Chapter

What English Is and Does: A Study of Students' Perceptions of English and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

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Abstract

Recent applied linguistic research into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) portrays English as a transactional tool decoupled from native norms and values and urges a need for change in English Language Teaching (ELT), with ELF serving as a central concept in redefining teaching paradigms. This chapter summarizes qualitative research data illustrating the views on the contemporary sociolinguistic realities of English of a sample of undergraduate non-native English speakers (NNESs) students at an Italian university. The way the students characterized what English is and does, as revealed by interview data, interrogates ELF ideology, as the prevailing characterizations of English pointed to prestige and attractiveness, which English derives from culture-specific norms and values, in contrast to the ELF notion of a deterritorialized, denativized, and culturally neutral language. While the findings reported here have no immediate pedagogical relevance, they nevertheless highlight the importance of problematizing the notion of ELF.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, English language teaching, language attitudes, globalization, global English, language ideology, culture

1. Introduction

The processes of globalization have accelerated the "spread" [1] of English in the world, and it has become common practice to refer to English as a global lingua franca. In countries where English is traditionally learned as a foreign language, working competence in English is nowadays emphasized in public discourse as a necessary skill to navigate the demands of modern society. In Europe, English has gained the position of a supra-national language of integration, functioning as a procedural language within the EU institutions while also increasingly operating as an additional language among the wider population [2]. As an effect of the Bologna process [3], English has been making inroads in sectors of paramount importance such as academic research and higher education (HE), where the last decade has witnessed the rapid growth of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses and programs. On top

of that, as on the Internet, content in English largely outweighs content in any other language [4]. Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) have unprecedented opportunities to receive authentic target language input other than the abstract, idealized standard English of the EFL classroom.

In this societal context of the extraordinary vitality of English, recent applied linguistic research studies of the English language have urged the need for a paradigm shift in English language Teaching (ELT), based on the idea that the accepted English-as-a foreign language (EFL) pedagogical models may appear today outdated and possibly even obsolete. The distinct, though interrelated, research strands of World Englishes (WE) [5], English as an International language (EIL) [6], Global Englishes (GE) [7], and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) [8, 9] have taken on the task of revising and rethinking the traditional tenets of ELT. To this day, an extensive body of research work has accumulated that explores the possibility of adapting ELT practices to reflect the changing dynamics of the English language, with ELF serving as a central concept in redefining language teaching paradigms.

A strand of applied linguistic studies has investigated the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the ELT stakeholders toward English and its pedagogy, with a view to confidently suggesting changes in ELT and possibly facilitating the paradigm shift from EFL to ELF. Attitudinal barriers to change identified in studies conducted in ELT contexts were the native speaker ideal and the ideology of the standard language [10]. However, in the same studies that revealed a generalized tendency to gravitate toward standard norms, ELF was not problematized as an ideological construct. Conceptualizing English as some sort of transactional currency, the ELF paradigm reproduces an ideology of English as a culturally neutral, denativized, and deterritorialized language. The English of ELF is thus decoupled from native speaker linguistic and cultural norms and no longer associated with the core English-speaking national communities that are commonly—and often stereotypically—reproduced in EFL classroom materials.

This study interrogates such ELT-related matters that have been a concern of applied linguistics research by integrating them within the framework of sociolinguistics of the English language in the globalized world. It investigates the perceptions of what English is and does held by a population of undergraduate students at an Italian university. The data under discussion were taken from a larger doctoral dissertation study [11]. In the specific, this work attempts to answer the following (interrelated) research questions: (i) What are the students' perceptions of English? (ii) Do the ways students think of what English is and does reproduce an ideology of denativized, deterritorialized language and culturally neutral language?

2. The spread of English and the rhetoric of English as a necessary skill

In the wake of globalization, applied linguistic studies [1, 12–17] of the English language tended to discuss the politics of the global spread of English from within an individualistic framework. To date, the prevailing characterizations of the contemporary realities of English have emphasized the key role of non-native speakers of English (NNESs) as free-willing subjects who turn to English for their own purposes and gains, driving the spread and supposedly leading the natural processes of linguistic innovation and change [see for example 18]. However, it has been noted that such individualistic and rational choice presumptions de-politicize the English language, "making it seem as if changes in language usage are 'natural' and not

connected to systemic issues of economic and political power or cultural prestige and identity" [19]. There are structural constraints to free individual choice, and it has been observed that in the geopolitical context of globalization, the promotion and the use of English "meshes with the globalizing of commerce, finance, politics, military affairs, scholarship, education and many grassroots networks" [20]. Systemic factors, particularly language-in-education policies, have contributed to establishing a "linguistic market" [21] in which English has greatly increased its value in recent times. In turn, the value acquired by English is arguably one main reason why competence in English is sought by the NNESs.

