Reassessing English in Europe: Italian Students' Perspectives on teaching English as a Foreign Language in The Age of English as a Global Lingua Franca

Marco Bagni

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

Abstract

The process of European Union (EU)'s integration and global digital media developments have accelerated the spread of English across the continent, where it increasingly functions as a lingua franca and undergoes nativization (Modiano, 2024). This shift challenges traditional English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching models and calls for pedagogical reform aligned with learners' real-world language experiences. Attitude studies have exposed both opportunities and barriers to innovation. This paper contributes to this research through a small-scale interview study exploring undergraduate students' perspectives on EFL teaching in the Italian education system. It examines the extent to which prevailing practices align with learners' experiences and evolving views of English. The findings reveal a deep ambivalence: while students support innovative approaches, they also uphold traditional norms, reflecting the influence of standard language and native-speaker ideologies. Although not generalizable, the findings point to a need to realign EFL instruction with current linguistic realities.

Keywords: *English language teaching; English as a foreign language; English as a lingua franca; global Englishes; language attitudes; standard language ideology; native-speakerism.*

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Introduction

English has gained increasing prominence within the European Union (EU), despite institutional commitments to multilingualism. It now functions as procedural language of EU institutions and lingua franca among the member states' diverse populations, accelerating a process of nativization across the continent (Modiano, 2024). Simultaneously, English proficiency is framed in public discourse as essential for global competitiveness and upward mobility (British Council, 2018), contributing to its prioritization within the members state's education systems. This is evident in the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs across European higher education (Wilkinson and Gabriëls, 2021), where English has become firmly entrenched as "lingua academica" (Phillipson, 2008: 250).

Additionally, the rise of Web 2.0 technologies and the dominance of English online – where English-language content vastly exceeds that of other languages (Statista, 2025) – has significantly expanded learners' access to English beyond formal educational contexts. Social media platforms, streaming services, and various forms of user-generated content now offer opportunities for informal, autonomous language learning (Davydova, 2024). Concurrently, the widespread popularity of these new media among younger generations has amplified the influence of a globalized U.S. pop entertainment culture (Chapman, 2015), increasing exposure to authentic language use. This stands in stark contrast to the

idealized and abstract standard typically promoted in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom instruction (Westphal and Jansen, 2021).

These broader societal developments have significantly reshaped the landscape of EFL teaching and learning, calling into question "long-held assumptions of how the language is taught and learned in most mainstream language classrooms" (Rose and McKinley, 2024: 2). Modiano (2024) similarly identifies a growing mismatch between formal instruction – reflected in pedagogical models, curricular materials, and assessment practices – and the ways in which English is actually used by professionals and citizens across the EU. As a result, teachers today are increasingly required to navigate the divide between classroom English and the lived linguistic realities of their students, a gap that necessitates pedagogical reconsideration.

Applied linguistics scholarship has called for an alignment of ELT with the contemporary realities of English. Two notions have served as central concepts in redefining language teaching paradigms: plurilithic English, which acknowledges diverse norms arising from global contact (Melchers and Shaw, 2019), and English as a lingua franca (ELF), which emphasizes English's instrumental role in intercultural communication decoupling it from the native-speaker cultures (Jenkins, Baker, and Dewey, 2017). Attitude studies have complemented this perspective by revealing the stakeholders' perceptions of ELT, thereby informing possible pedagogical reforms (Manzouri, Hossein, Zia, and Gholam, 2024).

This paper aims to contribute to these discussions through a qualitative interview study exploring the views on English language teaching held by a small sample of Italian university undergraduate students. Drawing on the participants' experiences as EFL learners across various educational levels, the study sheds light on how entrenched teaching norms in Italy correspond with or diverge from the learners' evolving conceptions of English. Given Italy's persistently low English proficiency scores (Education First, 2024), such an inquiry is arguably timely. While grounded in the Italian context, the findings hold broader relevance across Europe, as they may reflect challenges encountered in other EFL settings.

This study addresses the following research questions:

What are the participants' views on ELT in the Italian education system?

What main problem areas do they identify in EFL teaching and learning?

Do their perspectives align with the principles of plurilithic and ELF-aware approaches to ELT?

Literature review

There is growing consensus that the traditional EFL label no longer reflects the current sociolinguistic realities of English or the evolving needs of learners across Europe. EFL pedagogy remains rooted in standard language ideology (Modiano, 2024) – the belief that the idealized English codified in grammar textbooks is the only legitimate variety (Milroy, 2007) – and "native speakerism" (Holliday, 2006) – whereby norms of correctness are attributed exclusively to Inner Circle speakers (Kachru, 1985). As a result, curricula and assessments in EFL contexts tend to privilege Standard British English and Received Pronunciation (RP), while also reflecting cultural bias, wherein English is presented primarily through the narrow lens of British or American cultural norms, neglecting the existence of multiple Englishes – each shaped by different sociolinguistic and cultural contexts – and its evolving role as a global language of wider communication.

