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ELF 'Awareness': Student Attitudes Towards Accents in a Context of English as an International Language

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Abstract The term 'ELF awareness' has gained currency in recent years to refer to teaching and learning contexts in which the ability to communicate in an international environment, between non native speakers, is recognised as a desired outcome of the course. In this chapter we present the results of a survey administered to incoming undergraduate students of languages at Ca' Foscari University of Venice to determine their attitudes towards non-native accents when English is used in an international context. I go on to compare the results of the same survey administered to students in two MA courses, in English language and literature, and in International Relations, to determine whether MA students are more 'ELF aware' than undergraduates, and whether students of International Relations have a more pragmatic, instrumentally motivated approach to ELF than their peers who are specialising in English language and literature. The findings lead to a reflection on the usefulness of an 'ELF aware approach' in English language courses in higher education in Italy and Europe.

Keywords Accent. Pronunciation. English Lingua Franca. Undergraduate. MA.

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1 'ELF Awareness'. A New Perspective for University Students Learning and Using English?

The research project reported in this chapter is premised on the notion of 'ELF awareness', a term popularised by Sifakis (2014) and Bayyurt and Sifakis (2015) in which 'awareness' refers to an understanding of the strategies employed by successful users of English in international communication, or ELF: English as a Lingua Franca. Firstly, however, the notion of ELF itself needs clarification. In this chapter, I take it to refer to interaction between speakers, neither or none of whom have English as their first or native language.[1] With the unprecedented rise of ELF in recent years, and the corresponding increase in the number of English speakers – Crystal (2008) puts this at two billion – his claim that non-native speaker (NNS) interactions in English outnumber native-speaker (NS) interactions by three to one (Crystal 2004, 69) seems more than ever plausible.

This, in turn, has consequences for teachers and learners of English. Two decades of ELF research have shown that a variety of strategies, such as accommodation and linguistic creativity, are regularly employed in ELF interaction; that the promotion of intelligibility rather than personal identity through features of pronunciation is crucial; that proactive collaboration between listener and speaker is fundamental to communication; and that in all of these aspects of ELF interaction pragmatics and intercultural awareness are likely to have an important role. The norms of NS English, are replaced by the fluid but functional norms of ELF, driven by the need for intelligibility, and observable in its syntax, lexis and pronunciation. The quandary for teachers of English begins with the recognition of these fluid norms: should examples of non-(native-speaker) standard language be stigmatised as errors, or seen within a wider context of ELF strategies (Newbold 2017)?

This is a real dilemma for teachers. Research into teacher attitudes has consistently shown awareness of the need for learners to be exposed to the English of international interaction, as in most cases they are more likely to need to communicate (in English) with non-native speakers like themselves. At the same time, they are committed to native-speaker norms at least in terms of their teaching and testing of the productive skills (Timmis 2002; Groom 2012; Soruç 2015). This is especially true of NNS teachers, who make up the bulk of the English language teaching community worldwide. These teach-

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1 Following the narrower definition by House (2003) rather than Seidlhofer's (2011) broader definition in which English L1 speakers may be included.

ers may also be aware of a paradox that some of their students who do badly in an educational environment – where, presumably, they have been subjected to the norms of Standard English – turn out to be good communicators in 'real life' ELF interaction: as Seidlhofer and Widdowson (2017) put it, they have language "capability" rather than "competence".

But at university level the picture which emerges is one of teachers, and institutions, firmly wedded to native-speaker norms. A large-scale survey of European University professors, of all disciplines, by Mollin (2005) showed that an overwhelming majority censored as "unacceptable" non-standard morphology, such as a missing third-person marker, interchangeability of relative pronouns *who*/*which*, or plural markers for mass nouns ("informations"), none of which compromise intelligibility. This attitude is confirmed by Jenkins (2014) in her study of ELF in 24 universities worldwide, all of which aim to attract international students, and which therefore offer courses through the medium of English. In a questionnaire delivered to teaching staff she found that the attitude of deference towards native-speaker models is however less noticeable when it comes to pronunciation, with some teachers taking a more "flexible" approach, but a sizeable group of "normative" teachers "find it unacceptable for their students to maintain a noticeable non-native English accent" (Jenkins 2014, 139).