Linguistic anthropological studies of globalization [22–23], on the other hand, have pointed to the commodification of the English language. Within the ideological framework of neoliberal thinking that emphasizes language skills as a form of human capital and a factor for individual talent, competence in English is often represented as key to securing employment and advancing prospects of upward social mobility [23–27]. In line with the principle of human capital theory [28] that "in a global economy, performance is linked to people's knowledge stock, individual skill levels, learning capabilities, and cultural adaptability" [29], the processes of globalization have also recast the purposes of education. The new millennium has witnessed a global policy convergence in approaches to educational reforms, based on the principle "that education does not have any intrinsic ends as such but must always be linked to the instrumental purposes of human capital development and economic self maximization" [29]. The EU Education and Training strategy [30] has repositioned education as a determinant of economic performance and key to the individual's participation in the new globalized economy. In this perspective, English, already the most widely taught language on a global scale with an estimated 1.5 billion learners worldwide [31], has now become a priority in the Member States' education systems. In Italy, where this study was conducted, the need to foster students' English language skills is a publicly voiced concern, particularly since Italians are still reported to fare rather low in terms of level of proficiency in English [32].

An integral part of the drive to redefine the role of education is also the recent growth of English-medium instruction (EMI). As observed by Galloway et al. [33], "EMI policies are related to government objectives to develop national human capital that can speak English. (...) and many nations see English skills as being an indispensable competency and key to their modernization and global competitiveness". This rhetoric of English as a necessary skill to maintain a competitive edge in the globalized world [15, 31] constitutes "a strong justification for promoting English language teaching and learning" [27].

In addition, English is also the language of a globalized pop entertainment culture [34], and precisely the cultural affiliations that English indexes arguably contribute to its attractiveness, representing a further incentive to its learning. This cultural dominance of English has been related to the spread of models of consumerism, an integral aspect of the incorporation of diverse local realities into a single global system of neoliberal economy and governance [35–37].

3. English as a lingua Franca

The consolidation of the role of lingua franca is arguably the main feature of the sociolinguistic realities of English in the era of globalization. Already at the turn of the century, these realities had led to the emergence of a distinct area of ELF

research. Seminal works of applied linguistic research into ELF [38–41] were mainly of a descriptive nature and remained anchored to the principles of WE research [5], which fragmented the image of monolithic English and legitimized the NNESs as owners of the English language. However, with the second decade of the twenty-first century, ELF research moved away from the pluralizing approach of WE to take on board the post-structuralist reconceptualization of language, culture, and their relationship [42, 43]. In tune with the concept of "translanguaging" [44], the distinguishing multilingual nature of ELF communication was characterized as emerging across individuals, time, and space. Concurrently, the ELF research field converged with that of transcultural communication in highlighting the fluid, contingent, and emergent character of culture and pointed to the need to move away from essentialist conflations of cultural identity with national languages and cultures [45]. Baker [46] illustrated how ELF interactions construct links through and across different cultures, as complex links with culture emerge "in situ as a result of adaptation and negotiation on the part of the participants." From this perspective, the English language is decoupled from the cultural models of the core English-speaking countries and appears as a neutral tool for communication between and across cultures. In this sense, the ELF paradigm foregrounds the instrumental function of language, separating it from its expressive and symbolic function of groupness [19].

3.1 ELF pedagogy

As the above-sketched theoretical developments were seeking to legitimize ELF research and its object in the face of harsh criticism [47–49], the focus of much ELF discussion concurrently shifted toward issues of pedagogical concern. Since Jenkins [50], various studies have explored the pedagogical implications of ELF, aiming to both meet the needs of learners and better equip English teachers.

Throughout the years, several studies [17, 51–59] discussed the entire range of the pedagogical implications of ELF. Interest around the need to promote critical reflection upon current EFL pedagogy that tends to be anchored to native English (NE) models and adapt ELT practice to the realities of ELF has grown also across the fields of WE [5], EIL [6], and GE [7]. Common to all the proposals for a post-normative, ELF-informed approach to ELT is the underlying view of English as a neutral tool for cross-cultural communication, which separates language from its cultural ties to a specific national community of native speakers. In this sense, ELF delegitimized the cultural models associated with English in the EFL curriculum and learning materials. Also, it brought to question the notion of "integrative motivation" [60] implicit in the EFL model, which is premised on the idea that the objective of foreign language learners corresponds to a desire to integrate and adapt to the culture of the target language group. This instrumental view of English as a culturally neutral tool has been gathering momentum and is now surfacing in much of ELT discourse [61–66].

However, as attitude studies have suggested, there seems to be a contradiction between the notion of English as a culturally neutral lingua franca and the still prevailing idea of learning English in a culturally appropriate way. Structural barriers to change in ELT have been widely acknowledged [67–69] and particularly strong adherence to standard language ideology appears to exert a decisive influence on how students perceive English and greatly contribute to the ways it is taught. Standard language ideology represents the false belief that the idealized, abstract standard variety

of English codified in grammar textbooks is the only correct and therefore legitimate variety [10]. Adherence to standard language ideology is perhaps not surprising, since English proficiency in ELT is traditionally assessed against the benchmark of standard English, and assessment practices have a washback effect on the learning target and the content of ELT practices.

3.2 Studies of attitudes toward ELF

Seminal studies of attitudes toward ELF [see 13, 70, for a comprehensive review] conducted with learners and teachers both in EFL countries and in a target language environment had the specific aim of understanding whether an ELF-informed approach to ELT would find immediate support. A common thread was that teachers and learners alike tended to value adherence to the prescriptive norms of the recognized standard, even when they were quite open toward incorporating a more inclusive ELF-aware perspective into ELT.