Extensive scholarship has challenged these assumptions, advocating for inclusive pedagogies that reflect English's global diversity. Theoretical frameworks such as World Englishes (WE) (Kirkpatrick, 2021), English as an International

Language (EIL) (Tajeddin and Minoo, 2021), Global Englishes (GE) (Rose and Galloway, 2019), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Kirkpatrick and Schaller-Schwaner, 2022) highlight the importance of preparing learners to navigate diverse communicative settings.

In particular, ELF-aware approaches to ELT (e.g., Bowles and Cogo, 2015; Vettorel, 2021; Sifakis and Kordia, 2023; Caprario, 2024) promote pragmatic and intercultural competence, shifting emphasis away from native-like proficiency. These approaches also challenge traditional cultural models, repositioning English as a neutral tool for cross-cultural communication (Baker, 2015, 2022; De Bartolo, 2023; Pitzl, 2022; Taglialatela, 2024). However, the enduring influence of the ideologies of standard language and native-speakerism remain a significant obstacle to pedagogical reform (Cogo, 2022; Rose, McKinley, and Galloway, 2021; Matsuda and Bayyurt, 2021).

A growing body of attitude research has explored the ELT stakeholders' beliefs about English, its regional varieties, native and non-native accents, and the notion of ELF. Studies carried out in ELT contexts have often revealed a conservative orientation, particularly among pre – and in-service teachers, who tended to adhere to native-speaker norms (Cameron and Galloway, 2019; Mohr, Manion, and Morrison, 2021; Soruç and Griffiths, 2023). In Italy, this conservatism is evident: while some studies have noted emerging ELF awareness (Grazzi and Lopriore, 2019; Lopriore, 2021), Standard British English persists as the dominant norm, hindering a transition to more inclusive pedagogies.

Learners, too, have been found to be strongly influenced by native-speaker ideals (Galloway, 2017), although their real-life communicative experiences has been reported to challenge the assumed link between native-likeness and intelligibility (Wang and Jenkins, 2016). Notably, students with immersive English exposure in target language environments have been found to display greater openness to ELF perspectives than those in traditional EFL contexts (Griffiths and Soruç, 2019). However, in classroom settings, where learners are positioned as students rather than users of English, adherence to native norms have been found to prevail.

This complexity is captured in Manzouri et al.'s (2024) review of 122 empirical studies between 2000 and 2023, examining teachers' and learners' beliefs through WE, EIL, and ELF lenses. The review confirmed that, despite some theoretical acceptance of pluralistic and ELF-oriented perspectives, prescriptive norms remain entrenched in instruction and assessment.

In the Italian context, this trend appears to be particularly pronounced. Learners' performance is typically evaluated against Standard British English and RP norms (Grazzi and Lopriore, 2019), reinforcing perceptions of these as the only valid target models. Consequently, ELF communication and alternative varieties are often excluded from classroom practice (Lopriore and Vettorel, 2015). This is exacerbated by the "washback effect" (Allen, 2025), where assessment determines teaching strategies and curriculum content. Indeed, studies of Italian ELT textbooks have shown an overreliance on Standard British English and portrayals of target cultures through static, stereotyped lenses (Vettorel, 2018; Vettorel and Lopriore, 2013), reinforcing a monolithic view of English and failing to prepare learners for the linguistic diversity they will encounter out of the EFL classroom.

While the research briefly outlined here has illuminated persistent ideological barriers, there remains a need for studies that foreground the learners' voices. Understanding how students perceive their English learning experiences can offer valuable insight into the alignment – or misalignment – between current pedagogical practices and learners' real-world communicative needs. To contribute to this discussion, the present interview study explores the perspectives of 26 undergraduate students from diverse academic

disciplines at an Italian university. It focuses on their personal trajectories as EFL learners and their evaluations of English language teaching within the national education system.

Methodology

This qualitative investigation was conducted at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE), a mid-sized Italian university located in a dynamic industrial hub of northern Italy. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling (Creswell and Creswell, 2017) from three departments: Communication and Economics (DCE), Education and Humanities (DESU), and Language and Culture (DSLC). The sampling aimed to include a diverse group of non-native English-speaking students, with a particular focus on non-English majors, while recognizing that representativeness was not a goal. Eleven participants were from the DSLC, eight from the DCE, and seven from the DESU. All participants had learned English primarily through formal instruction.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format, drawing from folk linguistics research (Niedzielski and Preston, 2003) and direct approaches in language attitude research (Garrett, 2010). A total of 26 in-depth interviews were conducted between February and May 2020, forming part of a broader doctoral project. While the interviews were structured to ensure thematic consistency, a free-narrative format encouraged depth and flexibility in participants' responses. The fieldwork took place between February and May 2020. Following Italy's COVID-19 lockdown, twenty interviews were held remotely via Skype and Google Meet. All interviews were conducted in Italian to maximize participant comfort and expressiveness. Audio recordings were transcribed using the conventions outlined below.