When it comes to student attitudes towards pronunciation, a raft of surveys of student attitudes shows a marked preference for acquiring an accent which is native-speaker-like. In Europe, this is likely to mean an accent which is close to British RP, and which students were probably exposed to at school, the model adopted by their teachers and propagated through courses produced by major UK educational publishers. For example, in a survey of university students of languages from Italy, Poland and Spain, Nowacka (2012, 49) found 89% agreeing, or strongly agreeing, with the statement "Students should aim for native English pronunciation". This figure rises to 94% in a survey of English language majors in Poland carried out by Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk and Porzuczek (2015).

More recently, reporting a survey administered to mostly Italian students, Christansen (2017, 65) notes that an overwhelming majority identify with the statement "If I could, I would like to speak English so well that people would think that I was born in an English-speaking country"; a deliberately loaded proposition, in a questionnaire which combined 'ELF oriented' and 'native-speaker oriented, statements. But, as Christiansen points out, the phrase "If I could" presupposes wishful thinking on the part of respondents, who presumably realise that the aim is unrealistic.

A preference for native-speaker pronunciation remains deep-rooted even for students who are not majoring in languages, and who

might therefore be seen as less integratively motivated than their peers who are specialising in languages. Brabcová and Skarnitzl (2018), for example, found that more than 70% of students they interviewed in the Czech Republic declared that they wanted to sound like native speakers. However, respondents also agreed that they would like teachers to present a range of accents, including examples of non-native speakers. Griffiths and Soruç (2018), investigating the preferences of (non-language majoring) international students in Turkey and New Zealand, from 72 different national backgrounds, and with a wide range of first languages, found respondents similarly attracted to native-speaker accents. But they note that those students living in a native English-speaking environment (New Zealand) showed more tolerance of non-standard forms than their counterparts in the international university in a NNS location (Turkey), leading them to the conclusion that

> the environment in which they use English as a medium of communication might predispose them to be more tolerant of language which is less than perfectly "correct" as long as they can convey the necessary message. (Griffiths, Soruç 2018, 62)

On a related note, but from a different perspective, Borghetti and Beaven (2017) look at the attitudes towards ELF of Italian students on mobility to European universities, and how 'ELF awareness' can be raised by getting students to reflect on the learning opportunities presented by interacting in ELF, and compare their experiences with their peers who communicate (or try to communicate) using the local language to interact with native speakers of that language. The survey, of 141 students, 59% of whom used ELF for most of their interactions, yields a number of reflections on the nature of ELF interaction, such as less embarrassment (compared with interactions with native speakers) since interlocutors using a lingua franca are "more ready to fill gaps" and are in a better position to understand the students' needs.

The mobility experience brings us to the realities of university life in Europe today, where the Erasmus programme has contributed to massive international movement of students across Europe, and beyond. Since the inception of the programme in 1987, more than 10 million students[2] have taken part in mobility programmes, with currently more than 300,000 participating each year in the Erasmus+ programme. As Borghetti and Beaven note, for most participants this means using ELF in the mobility country. However, the implications for ELF usage go beyond the experiences of those directly benefit-

2 https://europeancommission.medium.com/10-things-you-didnt-know-about-erasmus-41bb2c8ebd9c.

ting from the mobility, to include the 'stay-at-homers' who need to interact with their international peers in informal as well as educational settings. These students may also have to interact with teaching staff on mobility, in both written and oral contexts, attend lectures and other events in English, and consult documents written by non-native speakers. In short, the 'ELF experience' has become an integral part of university life in Europe for all students, especially those in universities such as the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which have an increasingly international vocation.

2 The First Survey. Undergraduates

A survey of incoming undergraduate students was administered to two successive cohorts (2019 and 2020) who had enrolled for the *laurea triennale* (BA) in modern foreign languages at the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice. As reported elsewhere in this volume Ca' Foscari has one of the largest intakes of language students in Italy, and the highest number of languages on offer, consistently around forty, with a strong tradition in Oriental, as well as Western, languages.