Although more recent research with Italian teachers [71–73] was reported to suggest an "emerging ELF awareness" [72], a conservative orientation was found to be the prevailing trend also in most research studies [see, for example, 74–77] carried out over the last few years with both pre- and in-service ELT practitioners in other EFL settings. As in previous studies, attachment to standard English was revealed as a chief barrier to innovation, with the clear suggestion that although ELF ideology was accepted as an abstract principle, it tended to be rejected as a classroom practice [11].

At the time of the investigation reported here, only a few notable studies [see for example, 78] had shed light on the learners' views of ELF, finding that students were under a strong influence of the native speaker ideal and standard language ideology. However, students' experience with ELF communication was generally found to question the connection between adherence to NE norms and intelligibility [see for example, 79]. Also, particularly learners in a target language environment were found to display much more tolerance of ELF than their peers in an EFL setting [see for example, 80]. Previous research thus suggested that the ELF principle of prioritizing successful communication over conformity to standard norms can hardly find any support in an instructional setting that positions potential ELF users as learners, who will understandably set their goals accordingly.

Other insights into the learners' perceptions of ELF are provided by studies that specifically targeted the attitudes toward the NESTs and NNESTs [see 11, for a comprehensive review], whose findings overall suggested that most language learners preferred to follow a NE model and understood target culture as the national cultures of the core English-speaking countries. A strand of studies [see 81] investigated the attitudes toward NNESTs and NESTs of students receiving EMI in the framework of the internationalization of HE, which has been defined as "a prototypical ELF scenario" [82]. A common finding was that learners in an EMI setting expected their lecturers to be models of target language use and understood the latter as NE, in contrast to the ELF principle of departing from native speaker norms.

Existing studies that look at the teachers' and students' attitudes to ELF had the specific aim of advancing a paradigm shift in ELT but did not interrogate the notion of ELF as an ideological construct**.** It is hoped that this contribution can help bridge this gap in research.

4. The study

4.1 Research context

The study was carried out at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (UNIMORE), a medium-sized university located at the heart of one of the main industrial hubs of Italy, a dynamic economic and cultural environment. The participants were reached within the Department of Communication and Economics (DCE), the Department of Education and Humanities (DESU), and the Department of Studies on Language and Culture (DSLC). The choice to find the participants for this study in three different departments responded to the need to involve a varied population of students, including non-English majors.

4.2 Participants

The participants for this study were selected through convenience (non-probability) sampling [83]. Therefore, the representativeness of the sample was not sought. Twelve participants were accessed within the DSLC, where they were attending an English-medium instruction MA program. Nine participants were reached in the DCE, and seven were found in the DESU. In both DCE and DESU, the participants were attending traditional Italian-medium BA and MA programs. All the participants were NNESs who had been learning English mainly through formal instruction. Two were non-native speakers of Italian, one from Russia and one from Vietnam.

4.3 Data collection procedure

The research approach adopted for this study was qualitative and interpretative, focusing on the transcripts of twenty-eight in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews carried out for a wider doctoral research project. This instrument of data collection is characteristic of direct approaches to attitude studies [84] and folk linguistics research [85]. While preserving the free-narrative structure of the interviews, the semi-structured pattern allowed to guarantee consistency between them and ensured coverage of the same topics. All the topics covered in the interviews related to the participants' personal experience with the English language, both in and out of the EFL classroom.

The fieldwork took place between February and May 2020. Due to the restrictions imposed in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (from March to June), twenty interviews were conducted at a distance via Skype and Google Meet. Only the two interviews with the non-native speakers of Italian were conducted in English. All the other interviews were conducted in Italian to make the participants more comfortable, which allowed them to better articulate their views and avoided the risk of limiting discussion.

4.4 Data analysis procedure

The interview transcription conventions are shown in **Table 1**.

The strategy adopted for the analysis of the interview data can be classified as qualitative content analysis [87–89], a systematic process of classification based on coding and identifying themes or patterns in a text. The content of the speech produced by the interviewees was taken at face value, and to gain direct information from

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
molto numerose	High-rising pitch (uptalk)
CAPS	Emphatic or contrastive stress
ing-	Abrupt cutoffs and false starts
@	Laughter (one @ per syllable)
proficiency	Utterances in English
okay	Speaker modes (open list)

Table 1.
Transcription conventions. Adapted from ref. [85, 86].

them, the categories for the analysis were allowed to flow from the data. The coding of the interview was an iterative, non-linear process, and a "second-level coding" [88] of the whole corpus of interviews was carried out that led to the development of the thematic framework of analysis. This in turn allowed us to visualize the occurrence of themes across all interviews and identify patterns in the entire data set. This study focuses on the interview extracts in which the themes were categorized under the broad category named 'What English is and does.'

4.5 Results/findings

The participants' views of what English is and does are reported in this section according to the main topics identified. Due to space limitations, only a few extracts from the interview transcripts are reported to illustrate the results of the analysis. Omitted parts are represented by three stops between square brackets: [...]. Extracts that run for less than three lines are reported with quotation marks. Extracts longer than three lines are in italics and set off from the main paragraph. The extracts were translated in a faithful manner by the author (a native speaker of Italian) to be completely faithful to the intentions of the interviewee.