Table 1: Transcription conventions

S1, S2, …	Students, numbered according to date of interview
(.)	Brief pause in speech
(3)	Approximate length of pause in seconds
:	Lengthening
.	Falling intonation and pause
,	Continuing (list) intonation
CAPS	Emphatic or contrastive stress
ing-	Abrupt cutoffs and false starts
@	Laughter (one @ per syllable)
<ono> bäˈä wäˈwäˈ <ono>	Onomatopeic noises in IPA symbols (speaker pronouncing sounds instead of words)

Adapted from Niedzielski and Preston (2003), VOICE project (2007)

The interview transcripts were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011; Kvale, 2007), with coding conducted inductively to allow key themes to emerge from the data. Multiple iterations of coding were followed by a second-level thematic analysis (Dörnyei, 2007), which enabled the identification of recurring patterns. This article focuses on those excerpts coded under the broad theme of 'English language teaching and learning'.

Results

All the interview transcripts were translated into English by the author, a native speaker of Italian, to faithfully preserve the interviewees' intent. Due to space limitations, only a selection of excerpts is included; excerpts shorter than three lines appear in quotation marks, with omissions marked by square-bracketed ellipses: […].

Twenty participants were explicitly invited to evaluate whether the EFL teaching approaches they had experienced were in step with the current sociolinguistic realities of English and

responsive to contemporary learner needs. Only 4 students expressed satisfaction with their learning experiences. The remaining 16 identified a clear incongruity, between classroom instruction and real-world language use. More broadly, all 26 participants offered critical reflections on EFL pedagogy, highlighting various shortcomings and offering suggestions. Their responses revealed several interconnected themes, which are presented in the following sub-sections.

Teacher identity and competence

Teachers were seen by most interviewees as the most influential factor in shaping the learners' experiences. Many emphasized that effective teaching depends less on native-speaker status than on professional training, pedagogical skills, and the ability to motivate students. Nevertheless, attitudes toward native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking Teachers (NNESTs) were found to be largely shaped by native-speakerism.

Participants such as S4 and S25 expressed a marked preference for the NESTs, whom they regarded as providers of more "authentic" linguistic input, especially valuable for younger learners who, they believed, benefit more from early exposure to native models. S25 bluntly claimed "we have a HUGE problem in Italy of (.) quality of English teaching", criticizing her previous NNESTs for their rigid grammar-focused methods and weak pronunciation skills, and linking poor instruction to inadequate teacher preparation. Similarly, S8 described one of his high school teachers lacking in oral skills as "PROBLEMATIC", adding that such deficiencies perpetuated the stereotype of Italians speaking "macaroni English". S17 expressed a similarly biased view, recounting her dissatisfaction in her academic high school with a NNEST who spoke "dialect-inflected English," and expressing disbelief that such a teacher could be employed in her city's prestigious academic high school rather than "the friggin' remotest little village of the South".

Other interviewees, however, rejected such native-speaker bias. S3 stressed that "you don't have to be a native speaker to have to teach", praising both her previous NESTs and NNESTs as "very good", though noting that younger NNESTs were more effective than "teachers of a certain age". S19 echoed this generational divide, associating older NNESTs with outdated methods and poor speaking skills.

Several participants also highlighted the NNESTs' unique strengths, such as a shared L1 and first-hand EFL learner experience. S28 remarked that "knowing the language doesn't mean knowing how to teach it", arguing that NESTs may struggle to grasp learners' difficulties because "language sort of comes naturally" to them. However, only two students, S10 and S6, explicitly advocated for a balanced approach, suggesting that combining the complementary strengths of NESTs and NNESTs would offer a supportive learning environment.

The primacy of British English

The notion of a learning target model emerged as a key theme. Many participants identified "British English", "London English", "the English of England", or "the English of the UK" as the most valid target. This preference was clearly linked to classroom practice: as S4 explained, she "instinctively" viewed British English as "a point of reference" because throughout her school experience it had been the one and only knowledge base and benchmark in English learning.

Beyond exposure, some students ascribed British English historical or linguistic primacy. S20 called it the "original" variety; S8 deemed it the "primary input"; S3 labeled it "the pure one." These perceptions reflected the influence of standard language ideology, as they reflected an underlying belief in the existence of a

"transcendental norm of correct English" (Milroy and Milroy, 2012: 31) – the reality of the standard cutting through variation of real-life usage. Particularly among the interviewees pursuing careers in translation or linguistic mediation, a desire for an idealized, neutral English surfaced. S25 commented that the appropriate target model is a "zero variety" that "does not give away where the speaker is from," rendering the interlocutor "incapable of finding a geography". Likewise, S19 called for a "neutral" pronunciation model for those "who work with languages", recalling that her university teachers had "talked the students' head off" about adhering to Received Pronunciation (RP).

Views on pronunciation

Most participants discussed the learning target and more broadly language variation mainly in terms of pronunciation, often equating language varieties with "accents". Native-like pronunciation was seen by many as a mark of proficiency, promoting intelligibility and confidence. S9 claimed that "pronunciation makes the difference" and warned that "a wrong pronunciation can impair communication". S3 described native-like pronunciation as "that extra touch" that elevates performance, suggesting that beyond considerations of intelligibility and communicative effectiveness, pronunciation is also a matter social image and status.

