influenced by the dominance of NE norms in ELT and the ideology of the standard language. The native-speaker episteme dominates ELT worldwide, and research is needed that investigates the feasibility of a paradigm shift towards an ELF-informed approach to ELT, highlighting its possible benefits as well as its limitations, and any possible barriers to change. Particularly in the expanding circle, where it is becoming increasingly important for the new generations to learn English as well as learning academic content *through* English, it is necessary to understand how an ELF perspective

can be effectively integrated into the ELT practices as well as the EMI practices.

By providing a window to the participants' views and the ideologies underlying their perceptions of English and its pedagogy, this study also aimed to explore the possibility that today's learners are favorably disposed towards a different understanding of English and its learning that embraces its pluricentricity, on the one hand, and its de-nativized and de-territorialized status of *lingua franca*, on the other hand.

### **1.5 The Research Questions**

In accordance with the objectives of the research and on the basis of the considerations previously exposed, the following research questions (RQ) were generated:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards English?
2. What are their attitudes towards ELF?
3. What are the students' opinions on the teaching of English?
4. Is an ELF-informed approach in tune with the students' own perceived needs?

The first and the second research questions focused on how the participants viewed the English language in the context of today's world and involved the status, the functions, the roles, and the perceived future use of English from the viewpoint of a non-native English speaker (NNES) student. The second question, in particular, addressed the 'global' *lingua franca* role of English and related also to the ownership of the English language, implicitly asking whether the students perceived English as belonging to a particular group of speakers or not. The third question was centered around how the participants evaluated their experience of learners of English as a foreign language in formal instruction and aimed to expose the critical issues of the EFL approach. Given the presence of students of an English-taught master's degree program in the participants sample, RQ3 also addressed the learners' opinions on and attitudes to the integration of content and language in English-medium instruction (EMI). The fourth question specifically focused on the viability of an ELF-informed approach to the teaching of English. It was initially considered as a sub-question of RQ3, but it was eventually separated for the

sake of clarity, since it specifically related the interconnected topics of linguistic variation in English, the learning target and the cultural content of the English language classroom to the students' own perceived learning needs.

## **1.6 Thesis structure**

The second and the third chapter provide the theoretical framework for the current study and present the review of the existing literature. The second chapter begins by establishing the wider sociolinguistic context in which the object of the research is positioned. After a critical discussion of a set of terms that have become standard in the field of English studies and that are used throughout this research, the chapter moves on to consider the advantages and disadvantages that have been associated, in scholarly research, to the 'global' dimension of the English language. Subsequently, an overview of the developments in applied linguistics research aimed at capturing the realities of English in the era of globalization is provided, with a particular focus on the ELF paradigm and the implications that this has had for ELT. Finally, the existing body of research work where arguments have been advanced for an epistemic break in ELT are reviewed. The third chapter introduces the study of language attitudes and underscores its relevance in relation to the purpose of the study. The methods of language attitude research are presented and the review of previous studies in attitudes towards English that are deemed significant in relation to the objectives of this research is provided. Chapter four outlines the methodology of the research study. This chapter includes a description of the setting where the research was carried out, a critical discussion of the method adopted for this research, a detailed description of the data collection procedure and a discussion of the development of the research instruments. Chapter five and six present the analysis of the data collected through, respectively, the questionnaire and the interviews. Chapter seven discusses the results in relation to the research objectives and questions. Chapter eight draws the conclusions by summarizing the findings and pointing out the implications of the research study. In the same chapter, the credibility of the results is discussed in terms of reliability, validity and limitations of the procedures of data collection and analysis, and suggestions are made for further research.

in the pedagogy of the English language to be confidently suggested, it is important to understand the perceptions and the opinions of the learners, who are the primary stakeholders of ELT. In regard to that, the relevance of attitude studies carried out in ELT contexts was highlighted.

As stated in 1.4, the rationale of this research was that an investigation into the views and attitudes of a relatively varied population of students in an Italian university can contribute to the task of assessing the established EFL pedagogical model and suggest possible ways of fine-tuning ELT in the new peripheries to the needs and goals of today's learners, who are likely to use English in lingua franca communication in the future.