4.5.1 British and American English

A tendency was observed to discuss variation in terms of a dichotomy of American English and British English. Several interviewees identified British English as a formal register, while American English was variously represented as an informal, slangy register. The influence of the standard language ideology was evident in all the interviewees' comments that juxtaposed British and American English, as they reflected the common sense notion that the English people strictly adhere to the rules of correctness, whereas the Americans do not hesitate to deviate from correct English. According to this folk opinion, rather than two distinct varieties of English, each with its respective norms, there is a primary, original, ancestral norm, and the Americans take the liberty to deflect from it. A stereotyped view of American English as "simplified" English and "slang" was found to prevail in the data, and for its associations with informality, this characterization of American English arguably testifies to the relevance of US entertainment culture as the main source of out-of-class language input for EFL students. On the other hand, the almost unanimous characterization of British English as "the original" English, "the pure one," and its associations with

a formal register pointed to the prestige that British English derives from its institutional support and the images of authenticity, heritage, and tradition that it evokes.

This view of English in dichotomous terms nevertheless coexisted with a view of English as a language of global dimension.

4.5.2 English as a global lingua franca

While only a few interviewees put into perspective the common sense notion of English as a global language, observing that it is not universally spoken and understood, most of them described it as such and highlighted its role as an international link language. S9, for instance, claimed, "whether we like it or not English is the basic language of communication for anything [...] a language that connects everyone." S3 and S7 referred to it as a "bridge," and S2 as a "meeting point." S16 testified to the rise of English as a working language for internal communication in Italian business environments, recalling her work experience in an Italian-based multinational company where she had "used English on a daily basis," and pointing out, "even if [...] there was one person in a meeting who was not Italian and we had to conduct meetings in English (1) and it was sort of (.) e:r it was normal (.) when actually it is not quite a normal thing."

Seven participants, of which only one (S4) had not attended ELF-informed courses, used the expression "lingua franca." S4 pointed to the role of English as a lingua franca of academia, mentioning "English which often is a language I am inclined to say a lingua franca allows to: access many more resources." S19 also emphasized the advantages of ELF for scientific and academic research. S28, while acknowledging that English is not spoken universally, appeared to accept with pragmatism the realities of ELF, claiming, "after all, we are still living in an epoch when knowing English is necessary there is not any other lingua franca in sight."

Whereas all the participants who broached this topic highlighted the advantages of ELF, a few of them revealed a more ambivalent attitude toward it. Commenting on the impact of the advance of English on the other national languages, S25 argued that "the global presence of English e:r therefore as a lingua franca represents a threat to any language (.) if these other second world languages cannot defend themselves." Other students expressed the concern that the primacy of English may lead to the marginalization of other languages and cultures. S27, for instance, spoke of the "paradox" inherent in English, a language "spoken by everyone" that facilitates international communication, on the one hand, but one whose advance poses "a threat to linguistic and cultural diversity." S22, a native speaker of Russian, hinted at the risks of erosion faced by the national traditions of academic research, especially in the field of humanities, claiming,

> *<LNen>the fact that the English is language of science and technology in some way e:r uhm like e:r do- it doesn't allow (.) the (.) ide- the (.) the thought (.) of (.) Russian Chinese French scientists er to progress [...] the most prominent scientific journals are all language e:r are all published in English so the scientist have to (.) like think in advance and they will present and they will put their ideas in English maybe in some way it affects the e:r u:hrm (.) most in humanities @@ it affects the: national way of thinking which is way of thinking in our own language.</LNen>*

The same risks were also pointed out by S26, who understood the problem of having to produce knowledge in English as one of dumbing down the quality of academic content:

> *obviously those shades and those possibilities of expression that are there in other languages are lost if a paper is written in English instead of in the language (.) e:r I mean of (.) native language of the researcher, or I mean e:r (.) and obviously e:r it also lowers let's say (.) the level even if involuntarily you know? e:r the quality of a work.*

Concerns about the risks of the advance of English in academic discourse leading to the erosion of the national traditions of research, as they had recently appeared in the European public debate, perhaps influenced the views of S9, S17, and S26. These students clearly suggested that English should coexist in a balanced ecology that also allows the national languages to thrive.

S29 perceived the privileging of English as a form of overt discrimination and remarked that English had been "imposed," "an indirect imposition," a "transformation that is achieved over time" that "one does not notice," so that in the end "it is difficult to understand what the real cause was." She thus suggested that the spread of English resulted not from overt coercion but from a series of social and historical processes that cannot be easily disentangled. Unlike most other interviewees, S29 showed an acute awareness of the history of the global spread of English, referring to the colonization of the Americas and Africa and mentioning military power as a key factor. Nevertheless, she also accepted the primacy of English with a pragmatic attitude and did not question the lingua franca role of English, emphasizing the advantages of having a widely spoken language that can link speakers of different L1s.

These findings overall indicated that a liking for the English language, as well as unconditional acceptance of its international functions and advances in contemporary non-English-speaking societies, can coexist with strong feelings for one's own national language and culture, and more generally a positive attitude toward multilingualism. More than that, as it is shown in the following section, some interviewees questioned the idea of global ownership of English.