Most students had enrolled for one or two of the 'big five' western languages on offer in the Department: English, French, German, Russian and Spanish, although other languages, notably Portuguese and Swedish, were also represented. A total of 372 students from the two cohorts completed the survey, which was administered via Google Forms; of these, 273 indicated "English" or "Anglo-American" as either their first or second language.[3] The survey was designed to investigate student attitudes towards accents, especially their own aims and desiderata regarding the acquisition of pronunciation in their chosen languages. It also aimed at identifying variables, such as the personal language backgrounds of students, which might account for those attitudes. This aspect of the research project is amply described elsewhere in this volume.

The fifth, and penultimate, section of the survey (Section E), was devoted to students' perceptions of the role of English as a Lingua Franca, with particular reference to pronunciation and accents. The term was clarified at the beginning of the section in the 'narrow' sense introduced previously:

3 At Ca' Foscari all students are required to do two languages, both of which have equal status, and involve the acquisition of the same number of credits. 'Anglo-American' is taught as a separate course from 'English', although students may not enrol to do both English and Anglo-American.

> English has become a lingua franca used throughout the world. By "lingua franca", we mean a language used to communicate by speakers of other languages, who are not native speakers.

This was intended to invite students to think of their own experiences of using English with other NNSs, such as their familiarity (or lack of familiarity) with specific accents, as well as their opinions about the importance (or lack of importance) of a native speaker-like accent in ELF interaction. Could it be that when using English *as a lingua franca* students took a different attitude towards the importance of native-speaker norms, compared to the overwhelming preference for a native speaker-like accent expressed by students towards their chosen languages in Section B?

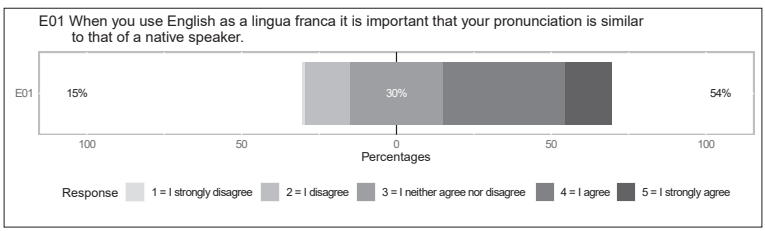
The format used to elicit responses in this as in previous sections of the survey, was a 5-point Likert scale which invited students to agree or disagree with given statements, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) and thereby allowing a neutral response (3) for students who felt unable to commit themselves to an opinion. There were seven statements in all, and the section concluded with an invitation to make any comment on the questions, or to add any comment on the pronunciation of English as a lingua franca.

The first two items revisit the notion of 'native speaker', which features in the second section of the survey (see ch. 2 in this volume), and in which more than 95% of respondents affirm that "I want my pronunciation to be as close as possible to that of a native speaker" (B05), while 88% agreed with the statement "I like being mistaken for a native speaker" (B12) – a statement which seems to assume that this is an experience that students will have had, although it is unlikely that many of them will have been mistaken *by native speakers* as such. Identity, then, with a native-speaker group, rather than (mere) intelligibility, is a clear target, albeit perhaps unrealistic, for first-year language students.

The first statement in the section on ELF echoes B05, but limits the context to that of speaking:

E01 When you use English as a lingua franca it is important that your pronunciation is similar to that of a native speaker.

Chart 1 Responses to E01



However, in contrast with Section B, which addresses the students' opinions through 1st person pronouns ("Ci *tengo* molto ad avvicinar*mi* il più possibile alla pronuncia di un madrelingua": "*I* want *my* pronunciation to be as close as possible to that of a native speaker"), an impersonal form is used in the original Italian version of E01 ("Quando *si usa*"), inviting students to take a more detached overview of the phenomenon. Here, too, a majority (54%) agreed, but the margins are considerably narrower, with 15% disagreeing, and a sizeable 30% undecided. NS pronunciation is still the gold standard, but there is perhaps an incipient realisation of the specific context of ELF interaction.