## **8.2 Summary of the research findings**

In answer to research question 1, the findings indicated that the students held a favorable attitude towards English, which they perceived as both a prestigious and attractive language. It was found that the students regarded English as an important tool for social inclusion in a globalized world that places great emphasis on English language skills. The prestige of English was found to be related in great part to its alleged potential to enhance one's chances of competitiveness in the work world and to its symbolic value as gateway to a cosmopolitan citizenship. The advance of English in the new peripheries was found to be accepted with pragmatism and although some students showed keen sensitivity to the preservation of linguistic diversity and particularly their own mother tongue, the usefulness and necessity of English in its established role of 'global' lingua franca went largely unquestioned.

Although the students acknowledged the instrumental function of English as a tool for inter-cultural communication, very few suggestions were given that the students could see English as a culturally neutral language. Specific ENL cultural references were found to be associated with English which appeared to contribute to its prestige and most importantly to its attractiveness, in the eyes of the students.

Although some students recognized that English is a pluricentric language and few of them also described it as a de-nativized and de-territorialized language that belongs to anyone who uses it, a characterization of English as the language of the Americans and the British was nevertheless found to prevail.

The participants thus tended to view variation in dichotomous terms and particularly the interview findings revealed a dual orientation, in that British English was valued as the most prestigious variety and American English was regarded as the most attractive one.

The prestige of British English was found to be related to its unquestioned status as knowledge base and benchmark in ELT and more generally to its institutional support, and to the images of authenticity, heritage, tradition, and history that it evokes. The attractiveness of American English appeared instead to be related to its connotations as the language of US culture, and particularly pop culture, which emerged as the main source of English language input in the out-of-school.

Most interestingly although perhaps not surprisingly, the students were found to associate British English with a formal register and American English with an informal register, characterizing the latter as a ‘simplified’ and ‘slangy’ variety of English. The students’ perceptions were found to be influenced by the standard language ideology and it was argued that at the root of the stereotyped views on variation in English there appeared to be a misconception of the nature of the rules of grammar, which the interviewees apparently tended to conceive as prescriptive, rather than descriptive. The students tended to use prescription in the description of the varieties of English and delegitimize all deviations from an accepted NE model as inappropriate and incorrect. It was argued that the students’ experience as EFL learners decisively contributed to entrenching the received beliefs and prejudices about Standard English and the other varieties.

It was also found that only the students who had received training in linguistics and had been introduced to the study of language variation seemed to be able to recognize that Standard English is an idealization that is hardly ever realized in actual usage of the language.

In answer to research question 2, it was found that the students’ attitudes towards ELF were rather ambivalent. On the one hand, by vast majority the participants seemed to safely assume that English can be adopted and used by the NNEs as a transactional currency for wider communication purposes. On the other hand, rather than having a sense of the global ownership of English, the students were found to relate the both the prestige and the attractiveness of English to the specific cultural associations that the two internationally recognized and codified varieties of English indexed.

The findings also suggested that as English functions as the lingua franca of higher education and research, it also performs cultural work, in that it is also the vehicle of culture-specific content. More generally, the findings indicated that the great vitality and the advance of English in the new peripheries is tied to the dissemination of US cultural products, norms, and values.

On top of all that, although the quasi totality of the participants recognized the lingua franca role of English and some of them were also aware that they would very likely use English in the future in communication with other NNEs, a clear tendency was observed to gravitate towards NE norms. This study thus confirmed previous research in students' attitudes that highlighted the attractiveness of NE varieties and revealed a desire, on the part of learners, to sound like the NNEs.

However, as the interview data revealed, the students did appear to have a sense that in real-life situations the necessity of carrying out successful communication takes priority over adherence to a native-like model of pronunciation. Also, it was commented that an excessive concern for grammatical correctness and particularly for sticking to the norms of RP inhibits the NNEs from speaking English confidently.

Even so, the legitimacy of NNE pronunciation seemed to be accepted in general only as an abstract principle. It was argued that the participants attributed great importance to NE pronunciation because they were assessed within an academic setting, and it is very likely that they perceived themselves as learners, rather than users of English. In this sense, this study confirmed previous attitude studies that found that in instructional settings, considerations on the primacy of intelligibility are overridden by the expectations that teachers have of students, as well as those that the latter have of their instructors, regardless of their status of NNEs. Interestingly, it was also suggested by a few students that, in out-of-school contexts of lingua franca communication, mutual intelligibility ultimately depends to a great extent on adherence to an internationally recognized NE model.