4.5.3 English and cosmopolitanism

Commenting on the global spread of English, S5 pointed out that English can nowadays be said to belong to "almost everyone," although she also clarified, "when I think of English I think maybe also of the social classes that can afford obviously also the let's say access to education and obviously to the language courses because (.) they do have a cost." The clear implication in S5's comment was that not all students can afford the costs entailed in developing proficiency in English. She thus shifted the focus of the discussion from the geographical spread of English to the social distribution of competence in English. S14 also commented on the costs of study abroad programs, and pointing out that only a minority of students can afford them, she raised an issue of inequality in access to those resources that more than any others facilitate the attainment of a high level of proficiency in English.

Presenting her views on the same topic, S17 suggested that English is a crucial element of an international cosmopolitan class structure, clearly indicating that competence in English is an index of socioeconomic background. She expressed begrudging admiration for those students who, unlike her, had had the opportunity to acquire more than one language naturally, by living abroad and studying in "very expensive" private English-medium international schools. Referring to a friend of hers who had attended one such school in China, she confessed, "those whom I hate most" and "I envy so much" are "those students like my friend who speaks three languages." In a subsequent turn, she also mentioned a family she had met in Jordan,

whose kids had been attending an English-medium school, pointing out that it was "one of the wealthiest families of the city" and that their kids "only hung out with children of wealthy people." Based on those considerations, she concluded that the opportunities that facilitate the attainment of native-like proficiency represent some sort of privilege that is reserved for the few, claiming, "I don't believe that English is a language accessible (1) to all."

Study abroad experiences broadly speaking, are regarded as an opportunity for families to accumulate linguistic capital and invest in class mobility. It is known, however, that study abroad programs are highly expensive, and in this sense, they deepen class inequality. Indeed, wealthy families possess better means to get their children ahead in a neoliberal social order in which competence in English is a highly coveted asset and where young learners are bound to feel pressure to become successful users of English. While the European Union does promote study exchange programs and traineeships, the Italian education system does not provide less affluent families with sufficient financial support for any such overseas experiences as those referred to by the interviewees. The ties between English and class are in this sense unmistakable, as are issues of inequality arising in a society that emphasizes English skills as a necessity.

4.5.4 English as a necessary skill

Twenty-five interviews in total included comments that characterized English as a necessary skill. Some interviewees were categorical in claiming that English was indispensable in today's world. Some instead hedged their claim, drawing distinctions between different domains of language use or highlighting the value of other foreign languages. Others even questioned the view of English as an indispensable tool, implicitly suggesting that the commonsense notion of a necessary skill must not be taken literally.

S8 believed that "even a laborer nowadays hardly he cannot have at least a minimum competence in English." Along the same lines, S20 also argued that "some knowledge of English is the basic nowadays. I mean it is not an added value anymore bu:t a minimum requirement". S9 claimed that "when one needs to: have more precise information about something you search it in English," which seemed to imply that to be validated, knowledge must be in English, as if the English language were the only source of all significant knowledge. S25 explicitly linked proficiency in English to individual competitiveness, as she commented that "ineffective teaching o- of English in high schools (.) e:r already represents let's say a weakness with which our human capital (.) e:r will enter the labor market." Recounting her work experience mentioned above, S16 remarked that "for us it was fundamental that the person that spoke English that had good knowledge (.) good knowledge of English," and repeated five times that it was "essential." S5 commented that even if "it depends also on the type of job [...] right now one has to know English that is basic competence in English is an important asset."

S21 argued that whereas in certain job positions, working competence in English is completely unnecessary, an English-proficient candidate will always be preferred over the non-proficient one, because English "is an added competence which is anyways useful for almost any job [...] is actually a (.) being connected somehow with with the outside world not not knowing only your language it is like some sort of narrow-mindedness." Her argument clearly suggested that English proficiency is perceived as a mark of prestige. According to this view, English, rather than literally being a necessary skill, is a status symbol, and it is by virtue of this symbolic value that English

enhances one's competitiveness in the labor market, irrespective of the actual need to use it on the job. S17 also puts the importance of English proficiency in the labor market in perspective, suggesting that as much as it is represented as necessary, English by itself is not automatically a gateway of opportunities: "it IS NOT that it immediately opens up the doors of the work world for you [...] is absolutely an added value surely it is but it's not all that." However, she also clearly suggested that being proficient in English nevertheless gives one an edge, as she commented "I believe that it is a that En- English is (.) also a discriminating factor. Like S21, she thus perceived proficiency in English as a sign of social distinction, rather than literally a necessary skill.

Two interviewees emphasized the importance of knowledge of other foreign languages for employability. S14, who pointed out that an exclusive focus on English may be misguided, since "just as you know English at least from my own point of view the more languages you know the (.) better it is," and S24, who remarked that "English actually is not always a passe-partout." While S14 and S24 suggested that the notion of a necessary skill ought not to be taken literally, they did not seem to challenge the prevailing characterization of English as a highly advantageous tool.

4.5.5 The culture of English

Although all the interviewees acknowledged the instrumental function of English, a particularly salient topic that emerged from the interview data was also the relationship between language and culture. Most participants represented English as a language that is loaded with specific cultural values. S12 commented that English "is not only a means of communication [...] one associates it immediately to the United States or England and to all the all the monuments and the history that lies behind the language." S5 said, when thinking of English, "I think of American or British culture but that is because they are the most present I don't know in TV series, TV, and also in newspapers."