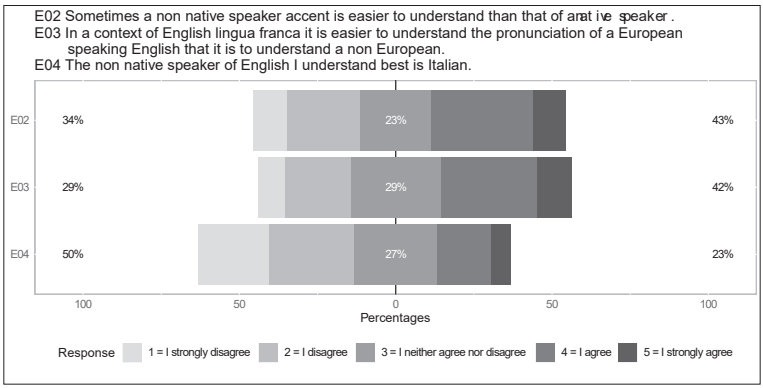
The next three statements move away from production to perception of NNS accents:

E02 Sometimes a non-native speaker accent is easier to understand than that of a native speaker.

E03 In a context of English lingua franca it is easier to understand the pronunciation of a European speaking English than it is to understand a non-European.

E04 The non-native speaker of English I understand best is Italian.

Chart 2 Responses to E02, E03, E04



The intention here was to investigate students' own experiences, with statements premised on the likelihood that they were familiar with European and especially Italian accents. But familiarity does not necessarily mean intelligibility. Whereas more respondents (43%) agreed that a NNS accent can be easier to understand than a NS accent (E02), with 34% disagreeing, and 23% unable to decide – a response which was consolidated for the European context in the next statement (E03), with 42% in agreement – the picture changes in the more specific context of Italian speakers of ELF (E04). The responses for E04 are as follows:

1	strongly disagree	22.6%
2	disagree	27.2%
3	neither agree nor disagree	26.8%
4	agree	17.2%
5	strongly agree	6.3%

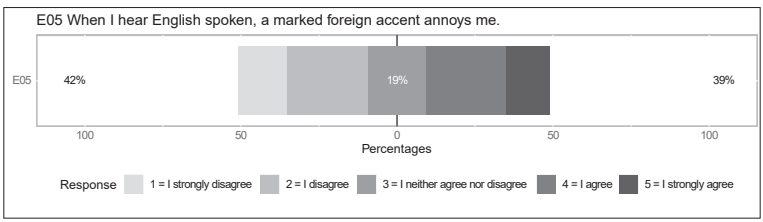
It is worth noting that this statement drew by far the greatest number of "strongly disagree" responses in the whole section, and counted fewer than a quarter of students in agreement. "Strongly disagree" suggests a degree of confidence in their opinions on the part of these respondents. They have no doubt that Italian accents are problematic. Why should this be so? Why should Italian students find it more difficult to understand a speaker of English who has an Italian accent rather than someone with a French or Greek accent? The result seems to belie Jenkins' (2000, 123) claim that intelligibility is undermined by transfer from the L1, and the implication that the more the transferred features differ between participants, the greater the threat to intelligibility.

One could argue that just as the intelligibility of native speakers of English may be compromised by regional accents (a fact which seems to be recognised in the responses to E02), so too Italian speakers might transfer phonetic features of their own regional dialects when speaking English, making comprehension problematic for listeners unfamiliar with the dialect. But the same could be said of speakers of other languages. Perhaps an explanation could be sought elsewhere, in the light of students' clear preferences for native-speaker accents: when faced with an Italian speaker whose variations from a native-speaker norm reflect their own shortcomings, the reaction is one of rejection or intolerance, which compromises intelligibility.

The notion of intolerance is a crucial one in evaluating attitudes towards accents, which features more overtly in the next statement:

E05 When I hear English spoken, a marked foreign accent annoys me.