S13 also emphasized the value of speaking with the "right pronunciation", noting that misunderstandings could ensue from failure to adhere to a recognized standard. Recalling her struggle to understand some Italian friends who had long moved to Texas and had acquired the local accent, she remarked, "now you cannot understand (.) anything <@> by now </@> [...] they speak <ono> bāʼä wäʼwäʼ </ono>". Her mimicking of the accent through onomatopoeic sounds revealed her negative attitude toward non-standard varieties, quite evidently shaped by standard language ideology.

However, some interviewees prioritized intelligibility over native-likeness. S10 asserted that a non-native accent "is not something certainly to: certainly to be ashamed of". S4 highlighted the "contradiction" between classroom expectations and real-world "lingua franca" interactions, where the "type of inflection" is secondary to communication. Notably, despite lacking formal instruction in ELF, she demonstrated an understanding of its emphasis on functional language use beyond native-speaker norms. S27 also supported the principle of prioritizing intelligibility, although her remark that Spanish-, French – and Italian-inflected accents are "very marked and difficult to shed" was indicative of a rather negative attitude towards non-native accents and suggested that she regarded intelligibility as ultimately depending on the degree of adherence to a recognized standard. S26 echoed this tension, maintaining that while non-native accents are acceptable, it is still important to "pronounce well," suggesting an implicit norm of correctness. S23 captured this ambivalence most clearly: she recognized that a "good pronunciation" adds "greater value" and boosts self-confidence, yet she also maintained that "it is also right to preserve one's identity". Her remarks mirrored the broader tension between conforming to native norms – partly due to societal attitudes – and recognition of legitimacy of non-native English pronunciation.

British and American English

All the interviewees instinctively framed variation through the narrow lens of a British vs. American English dichotomy, reflecting a tendency to reconcile the traditional EFL target model with their exposure to American English, the most prominent variety in the globalized mediascape.

Several students described British English as more formal or grammatically "correct" than the

American counterpart. S2 claimed it has "more established" grammar rules, whereas American English "simplifies the English language" and lacks "significant grammar rules". S18 described British English as "more standard", "more grammatical", with "less slang" and "clearer" rules. American English was often portrayed as a "simplified" or slangy variety.

This stereotyped view reflected a folk belief that English speakers speak the one and only proper English language, whereas the Americans are more prone to deviating from what is considered correct usage. Within this commonsense perspective, British and American English are not viewed as equally legitimate varieties with distinct norms, but rather as existing in a hierarchical relationship – where British English is seen as the original, ancestral standard and American English as a deviation. The interviewees also conflated register with dialect – associating British English with formal settings, and American English with informal, familiar contexts and casual conversation. S5, for instance, found the American variety more suitable "for conversing with her friends", and S20 said she felt "more comfortable" using American English because it allowed her to speak in a "less controlled manner" and express herself "more freely". These perceptions reflected the students' dual exposure: classroom instruction promoted Standard British English, while informal exposure – especially through American pop entertainment culture – shaped their everyday usage. Despite the institutional focus on the British standard variety, many students preferred American English, influenced by consistent engagement with American media. As S18 noted, "TV series a:nd or online memes" played a major role in their learning, and S26 observed that "all the tv series that we watch nowadays are American".

Questioning monolithic English

Although many viewed classroom and real-world English as separate spheres, some challenged this divide, advocating inclusion of real-world varieties in ELT, highlighting in particular the marginalization of American English. S10 criticized the focus on "the so-called PURE English," arguing it disadvantages learners who constantly engage with American media. S26 questioned the validity of standardized certifications after a meaningful U.S. study-abroad experience left her test scores unchanged.

Other interviewees criticized the exclusive focus on British English. S4 highlighted the value of exposing students to "the living language [...] that I consider real". S23 noted that in the English classroom "all other variations are not even considered". S26 wished for exposure to "all the Englishes of the world", and S11 contended that "more accents" would better prepare learners to out-of-school encounters. Even S13, despite her biased views on non-standard English, acknowledged the relevance of "the English spoken in the former colonies" brought to the fore by "the processes of migration". Some participants highlighted that a monolithic model of English leaves learners unprepared for real-world communication. S6, for instance, though favoring RP, admitted difficulty understanding other English accents. S25 critiqued the teaching methods based on narrow focus on standard grammar, noting that, "exactly like in Italian we have various ways of saying something and often it can also go against the rules or we can interpret one rule in different ways it doesn't mean that in the oth – in the other languages we cannot do it".

A minority of participants expressed more progressive views derived from ELF – or GE-aware courses in university. S1 stressed the legitimacy of all varieties of English, noting that exposure to a "monolithic English" had caused confusion in the occasional encounters with speakers of other varieties, whereas ELF awareness has showed her

that learners can "deviate from British English or any other variety that is set as a reference model". S24 similarly described a single target as "a thing of the past", and S2 argued that "there is not one particular English accent to be taught" since "real English" has been "contaminated" – though she still saw variation as recent, overlooking the constructed nature of the standard language.