Several interviewees clearly suggested that their perceptions of the English language were strongly influenced by US entertainment culture. S28, for instance, commented that "nowadays we are very much dominated by (.) TV series, movies, actually especially American ones." S18 observed, "from what I can see on the social media, TV series [...], movies and pop songs the language of globalization is English yes it is but English in its American version." She also emphasized the key role that pop entertainment culture had had in fostering her motivation to learn English and contrasting English with German, she commented,

> *as regards English I have constant and continuous feedback (.) from music to cinema fro:m from the news [...] I do not have incentives towards the German language because [...] German music, but I do not listen to it (.) also because I don't (.) I mean it doesn't not not get simply it does not not get here does it? I should search for it I should it presupposes an active attitude which I do not have towards the German language [...]. I do not even get the same incentives.*

In a subsequent turn, S18 explicitly linked the attractiveness of English to a globalized American youth culture:

> *there is this girl whom we look for and oh my look for sorry we follow on social media [...] she attended the American school a-s well from preschool to university therefore she o- often speaks and also quote unquote teaches her <LNen> followers </LNen> e:r*

> *some idiomatic expressions [...] expressions that actually come from TV series a:nd or online memes. like now there is this Karen fad Karen <LNen> I'm a Karen </LNen> to delineate a person in her fifties who complains about a lot of stuff things things like that*

No doubt influenced by her experience as a high school exchange student in the USA, at various points throughout the interview, S18 manifested an enthusiastic attitude toward American culture, which appeared to mirror a desire to integrate into it.

All the allusions made in the interviews to pop entertainment culture as a key source of out-of-class target language input and a factor for motivation to learn English were indications as to the consumer appeal of English. Clear suggestions that English indexes *coolness* and sophistication were found also in the interviewees' comments on the use of Anglicisms in the Italian language. Claiming that Italians use Anglicisms for mere reasons of prestige, S25 pointed to the connotations of high status that English loanwords carry: "what Italians do when they repeat Anglicisms and overuse them is in order to raise (.) the the their own level their own they sort of give the impression of being e:r let's say sophisticated and learned." Along similar lines, S17 highlighted the connotations of the prestige of Anglicisms, commenting that some of her friends used American English "slang" expressions to "show off," "make an impression," and prove that they are proficient in English, as if to say, "look I know how to speak slang," "look I know English better than you."

S6 instead observed that Anglicisms can be used "to better express something," and "to find the best words to say something". Referring to the adapted loanword "fittare"—from the English verb 'to fit,' which she had frequently found in social media, she commented,

> *FITTARE with also a transformation e.r in Italian e.r which is exactly the emblem in my opinion because (.) fit does not have a real translation in Italian or if it has one I cannot recall it now therefore it is by itself indicative of how more quickly it comes off the top of your head than the: the Italian word because it is simpler I don't know [...] one can say by some sort of play on words that the word fittare fits FITTA BETTER @ in the the spoken language*

While a positive attitude toward English conceivably shaped S6's perception that Anglicisms get through the message better than their Italian equivalent, the marked choice of "fittare" also perhaps corresponded to a desire to express in-group solidarity with a cosmopolitan generation of young Internet users.

S18, who communicated that she constantly used English expressions in her text conversations with friends, also believed that English words better convey the intended meaning than their Italian equivalents:

> *a good part of our messages a:re in English or anyways sometimes m- mixed English and Italian beca:use there are <LNen>reference</LNen> to: meme o:r articles or videos e:r that are indeed in English therefore it would not not make sense to translate them and their meaning would get lost [...] it is not that they are untranslatable but i- in English in my opinion they co-better convey the message*

As noted above, S18 expressed a strong emotional attachment to US culture, and it seems reasonable to conclude that her enthusiastic attitude toward American English and culture shaped her perception that an English expression better conveys the intended meaning than its Italian equivalent. Also, like S6, she clearly revealed

that English expressions represented marked choices, and it is possible that S18 and her friends used them not only with the intent of demonstrating their high level of proficiency in the language—itself a sign of distinction—but maybe also of signaling their in-group solidarity with the native speakers with whom they associated those expressions and their culture.

S9, herself a highly proficient English learner who had spent three years abroad in an English-medium international school, seemed to signal her positive attitude to English by means of her intonation. She repeatedly reproduced in her (Italian) speech the high rising terminal contour (HRTC) (also commonly referred to as 'uptalk') that is typical of certain English speech styles but is utterly uncommon in Italian. The category of "pragmatic borrowing," referring to "a variety of phenomena whose common feature is that they do not contribute to the propositional content of utterances but act as constraints on the interpretation process" [90] extends the borrowing of linguistic features to intonation, including the use of HRTC. Twenty-one occurrences of HRTC in total were counted throughout the forty-two turns of her interview; the extract below (intentionally kept in Italian) shows three instances of it when she answered the researcher's question whether she ever happened to use English in her hometown:

> *u:hm <?> poco in realtà </?> nel senso che: lo utilizzo appunto: <?> tanto tra amici </?> però sono amici che sento solo (.) via Skype o <?> o diversamente </?> u:hm un po' con mia sorella perché mia sorella ha studiato per un anno in America quando era al Liceo.*[1]

The significance of uptalk in NE varieties is a complex one and has undergone changes over the decades (and so have the attitudes toward it) [91]. However, considering the widespread use of uptalk in the speaking habits of the younger generations of NESs, it can be hypothesized that by transferring it into Italian, S9 was possibly aiming to be identified as an internationally educated cosmopolitan and highly proficient English user and perhaps lay claim to the English language.