Chart 3 Responses to E05



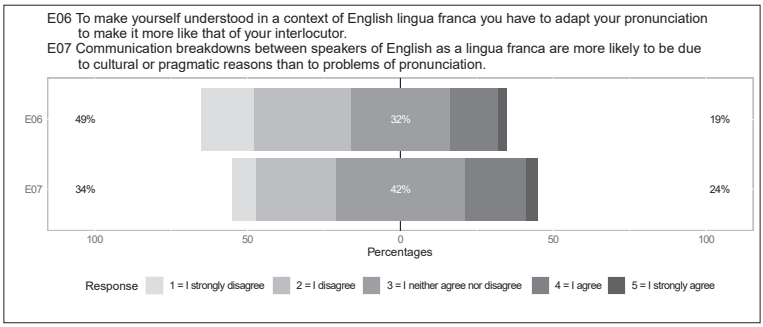
39.5% of students agreed with the statement, including 13.8% who "strongly agreed". Although this is fewer than the body of students choosing "disagree" (26%) or "strongly disagree" (15.7%), it is a sizeable minority displaying an attitude which seems likely to compromise comprehension in ELF contexts, in which collaborative co-construction of meaning is essential, and with it, the need to embrace the variety one's interlocutor is using, whatever this is, and however much it is influenced by L1 transfer. Attitudes are learned, not intuitive, as Garrett (2010, 22) reminds us; and here too, as with the previous statement, the negative reaction towards marked foreign accents could be correlated with the extent to which these students, embarking on a higher education course as language specialists, identify their learning objectives with a 'perfect' native speaker-like accent. This attitude is captured in one of the (few) free standing comments at the end of the survey, in which a student complains that they feel horrified when hearing someone speaking with a strong accent. We shall return to the notion of intolerance when examining the attitudes of Master's students in the following sections.

The final two statements moved into the domain of ELF strategies, such as accommodation, pragmatics, and the intercultural dimension:

E06 To make yourself understood in a context of English lingua franca you have to adapt your pronunciation to make it more like that of your interlocutor.

E07 Communication breakdowns between speakers of English as a lingua franca are more likely to be due to cultural or pragmatic reasons than to problems of pronunciation.

Chart 4 Responses to E06, E07



They invite students to reflect on what actually happens in ELF interaction, on how communication is promoted (e.g., by accommodation strategies), and why it can break down (e.g., for cultural misunderstandings or inappropriate pragmatics). But although these phenom-

ena are frequently observed in ELF, the statements caused more uncertainty for respondents than any of the previous statements. For both of them the preferred option was "neither agree nor disagree", reaching a noteworthy 42.4% in E07. In short, it seems that, lying outside students' personal experiences and preferences, the statements do not induce much in the way of reflection. Those who do come down on one side are more likely to disagree – 49% do not think they should adapt their pronunciation to that of their interlocutor, flying in the face of mainstream ELF research; while 33.7% do not think that culture and pragmatics are more responsible for communication breakdown than pronunciation. 'ELF awareness', if present at all, takes second place to the default position of all students in the survey which had already emerged in Section B: the overriding belief that good (i.e., native speaker-like) pronunciation – is necessary for successful international communication, and an appropriate target for university language students. That the special circumstances of NNS – NNS interaction in ELF may require a different attitude towards their own and their interlocutor's pronunciation to ensure intelligibility, does not seem to be an issue.

3 The Second Survey. Master's Level Students

The findings in the undergraduate survey are thus in keeping with those emerging from similar surveys of European university students, reported in § 1 above, and which reveal a marked preference for a (near) native-speaker accent even in ELF interaction. The respondents were all at the start of their three-year course and may not themselves have had much experience as participants in ELF interaction. Would the results have been significantly different if the survey had been administered to MA students with three years experience of student life in the increasingly international environment of a European university, and in which international interaction in ELF had become a daily reality for many of them?

A 2010 survey of third-year Ca' Foscari undergraduate students across the four faculties, the majority of whom were not language specialists, showed that many had needed English to successfully complete their course: specific needs for English included reading (70%), using the Internet for research (53%), attending lectures (21%), writing emails (19%) and interacting with foreign students (18%).[4] A decade down the line, these percentages – especially for spoken interaction with international students – are likely to be much higher. International enrolments have continued to rise, at least until the

4 Reported in Newbold 2012

temporary halt imposed by the pandemic in 2020 for 2021 enrolments, especially at Master's level, as can be seen in table 1:

Table 1 International enrolments of degree-seeking students at Ca' Foscari

	Bachelor	Master	Total
2019	125	247	372
2020	174	296	470

The higher numbers enrolled at Master's Level are due to the large number of Master's courses delivered entirely through the medium of English.[5] The figures, however, refer to degree seekers who choose Ca' Foscari as their home university; they would be much higher if we were to include students on mobility, usually on Erasmus programmes, most of them at undergraduate level, and usually for a single semester. Most mobility students and international degree seekers are unlikely to be Italian speakers, and communicate with their peers, and their professors, in English. The increasingly large numbers are likely to be replicated in other Italian and European universities with similar international vocations, and as a result many, probably most, students beginning a Master's level programme, including the stay-at-homers we referred to in § 1 above, will have participated in ELF interaction as part of their undergraduate experience.