Only two students questioned the dominance of British English by explicitly tracing this primacy to external forces. S14 credited GE and linguistics courses for showing that the status of British English stems from "historical aspects" like "colonization and the Empire" and "economic aspects like the certification exams". S16 argued the standard variety is "not real" and suggested that stereotypes persist: "maybe England is not what [...] we have in mind which is rather our stereotype".

Theory-practice gap and grammar instruction

Most interviewees believed that English teaching should emphasize building confidence and communicative ability over analytical knowledge of the grammar. Many criticized ELT methods in Italian schools for perpetuating a theory-practice gap. S12 lamented that "many teachers focus a lot on grammar", and S19 noted the tendency to teach English in a "super abstract manner", with strong emphasis on grammar and literature. Recognizing speaking problems among Italian learners, S19 insisted on the need to "MODERNIZE the method" by "focusing more on practice". S3 recalled that under grammar-focused instruction, "the student could never learn (.) at least to sp – to speak". S5 expressed a similar view: "one focuses a lot on the grammar rules and little room is made [...] for the speaking and listening". S18 expressed a desire for "a teacher who looks a little less at grammar but who stimulates you and goes beyond what is right or wrong at the normative level [...] in real life". Recalling her high school exchange program in the U.S., she commented that during the first days of her stay "maybe I knew the grammar very well but I could not (.) speak in everyday life". S14, who was attending a linguistics course at the time of the interview, offered a detailed critique:

I'd say in Italy [...] I believe is a thing that derives from the way English is taught in the schools which derives from the fact that (.) one cannot not not make a distinction between a e:r written English that has certain grammar rules and a spoken English instead whi:ch is different [...] and so this thing stops them from from from speaking with the others [...] because in school obviously nobody tells us by the way that one thing is grammar PER SE and another thing then is the competence of a an English speaker [...] when one of us then gets the chance to actually speak with a native speaker of English we are inclined to say they are ignorant because they do not follow the the: rules of the grammar [...] I mean the fact of having to of caring too much about grammar about pronunciation because obviously you must use British pronunciation perfectly then [...] you get stuck.

S14's remarks revealed how school instruction reinforces standard language ideology. Her use of "obviously" and "you must" reflected the internalization of this belief, while her critique implicitly called for moving beyond prescriptive grammar-focused teaching. Apparently, her background in linguistics had provided her with greater metalinguistic awareness than the other interviewees.

Echoing S14, S9 argued that excessive grammar focus inhibits real-world use: "students are afraid to speak English, of making mistakes once they are outside the classroom [...] of pronouncing badly, therefore they tend not to do it". Yet she also acknowledged grammar's foundational role, noting that "the English that I learned in school was useful to me as a basis to be able to (.) quote unquote develop English once once out of school". S28 echoed this ambivalence: she criticized

grammar-based classes for lacking practice yet conceded that they provided useful grounding. S20 went further, suggesting that school grammar was sufficient and that "it is up to the students" to practice listening and speaking independently – thus placing responsibility on learner motivation.

Only a few students explicitly valued grammar as essential: S1 deemed it "an essential basis from which to start learning English", S2 called it a "starting point", and S6 – who had never participated in study – or work-abroad programs – insisted that grammar instruction "is very much needed".

Decontextualized teaching

The interviewees' criticism of grammar-based instruction often dovetailed with concerns over the decontextualized nature of English language instruction. Several participants stressed that English learning should be oriented toward practical, real-world use rather than abstract knowledge of grammar rules. S10 claimed that grammar-focused instruction "does not equip learners with concrete abilities in the real world" and "demotivates the students". S13 also commented that English instruction should be motivating and tied to the learners' needs, while S2 criticized the way English is "taught as something that must be known but without e:r showing the uses to which it can be put". She recommended exposing learners to real-life contexts, "taking them out of the classroom to do activities in a context (.) different contexts […] showing the pref – professional uses of English and its usefulness for your possible future".

Other students voiced comparable concerns. S25 claimed that the prevailing ELT methods in Italian schools "won't bring you anywhere in the work world of today: e::r […] I feel I have to (.) to highlight this this failure of the pedagogical system". S27 observed that the way English is taught in Italian schools is too detached from the practical demands of the labor market. Echoing this, S16 observed that her high school English instruction had not prepared her for employment in a multinational company, leaving her skills "too weak". Likewise, S9 admitted that after graduation she "had to (.) start again to study a more practical English".

Cultural content

Many participants criticized the overemphasis on literary texts and the English canon. However, a few interviewees nevertheless saw literature as a valuable curricular component, as long as it was integrated in ways that also supported the development of communicative competence relevant to real-life contexts. As S1 noted, through literature "learners can receive a more comprehensive view of the English language".