A generalized negative attitude towards NNE seemed to prevail among the participants, and in accordance with the above-mentioned tendency to use prescription in description, several interviewees characterized NNE accents as "imperfect" and "wrong". Even those interviewees who recognized the primacy of intelligibility in lingua franca communication nevertheless revealed negative attitudes to NNE. Such unfavorable attitudes tended to be even stricter

towards the Italian-inflected pronunciation. This finding confirmed previous studies that indicated how greater awareness of L1 transfer in the English accents of one's own native speaker group than in the accents of other NNEs breeds more negative attitudes towards the former.

Most interestingly, ambivalent attitudes towards ELF were also revealed by the students who had attended ELF courses. It was suggested that ELF-informed overt beliefs can coexist with a deeper-seated negative attitude towards non-native and non-standard English norms. In this sense, this study's findings were in line with the results of previous research that concluded that ELF tends to be accepted in the abstract but resisted in practice. It was also argued that the interviewees' comments that reproduced the typical arguments of ELF research literature were possibly biased by social desirability.

Nevertheless, this study also suggested that however deeply the negative attitudes towards NNE may be entrenched, they can also be changed. If, on the one hand, the conventional ELT practices and especially language testing and assessment heavily influence the students' attitudes, on the other hand, awareness-raising of linguistic variation and its principles can facilitate a shift towards a more favorable orientation towards non-standard English and lead to an acceptance of NNE norms.

The interview data offered valuable insights in answer to research question 3. First, they revealed that the students who participated in this study were very demanding of ELT in the Italian education system and set high standards as to the learning outcomes; all of which arguably testified to the existence of a sort of social pressure to become proficient in English.

The widely held belief that the earlier English teaching is imparted in formal education the better the learning outcomes in the long run, which was revealed by the analysis of the data obtained from both instruments, was proof of a prevailing sentiment that English language skills are a must for the new generations. While only the one interviewee who had worked in a kindergarten was against the introduction of English at the earliest stages of education and apparently based her opinion on direct experience, almost unanimously the interviewees were found to hold the commonsensical opinion that English in Italy should be learned already at the preschool stage.

Several interviewees argued their support for the early start tenet by referring to the presumed advantages related to the young kid's "brain plasticity".

However, it was pointed out in the discussion of the findings that the younger learner's advantages that are related to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg 1967) can only be observed in target language contexts and in bilingual families. Also, against the 'early exposure myth' reproduced in some of the interviewees' comments, it was observed that it cannot be presumed that young Italian kids can 'naturally' acquire the English language in the very few hours of the preschool timetable.

It was perhaps not be expected that as undergraduate students the interviewees were knowledgeable of matters of second language acquisition. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that they subscribed to the early start tenet, regardless of any considerations related to the wider context in which English is learned. What was arguably most interesting was that this study's findings quite clearly reflected the emphasis that has been given in public discourse to the necessity to raise English proficient students starting from the earliest stages of formal education.

The interviewees seemed to lament that that there is not enough English in the life of the Italians, and many of them were found to suggest that the onus is on the education system to bridge that gap between Italy and other (non-English speaking) European countries, where their peers can receive a comparatively greater amount of English language input.

Several interviewees greatly valued international mobility as a way of integrating classroom learning with hands-on experience and claimed that the public education system should offer learners opportunities to be immersed in a target language environment by promoting exchange programs. Suggestions were also given that more school subjects should be taught through the English medium. The perceived advantages of integrating the teaching of content and language were found to be related to both sides by the LACOM students who commented on the pros and cons of receiving English medium education.

However, in accordance with the view that Italy lags behind other European country in terms of English proficiency, some students also bemoaned that the Italian education system is not quite ready to offer EMI instruction. More generally, this research study found that the students tended to perceive the traditional ways of EFL pedagogy as not in tune with their own perceived needs as future users of English in a society that places great emphasis on English language skills.

Several interviewees censured the GT method and particularly its emphasis on accuracy rather than fluency. The EFL classroom was found fault with for being too focused on teaching uncontextualized grammar rules, and it was lamented that such a teaching method does not foster the learners' ability to use the language in real life, especially in spoken interactions. On the one hand, the teaching of grammar was valued by a few students as an efficient way of providing learners with a solid basis on which to build more practical skills. On the other hand, many of them suggested that an excessive concern for grammatical correctness in the EFL classroom has the effect of inhibiting fluency in speaking, hence of preventing learners from developing confidence in the use of English in out-of-school contexts.