In brief, all the interviewees' references to Anglicisms clearly testified to the appeal that English derives from the specific cultural affiliations that it indexes as the language of US entertainment culture and youth cosmopolitanism.

Like S18, S26 also highlighted the lack of "a culture surrounding" German as a disincentive to its learning and characterized the globalization of English as a process of Americanization. However, not only did she refer to entertainment culture, but she also mentioned US academic culture:

> *English is so widespread e:r as a language of communication for those who e:r do not speak it as first language (.) especially because of the e:r American influence [...] all the tv series that we watch nowadays are American (.) [...] the majority of the textbooks that are used e:r in university e:r they are often American e:r almost all the economics textbooks for instance*

Likewise, S19 perceived the adoption of English as a medium of instruction to go hand in hand with the assimilation into a specific academic culture. She claimed that marketing was "quintessentially an English-medium subject" and that it was natural

[1] Translation: *u:hm <? > very little actually </? > I mean e:r I use it <? > indee:d: with friends </? > but they are friends whom I only hear from (.) via Skype or <? > or otherwise </? > u:r a little with my sister because my sister studied for one year in America when she was in high school.*

for her to associate it with the English language and US culture, as "one of the greatest marketing authors was an American." Restating her perception of an inextricable link between certain disciplinary fields and the English language, she repeatedly remarked, "it would sound strange to me" to receive the same academic content in Spanish (her second language of choice in her degree program) and made an implicit association between English and modernity, remarking,

> *something that is completely in English in my opinion really gives one (.) I don't know that added something @ the aspect how can I say? mo:re u:r ur more advanced aspect of the subject that is to think of doing marketing in Italian why not? but in English (.) I don't know it is e:r mentally it is perhaps more interesting*

In the same vein, S13 represented English as the vehicle of a culture-specific line of scientific research:

> *I would like to do research after graduation [...] English is the most used language therefore it is very useful [...] we have a center (.) a rehabilitation center for kids u:r where the cabas method is used it is a method used especially for the with autism particularly a:nd it is a method that is studied mostly e:r in America [...] most research and texts are in English*

Speculating whether the CABAS technology of instruction [92] that had fueled S13's investment in taking her learning of English further has some universal value is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, as a matter of fact, English as an academic lingua franca did not turn out from her comment as decoupled from a specific culture.

In conclusion, the interview data revealed a prevailing characterization of English that is incompatible with the ELF notion of English as a culturally neutral language.

5. Discussion

In relation to research question (i) (What are the students' perceptions of English?), the analysis of the interview data revealed that the students who participated in this study characterized English as a key skill to navigate today's society. It was found that English tended to be perceived as a status symbol, as some students were reported to believe that high proficiency in English represents a mark of social distinction that gives one an edge in today's globalized society, regardless of the real need to use the English language in a work context. As argued by S21, English proficiency looks good on a young job applicant because it indexes openness and cosmopolitanism.

The data suggested that the prestige of English was related also to its symbolic value as a gateway to a cosmopolitan citizenship, and several indications were given that English is a crucial element of an international cosmopolitan class structure. In this respect, S5's and S17's comments were very telling, as they raised issues of inequality in access to the resources that facilitate the attainment of native-like competence in English.

The analysis also suggested that in the students' views, the English language carried both connotations of prestige and highly positive affective connotations. Not only was English found to index status and success in society, but also *coolness*

and modernity. This perception in turn is clearly related to the consumer appeal of English. The findings indicated US entertainment culture as a fundamental source of out-of-class English language input for all participants and unequivocally suggested that the spread of and the related great vitality of English in Italy is tied to the dissemination of US cultural products, norms, and values.

In relation to research question (ii) (Do the ways students think of what English is and does reproduce an ideology of denativized, deterritorialized language and culturally neutral language?), the participants were found to discuss English language variation in the dichotomous terms of British English and American English, and in this characterization, register, and dialect coincided. Their experience in the EFL classroom, where British Standard English is set as a benchmark and learning target, on the one hand, and massive exposure to US entertainment culture, on the other, clearly shaped their characterizations of British English as a formal variety and American English as an informal, slangy variety.

Also, specific cultural references were found to be associated with the English language that contributed to both its prestige and attractiveness in the eyes of the students. Although most participants seemed to safely assume that English can be adopted as a transactional currency in cross-cultural communication, the image of English provided by the interviewees was that of a language that is loaded with culture-specific values. Even the interviewees who referred to the role of English as the lingua franca of the international academic community were found to perceive that as it is adopted as a tool for that specific function, English is nonetheless also the vehicle of culture-specific content.

6. Conclusion

This study attempted to answer two interrelated questions: (i) What are the students' perceptions of English? (ii) Do the ways students think of what English is and does reproduce an ideology of de-nativized, de-territorialized language and culturally neutral language?

In answer to (i), the analysis of the interview data found that the students regarded the English language as an important tool for social inclusion in a globalized world that attributes a utilitarian and a symbolic value to English. It can also be concluded that the ways the students who participated in this study think of English revealed a pragmatic attitude toward its spread and its concomitant function of lingua franca. ELF was accepted on pragmatic grounds also by those students who were more critical toward the idea of English making inroads in key domains of society and raised issues of inequality.