It was thus decided to administer the ELF section of the survey to students enrolling at Master's level concurrently with the administration of the main survey to the second cohort of undergraduates (in 2020). The main research question was to investigate whether MA students are more 'ELF aware' than undergraduates, for example by showing an appreciation of ELF strategies, or in a greater tolerance towards imperfect accents. Very little comparative research of this nature seems to have been carried out; one example is a small scale project in Croatia reported by Margić and Širola (2009), which found that 80% of undergraduate students wanted to sound like native speakers, but only 50% at MA level: perhaps because they realised that native speaker-like accents were unrealistic, but also because they were more sensitive to the reality of ELF and related issues of intelligibility.

We chose two *laurea magistrale*[6] courses, the first in European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures (Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali, LLEAP), the second in

5 Currently 16 courses at Master's level, compared with 4 at undergraduate level.

6 The *laurea magistrale* is a two-year second-level academic degree, in contrast with the more professionally or vocationally oriented one-year Master's degree. However, in this article we use the term MA to refer to the *laurea magistrale*.

Comparative International Relations (Relazioni Internazionali Comparate, RIC). For LLEAP the survey was administered only to students majoring in English; the second was open to all RIC students, whichever of the five curriculum strands they were following. Two of these strands (Global Studies and EU Studies) are taught entirely in English; the other three are taught partly in English and partly in Italian. As with the undergraduate survey, students were at the very beginning of their course, and so had not been primed in any way in the field of ELF. The decision was made to sample from two different courses, one for language specialists, the other for non specialists, to ensure a wide representation. However, it should be noted that a minimum B2 level in English is required for students of RIC, and a second foreign language is also studied. The B2 level is a prerequisite for all *laurea magistrale* students while for students of LLEAP the presumed level is at least C1. 118 Masters' Level students participated in the survey, of whom 53 were students of LLEAP and 65 RIC.

In order to test the differences between the different groups of survey participants it was decided to use the Mann Whitney (Wilcoxon rank-sum) test, as an indicator of significant difference in situations in which differences are measured on scales which are ordinal, or which use arbitrary scale units (Conroy 2012). Analysis was conducted in R (R Core Team 2020). We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests. In fact, four of the statements (E01, E02, E04 and E07) show no significant difference between the two groups. E03, however, has a significantly larger percentage of MA students agreeing that it is easier to understand a European speaking English than a non-European ($W = 23251$, p-value = 0.0292). Here, a possible explanation might be found in their own university experience, in which visiting international lecturers or students on mobility they may have had dealings with were more likely to have been European than extra-European; or simply, because of their greater experience of travel in Europe than their undergraduate counterparts.

More interesting, from an ELF point of view, is the considerable difference in attitudes towards foreign accents in E05 ($W = 30510$, p-value = 0.01475). Whereas, as we noted, a large number of undergraduates report that they are "annoyed" by a marked accent, the figures drop considerably for MA students, with 22% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 48.3% disagreeing. In short, the older (more mature?) students display greater tolerance towards a less than perfect accent; a strategy which is likely to pay dividends in an ELF context.

The third and final statement which divides the two groups is E06 ($W = 29325$, p-value = 0.05913). Contrary, however, to the hypothesis that MA students are more 'ELF aware' than BA students, a considerable majority (59%) disagree with the statement that participants in ELF interaction have to adapt their pronunciation to make it more like that of their interlocutors. Here, the undergraduates were un-

decided, with 32.4% opting for "neither agree nor disagree". MA students in agreement (16.3%) were fewer than for any of the other statements. The notion of accommodation, then, as a linguistic strategy to promote intelligibility, seems to be unavailable to most of them.