Besides being ineffective, the failure to balance theory with practice in the EFL classroom was found to be demotivating. In this sense, the need to foster the learners' communicative competence was found to be paired with a need to connect the teaching practices the out-of-school realities of English use. The interviews revealed a strong tendency to conceive ELT in utilitarian and instrumentalist terms, by which English learning does not have any intrinsic ends but must respond to the demands of the labor market.

Although the findings suggested that the English class should focus on the out-of-school realities of English and prepare future users to function in a work world that demands English skills, it was also found that classroom English and the English language input students receive outside the formal space of the English classroom tended to be considered by the majority of the participants as two separate spheres. On the one hand, a few interviewees expressed a wish for closer links between the classroom and the out-of-school context. On the other hand, a pragmatic attitude towards the learning target model largely prevailed among the participants, who by vast majority did not question the validity of British Standard English as the one and only knowledge base and benchmark of ELT.

The standard language ideology was found to have a strong influence on the participants' views on the learning target model. As it was mentioned above, the American English which represented the students' main source of out-of-school input tended to be associated with non-standard usage and informality, and for that reason it was considered inappropriate for the English classroom. More than that, only few interviewees, who had had hands-on experience as users of English in lingua franca communication, censured a narrow focus on monolithic English for its being inadequate to prepare learners to deal with the

dynamic heterogeneity they are bound to encounter as users of English once they are outside the classroom.

Regardless of any considerations about the learning target model, the unnaturalness of the classroom setting was highlighted as one contextual factor that potentially undermines the effectiveness of the learning process. The interviewees who had had study- or work-abroad experiences pointed to the crucial distinction between learning English from the textbook in a classroom setting and being immersed in a naturalistic setting. The prevalent perception that there is a need for more English in the lives of the Italian students and, most importantly, for more effective ways of teaching it, apparently led the participants to believe that the English classroom must imitate a naturalistic setting. It was found that some students appeared to place demands on ELT that classroom-based instruction alone cannot possibly meet, and it was argued that they did not seem to be fully aware of that impossibility.

However, as they emphasized the need to shift the focus of ELT away from decontextualized grammar towards the development of communicative competence, the students also implicitly suggested that teachers of English must combine the notion of language as an abstract grammar system with the notion of a communicative tool in the real world.

In accordance with the view that instructional settings must recreate the conditions that are found in naturalistic settings, the quasi totality of the interviewees were found to uphold monolingual teaching already from the earliest stages of education as a way of maximizing the use of the target language in the classroom. However, the questionnaire findings also showed that less than two thirds of the sample were found to support the monolingual tenet, and that by vast majority the respondents also believed that a teacher of English must be able to communicate to the learners through their L1, with the implication that the L1 can provide a useful support to the learning process. The discrepancy between the findings obtained from the two instruments arguably reflected the non-representativeness of the interviewee sample, with respect to the questionnaire sample. Most interviewees were proficient learners who appeared to be motivated to attain native-like proficiency, and it was not surprising that the interview findings revealed a considerable influence of native speakerism.

In accordance with the tendency to gravitate towards NE norms, several interviewees' comments suggested that native-like pronunciation is an

essential prerequisite for the NNESTs. It was argued that the deficit views of the NNESTs' competence, which the LACOM students tended to relate to their instructors' NNE pronunciation, had more to do with prejudice than with an objective problem of intelligibility. It was also suggested that as students of an English-taught program, the LACOM students possibly viewed their teachers as target language models, and for that reason they appeared to lean so strongly towards NESTs and NE norms.

Other interviewees who were not attending an English-taught degree program instead also recognized the advantages of being taught by a NNEST, apparently relating them to the fact that the NNESTs have been learners of English themselves. It was concluded that the findings of this study confirmed those of previous research in students' attitudes which revealed that the choice between a NEST and a NNEST is not a straightforward one and that while learners tend to prefer the NESTs because they are target language and target culture models, on the one hand, they also recognize the advantages of sharing an ease of mutual comprehension with the NNESTs, on the other.

While a view that the English classroom must recreate the conditions that are found in a naturalistic setting prevailed, some interviewees also acknowledged that since learning a language is a complex process, personal motivation and one's willingness to extend learning beyond the instructional setting are key factors for success.