Beyond literature, most participants stressed the need to enrich the curriculum with broader cultural content. S13 argued that cultural materials make learning "more realistic and credible", while S6 lamented their absence in technical and vocational high schools. S9 similarly regretted that English teachers in the academic high school she had attended had focused "mainly on the literature part (.) a lot on the history part but little on the contemporary part", noting that a language learned without broader cultural context is "cold". S20 suggested including "contemporary events […] of culturally popular interest", while S18 criticized both her middle and high school English classroom's reliance on clichés such as "the English breakfast with sausage bacon eggs and the scones", and described a clear mismatch between these portrayals and her actual experiences visiting the UK.

Others called for a more inclusive cultural scope. S23 urged moving beyond the "colonizer's viewpoint" of English literature, and S14 valued the GE-oriented university course she had previously attended for exposing her to multiple English-speaking cultures and challenging stereotypes.

A few ELF-aware students went further. S24 and S28 emphasized intercultural competence – which they understood as the ability to understand diverse linguistic and cultural norms and adapt communicative behavior accordingly – rather than centring English on native-speaker cultures. Yet such perspectives were rare, as most interviewees, even when advocating curricular expansion, still referenced mainly ENL contexts such as the UK, US, Canada, and Australia, with only occasional mentions of South Africa or "former colonies".

Early English learning

Most participants supported early English instruction, citing cognitive benefits such as enhanced brain "plasticity" and phonetic sensitivity. S20 and S4 stressed the intuitive nature of early language learning, while S23, S25, and S5 invoked simplified versions of the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967), often using the "sponge" metaphor. As S25 put it, "until twelve years old the brain is like a sponge but then it starts to stiffen," and S23 added that at a young age "learning is absorbed better." Similarly, S5 argued that children benefit from "neural plasticity" and thus "absorb a lot more".

Some participants equated early English instruction with bilingual language acquisition in a naturalistic setting. S21 and S27, for example, appeared to assume that limited preschool lessons could replicate naturalistic learning. Personal anecdotes also shaped these perceptions: S13 and S12 cited their own or relatives' early exposure as decisive for later success, though without distinguishing between structured classroom teaching and immersion in bilingual contexts.

Only two interviewees challenged this narrative. Drawing on her work in early childhood education, S6 questioned its pedagogical value, calling it "rather pointless and too stressful for very young kids". S29 went further, framing early English teaching as an ideological "imposition", comparing it to religious indoctrination and insisting that "a student should be free to choose the foreign language they want to learn".

Monolingual classrooms and immersion

Though a less prominent topic, monolingual instruction elicited mixed responses. Some students supported using only English in class for immersion. S25 insisted that communication "must be in English", while S23, drawing on summer-camp experience, advocated visual and non-verbal scaffolding over Italian use, believing that "language input settles in the subconscious". However, S29 opposed strict English-only instruction, arguing that strategic use of Italian could support struggling students, especially when NESTs cannot clarify via L1.

Another related theme was the superiority of immersion over formal instruction. Study abroad experiences were commonly cited: S18, S26, S19 credited their fluency to immersion, contrasting it with the grammar-focused methods of Italian schools. S14 and S24 similarly argued that English should be "lived" rather than merely "studied", while S21 described learning through music and peer interaction abroad as more effective than formal lessons.

Limited access to immersion concerned many interviewees, but some welcomed new informal and mediated alternatives. As S16 observed, "now with the tee vee series things have possibly changed a little with the on demand tee vee this way of things has changed when I was a kid (.) I mean never did I watch English tee vee and by the way there was not even the culture".

Socioeconomic and structural challenges

Finally, the participants noted social and institutional barriers to effective English learning. S5, S14, S17 cited the financial burdens of study

abroad or private international schools. S17 admitted to envying a friend educated in English-medium elite schools abroad, and observed that English is not "accessible to all", underscoring its link to socioeconomic privilege and its role in shaping a cosmopolitan elite.

Structural constraints also surfaced: large class sizes and heterogeneous learner levels were mentioned as factors limiting effective teacher-student interaction. S9 recounted that in her high school classes, with 25 or 30 students, "interactive practice was nearly impossible". S14 compared these typical contextual conditions with the smaller classes in the private middle school she had attended, which had enabled "more participatory learning". Others noted that mixed-ability groups further restricted the teachers' capacity to attend to both stronger and weaker students.

Discussion

In addressing the first research question – What are students' views on ELT in the Italian education system? – the findings revealed ambivalent perceptions. This ambivalence stemmed from the institutional promotion of Standard British English in EFL classrooms, contrasting with the participants' frequent exposure to American English through digital media and entertainment.

Standard British English was unanimously upheld as the only classroom norm and legitimate learning target model, an attachment clearly rooted in the prevailing EFL teaching practices. Beyond familiarity, the codified British norm was also granted historical and linguistic primacy, as it was frequently described as "original" or "pure", confirming the influence of standard language ideology (Milroy, 2007). Among the students pursuing careers in translation or mediation, a strong desire for a "neutral" accent-free English emerged. While this reflected pragmatic concerns with clarity and legitimacy, it nonetheless revealed the persistence of ideals of linguistic purity, even when framed in pragmatic terms.