However, in answer to (ii), no suggestions were given that the students could see English as a deterritorialized, denativized, and culturally neutral language. Culture-specific norms and values were found to be associated with English, which unmistakably contributed to its prestige and, most importantly, to its attractiveness in the eyes of the students. The findings clearly suggested that the great vitality and the advancement of English in contemporary society are tied to the dissemination of US cultural products, norms, and values. Therefore, it can be arguably concluded that rather than two distinct things that coexisted in the students' perceptions, the notion of English as a lingua franca and the image of American English as the language of globalization are two sides of the same coin, and to be more specific, the former appears to be a function of the latter. In other words, it is suggested that there is a culture of English

that, although it is represented as globalized, cosmopolitan, and neutral, is deeply embedded in specific norms and values.

This contribution has mentioned the importance of looking at matters that have been a concern of applied linguistics through the lenses of a macro-sociolinguistic approach. To this end, ELF was understood as an ideological construct against which to assess the participants' perceptions of the current realities of English. From a pedagogical perspective, this study suggests that it is certainly important to raise English learners' awareness of ELF and more generally harmonize ELT practices with the current realities of English. However, it also suggests the need to address the symbolic value of English in ELT by raising students' awareness of the politics of English and its spread. Characterizations of English as a neutral language tend to overshadow issues of cultural prestige and identity. This study pointed instead to the relevance of the expressive and symbolic function of language, which was found to be a major factor in learners' motivation.

Furthermore, this study suggests a need to problematize ELF ideology and foster a critical approach to the study of English. First, ELF should be repositioned within an equitable and symmetrical multilingual-multicultural framework that respects the principles of diversity, pluralism, and equality in communication. In regard to the latter point, while the ELF principle of discarding NE norms apparently corresponds to a democratic and egalitarian ideal, the symbolic value of native-like proficiency cannot be left out of the equation. ELF communication represents a highly diversified phenomenon that includes a heterogeneous group of English speakers with divergent levels of competencies. Although NE norms may be irrelevant for ELF users in some specific real-world interactions—as opposed to classroom interactions for EFL learners—this study suggests that high proficiency in English still gives the NNESs an edge, even if only on a symbolic level. Not to mention the fact that in such formal, highly regulated contexts as academia, native-like proficiency represents a tangible advantage if not a necessity. Also, it may not be enough to merely expose students to a plurality of English varieties, as they may find the celebration of diversity and legitimization of deviations from the standard to be pointless unless non-standard forms could function as linguistic capital. Taking all this into account, and since ELF is not literally a lingua franca, it is arguably in the interest of the NNESs to increase their range of competitiveness.

To conclude, it is hoped that the findings of this study can also help ELT practitioners and English learners recognize ELF as an ideological construct and critically look at the contemporary sociolinguistic realities of English.

6.1 Limitations

Given the limited number of students involved and the non-representativeness of the sample, the findings of the present study cannot be generalized and are not conclusive. Furthermore, except for S29, all the interviewees held a favorable attitude toward English and expressed a personal interest in English language learning that extended beyond the boundaries of the EFL classroom. In this sense, a favorable bias toward English and its cultural associations may have affected the representativeness of the data. Particularly the students whose views were found to be strongly influenced by exposure to US entertainment culture could hardly be expected to conceive English as a culturally neutral language.

To reduce such bias, provide more balanced views, and enrich analysis, future studies should also involve students who hold negative affective attitudes toward

English and its learning and possibly even students who have limited exposure to US pop entertainment culture. Heterogeneous populations of non-English majors can certainly be reached, at least potentially, in any of the general and specific purposes English courses offered in Italian universities. However, as this study proves, if participation can only be on a voluntary basis, it may be difficult to motivate students to engage in discussions on a topic they lack interest in. It may thus be necessary to provide incentives, in accordance with the policy of the university where the study is conducted, as these may ease the problem of getting students to take part in the research. Researchers may also address the broad topic of students' perceptions of English in interviews or focus group studies, for instance, that ask students to offer their views on their past English learning experience and point out particularly their perceived failures and faults of ELT. It seems reasonable to assume that more students with negative attitudes toward English could be motivated to recount their learning experience, especially if this was unsatisfactory. In addition, more studies carried out in other universities and other European contexts than Italy may provide a fuller and more complex picture.

On a final note, although implications for ELT were pointed out, it must be observed that these findings are surely not of immediate pedagogical relevance. Nevertheless, they suggest that for ELF to be accepted in practice, explicit ELF instruction may not be sufficient. ELT practitioners must consider that learners may perceive their teachers' arguments for the legitimacy of non-standard and non-native usages of English as a sort of patronizing attitude, which may in turn lead to dissatisfaction and loss of motivation. On the other hand, the purpose of promoting an inclusive view of English that embraces the notion of ELF would perhaps be better served by grounding ELT practices on solid linguistic and sociolinguistic foundations. Incorporation of explicit teaching of principles of linguistics (and sociolinguistics) theory into traditional grammar instruction would possibly bring students to question standard language ideology and the native speaker ideal. They may thus be led to understand the rule-governed nature of the non-standard varieties of English and accept the legitimacy of ELF usages, while also recognizing ELF itself as an ideological construct.

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