Personal experience as successful learners of English appeared to have led several students to claim that English is objectively easy to learn. It was noted that the interviewees who claimed that English is easy to learn had been studying it for several years and had had opportunities to learn it also in informal ways in target language environments. In addition to that, it was observed that today's students have the opportunity to receive a considerable amount of genuine target language input, especially through the new media, hence they are facilitated in the learning process.

However, it was also argued that the stereotype of English as an easy-to-learn language suggested that the students were very likely biased by social desirability. That is to say that the students projected an ideal image of themselves as confident and successful highly proficient English learners by claiming that English is objectively easy to learn, in spite of the fact that on average Italians are ranked among the least proficient speakers of English in the old continent.

In answer to research question 4, the findings indicated that an ELF-aware approach to English teaching is in tune with the students' own perceived need to become competent users of English in real-life contexts. However, this study also suggested that the transition from an EFL to an ELF model may not be a smooth one since it might arguably meet with the students' criticism.

On the one hand, considering the importance that the students attributed to the instrumental purposes of English learning, the findings did not seem to provide any arguments against the idea of not measuring the learners' proficiency with reference to NE norms. On top of that, the ELF pedagogical proposals of introducing learners to a wide range of regional and social dialects of English and fostering the learners' intercultural sensitivity and competence seemed in keeping with the students' own perceived needs as future users of English in lingua franca communication settings. On the other hand, this study also revealed that the students tended to hold on to very 'traditional' notions of English teaching, particularly in regard to the learning target model, and it was pointed out that the principle of prioritizing successful communication over adherence to NE norms may not win the students over easily.

This study suggested that even though the students recognized that NE norms are irrelevant for future users of English, as learners of English they rather seemed to be motivated by a desire to appear as fluent as possible, as if to reduce the power imbalance between NESs and NNESs and increase their range of competitiveness with respect to the other NNESs. The analysis of the interview data suggested that the findings may have been biased by the composition of the sample of the interview participants, most of whom were confident and successful learners of English who wished to attain native-like proficiency and so quite naturally gravitated towards NE norms. Interestingly, native-like pronunciation was found to be held in high regard because it was perceived as an added value that confers NNESs distinction and confidence, regardless of whether the communicative exchange involves NESs or NNESs.

Furthermore, the idea of transcending the teaching of monolithic English did not emerge as a major concern of the participants. The generalized tendency to view English language variation in dichotomous terms suggested that the students may not even see the point of adopting a more inclusive approach that increases exposure to varieties other than British English and American English and raises awareness of ELF usage.

The findings also suggested that as long as the students tend to view English as the language of the British and the Americans, the idea of decoupling English from the cultures of the nations that propelled it forward throughout the globe may not find much support.

On top of all that, the widely held perception that the English classroom must imitate a target language naturalistic setting was found to be a major attitudinal barrier to the paradigm shift away from native-speakerism towards a multilingual approach to English teaching that recognizes the advantages of translanguaging practices. Finally, confirming previous research findings, language proficiency tests, for their washback effect on the objectives and content of the English language curriculum, emerged as another barrier to innovation.

### **8.3 Contribution and implications of the research**

This study inscribed itself in the field of ELF research, a sub-field of applied linguistic research that has been thriving and rapidly evolving in the expanding circle. Although the investigation was conducted on a relatively small population of undergraduate students at a single Italian university that was selected by non-probability sampling, it nevertheless yielded abundant data. Although they cannot be generalized, it is hoped that the research findings contributed to assessing the EFL pedagogical models adopted in the Italian public education system, and that they offered valuable insights as to how a paradigm shift in ELT can be put into effect.

Through the lenses of the students, this study looked at the critical issues of EFL pedagogy. In that regard, the findings suggested that the GT method and a rigid focus on monolithic English do not foster communicative competence, tend to promote prescriptivism, and breed negative attitudes towards non-standard usages of English. However, the findings nevertheless suggested the importance of providing learners with an analytic knowledge of the structures of the English language through grammar instruction. As regards grammar teaching, the findings also suggested that it is important that teachers describe the rules of English by using an adequate set of categories that apply to its specific morpho-syntactic properties. As a language that is typologically distant from Italian, English has its own peculiarities which demand ad hoc

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