Although a few interviewees criticized the narrow focus on monolithic English as ill-suited for real-world communication, most participants tended to maintain a divide between classroom and out-of-school English – echoing Grau's (2009) finding in German secondary schools, where extensive informal contact with English was found to have little influence on classroom learning.

Most participants regarded the globally dominant American English inappropriate for instruction, viewing it as slangy and grammatically incorrect, hence associating it with informality and non-standard usage – two areas that tend to be ignored in the most traditional ELT practices (Werner, 2020). This view of the American variety as a deviation from the correct norm was once again shaped by standard language ideology, whose basic principle of correctness, as observed by Niedzielski and Preston, permeates the ways in which people usually talk about language: "[n]onlinguists use prescription (at nearly every linguistic level) in description" (2003: 18).

The apparent contradiction in these perceptions of British versus American English aligns with findings from previous research on language attitudes (see McKenzie, 2010: 54) showing that while people value the standard variety along the dimension of prestige, they also often value a non-standard variety of the same language along the dimension of attractiveness. Indeed, consistent with previous research carried out in ELT contexts (Manzouri et al., 2024), many interviewees expressed a personal preference for American English, pointing to its associations with digital media and pop entertainment.

Ambivalence also characterized the prevailing perceptions of teachers. Mirroring earlier findings (Florence Ma, 2012), the NESTs were often idealized as linguistic and cultural models, particularly for pronunciation. Although the NNESTs were sometimes appreciated for empathy and shared learning experience, concerns over their oral proficiency emerged as a prominent issue.

This criticism links to the second research question – What main problem areas do students identify in EFL teaching and learning? Beyond issues of NNESTs' skills and preparation, the most common concern was the dominance of grammar-centred instruction. Prescriptive, decontextualized grammar teaching was widely critiqued for prioritizing accuracy over fluency, inhibiting confidence in speaking, and disconnecting the students from real-life communication. As argued by Niedzielski and Preston (2003), formal instruction often discourages non-standard but communicatively effective forms – a view echoed by the participants who felt anxiety for correctness in speaking hindered spontaneous speech.

Beyond being ineffective, grammar-focused instruction was seen as demotivating, especially when not paired with meaningful practice. However, as noted above, while many participants stressed the importance of affective engagement and practical application, they simultaneously upheld the view that classroom and real-world English were separate domains, again highlighting a persistent ambivalence in how the interviewees conceptualized the target language and its learning.

Nevertheless, several participants called for curricula to reflect English's global role, advocating for authentic, culturally diverse, and professionally relevant materials. However, even those endorsing diversity continued to evaluate legitimacy using standard norms, illustrating a persistent tension between institutionalized pedagogical models and lived linguistic reality.

Criticism of decontextualized instruction also reflected broader views on the purposes of English learning and particularly the perception of English a tool for upward social mobility. Many participants endorsed a utilitarian perspective, consistent with public discourse on English as a gateway to employability and economic success (British Council, 2018). Schools were expected to prepare students for professional uses of English, but the students felt that current ELT practices fell short of this expectation, especially due to lack of immersion and authentic exposure. Some participants also noted the financial and institutional barriers to international mobility and immersion experiences, making them inaccessible to many.

In response, several students supported monolingual, English-only classrooms as a valuable substitute for immersion in naturalistic learning environment. Likewise, early English learning – starting in preschool – was widely endorsed, with many participants citing cognitive benefits and folk interpretations of the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) and comparing preschool EFL learners with children born and raised in bilingual settings. However, they overlooked the structural differences between immersion and EFL contexts, where time constraints and limited resources restrict what can realistically be achieved (Muñoz, 2011).

These perceptions directly relate to the third research question – Do the participants' perspectives align with the principles of plurilithic and ELF-aware approaches to ELT? In this regard, the results were mixed. On the one hand, several students welcomed the inclusive, pragmatic, and communicative focus underpinning ELF-aware and plurilithic pedagogical models. as noted above, the interviewees were found to uphold traditional instructional target models, revealing the persistence of deeply entrenched ideologies. Particularly the ELF theoretical principle of decentring standard and native norms appeared incompatible with many participants' views. The findings indicated that overcoming native-speakerism was not seen as a priority.

Additionally, the view that the English classroom should imitate a monolingual, immersion-like environment may hinder a paradigm shift toward ELF-oriented pedagogy. Similarly, the notion of decoupling English from its cultural ties and reimagining it as a culturally-neutral transactional tool is at odds with the prevailing perceptions of

English as the authoritative language of British tradition and as the language of American pop entertainment culture.

Conclusion

This study addressed three interrelated research questions, examining the views of a small sample of undergraduate students on ELT in the Italian education system, their perceptions of key problem areas, and the extent to which their perspectives align – or fail to align – with the principles of innovative ELT approaches proposed in recent applied linguistics scholarship.

Overall, the findings highlight a clear tension in the participants' views. While they suggest that Italian students are predominantly exposed to American English through their engagement with digital media and pop entertainment outside the classroom, the findings indicate that EFL instruction continues to privilege Standard British English as both the pedagogical norm and the aspirational model.

Consistent with previous research (Grazzi and Lopriore, 2019), this study suggests that the dominance of standard British English in the Italian EFL classroom sustains long-standing ideologies of linguistic purity and primacy, reinforcing monolithic notions of correctness that conflict with real-world linguistic diversity. Notably, the primacy of British English often went unchallenged, even when the students advocated for more authentic, contemporary, and motivating approaches. This also reflects the continuing influence of assessment practices. Addressing the duality here discussed may be crucial for rethinking EFL pedagogy in ways that better reconcile EFL learners' personal experiences with the aims of formal instruction.

This brings us to the second research question, focusing on the perceived issues in ELT. The participants widely saw Italian EFL pedagogy as insufficiently responsive to both the learners' needs and the communicative demands of contemporary society. The findings pointed to the limitations of the prevailing grammar-driven teaching approaches. Although a range of alternatives to grammar-focused ELT – such as communicative (Brumfit, 1984) and task-based approaches (Ellis, 2003) – have long been established, they appear not to have sufficiently permeated Italian ELT practice. This may be partly due to entrenched habits rooted in the classical grammar-translation method, and partly to structural constraints, such as those cited by the participants – including large class sizes, high teacher-student ratios, and insufficient teacher training – all of which tend to reinforce established practices.

Nonetheless, even within a traditional teaching framework, a shift toward real-world usage of English and recognition of linguistic diversity could help challenge rigid notions of "grammaticality" (Werner, 2020) – understood as attested real-world usage validity. Such an approach may help bridge the gap between classroom – and out-of-school English, reconciling more effectively classroom instruction with today's students' engagement with pop entertainment and digital media.

We highlighted that several participants expressed pragmatic concerns about real-world communicative effectiveness, calling for instructional models that are better aligned with contemporary learners' prospective professional needs, and emphasizing the need for more naturalistic learning contexts. The findings thus suggest that EFL instruction should balance analytic knowledge of grammar with opportunities for meaningful communication, even under the constraints of limited classroom time and resources.

In discussing this study's findings, we emphasized the central role attributed by some interviewees to motivation in successful learning. Motivation, in turn, was found to be closely related to the students' personal interests extending beyond the context of formal instruction. This leads

to the third research question and the inherent ambivalence of the participants' perspectives in relation to innovative pedagogical approaches previously outlined.

Here, too, the results were mixed. On the one hand, the interviewees' concern or the acquisition of practical skills and communicative ability are in line with the principles of ELF-oriented pedagogy. Additionally, aligning with WE-, EIL-, GE-aware approaches to ELT, some students also called for updated curricula that reflect English's global, plural realities.

On the other hand, as noted earlier, these views coexisted with conservative orientations, shaped by native-speakerism and standard language ideology. This arguably suggests that pedagogical innovation may face resistance in Italian educational contexts. Deep-rooted ideologies and entrenched assessment practices continue to pose significant barriers (Matsuda and Bayyurt, 2021; Rose et al., 2021). Unless these obstacles to change are critically addressed, learners may struggle to appreciate the value of moving beyond traditional EFL norms. In such cases, the validation of non-standard or non-native English usage could be perceived as condescending, potentially resulting in dissatisfaction and diminished motivation.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that exposure to linguistic theory – arguably more impactful than introducing ELF or GE frameworks alone – enabled learners to interrogate previously held assumptions about language and variation. Embedding such theoretical elements into secondary-level EFL instruction may encourage students to challenge deeply rooted language ideologies and facilitate the critical unpacking of standard grammar norms and native-speaker ideals, supporting a shift toward more inclusive ELT in line with contemporary directions in ELT scholarship.

Limitations

First, although EFL students' reflections can shed light on pedagogical practices, they do not represent expert perspectives and should be interpreted accordingly. Still, recurring thematic patterns in the data point to enduring challenges in Italian EFL instruction. It must be also noted, however, that the limited and non-representative sample prevents these findings from being generalized or regarded as conclusive.

Another limitation of this study is that the interviewees mainly referred to high school although without consistently distinguishing between educational levels, and they rarely provided concrete examples of classroom practice to substantiate their views.

It must be also observed that some remarks about the NNESTs may have been shaped by the context in which the research was carried out: since the interviewer was a NNEST and the participants were being taught English mainly by NNESTs in their respective degree programs, some may have softened their views to avoid sounding overly critical. Biases may have also stemmed from the participants' overwhelmingly negative school experiences, potentially skewing the data. Conversely, a positive bias may have arisen from the strong influence of U.S. pop entertainment culture, which shaped many interviewees' favorable attitudes toward American English.

To provide more balanced perspectives and enrich the analysis, it would be useful to include a more diverse population – including students with positive English learning experiences, students with negative attitudes toward English, and others with less interest in and exposure to pop entertainment culture. Expanding the scope to other universities and European contexts beyond Italy would also provide a broader, more nuanced perspective.

Although study's findings have limited immediate pedagogical relevance, they nonetheless highlight the pressing need to revisit EFL pedagogy and better align it with the evolving sociolinguistic realities of English in Italy and beyond.

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