The final statement, E07, sees more MA than BA students attributing breakdowns in communication to cultural and pragmatic reasons (32.2%, as opposed to 23.9%) but overall there is no significant difference between the two groups. However, the smaller percentage of undecided respondents in the MA group (28%, compared to 42.4%) suggests that they are the more reflective group, at least in their desire to articulate an opinion. This is confirmed by the number of comments made in the final free-standing task, E08: 21 (out of 118) added a comment, compared with 13 (out of 370) undergraduates. Typically, respondents refer to their own experiences, sometimes in anecdotal form. For example, one student identifies the phenomenon of accommodation as an unconscious process which may be noted by an observer, but not by the participants themselves. Another student sees the process as a levelling down, because:

> I have noticed that when I speak English with a non-native speaker, the quality of my oral expression diminishes, especially if my interlocutor has a language level which is lower than my own. But when I speak with a native speaker, perhaps because I want to make a good impression, I speak much better…

Several students provide comments which resonate with this one, preferring to aim for a native speaker-like accent not because it promotes greater intelligibility, but because it is likely to be judged more favourably. But this is countered by curiosity in the face of a variety of accents such as the reflection made by the student who writes:

> I have always been intrigued by different accents rather than by a single accent, since they help me to understand better the cultural background of the person I am speaking with

and who concludes by referring to a counterproductive (at least in respect of intelligibility) but interesting side-effect of this attitude:

> What's more, I often find a foreign accent attracts my attention more than what is actually being said.

Perhaps the most 'ELF-aware' comment is the practical piece of advice offered by a student who (like many of those making comments) seems to have considerable experience of international communication in English:

> I myself gave up on having the perfect accent (only recently) and decided that it is more of importance to pronounce words correctly and talk as fluently as possible. I think most of the language learners focus on accents more than necessary and it is even more the case with English.

4 Intra-MA Variability Language Specialists, Non-Specialists, and International Students

So far we have considered the MA students as a single group, and examined their attitudes in comparison with those of their undergraduate counterparts. The choice of two different degree courses, however, makes a further, intra-group exploration possible. Students of International Relations are not language specialists, although they have to complete a 30-hour course in English for International Relations which focuses on debating skills, as well as a course in another foreign language of their choice. However, as previously mentioned, some of them attend a curriculum strand taught entirely in English; and any RIC student can, if they wish, write their final dissertation in English; in this way, the doors remain open for international students who do not know Italian to graduate.

In contrast, students of LLEAP are language and literature specialists. All courses (for students majoring in English) are taught in English. Only one of these, Aspects of English Today, has a focus on the language (rather than literature or culture), but it is supported by a hefty *lettorato*, three 90-minute lessons per week with a native-speaker language teacher (*collaboratore linguistico*) which offer an extensive reading programme in contemporary world literature in English and a focus on critical writing. Needless to say, the final dissertation is written in English.

A second research question was thus: Are there any significant differences in attitudes between MA students who are English language specialists (LLEAP) and those who are not (RIC)? If so, what are they, and in what way do they reflect the students' 'ELF awareness'? For example, one might speculate that LLEAP students, having graduated in English for their first degree, have a greater understanding of language variety and communication strategies, and the development of English as the world's lingua franca, even though they may themselves be wedded to the idea of the desirability of a native speaker-like accent. One could also take the converse view: perhaps students of international relations – an obvious context for ELF – take a more pragmatic view of the nature of ELF interaction, and the extent to which successful communication is context-dependent.

We thus ran the same Mann Whitney (Wilcoxon rank-sum) test for these two subgroups, and again found significant variation in re-

sponses to three statements: E01, E02 and E07. The first statement produced the greatest difference in responses (W = 1112.5, p-value = 0.00014). Most RIC students have no doubt: it is important to try to sound like a native speaker. 64.6% agree, including 21.5% who "strongly agree". In contrast, only 39.6% of LLEAP students agree with the statement, with just 5.7% (3 respondents) "strongly" agreeing. It is a noteworthy difference which undermines our preliminary supposition that RIC students might take a more practical approach and view a native-speaker accent as inessential for international communication. What, then, is the explanation for the biggest variation in the whole survey? Perhaps the answer should be seen in the response of the LLEAP students, who are more cautious, and perhaps more 'mature' than their RIC counterparts and more experienced in their own use of the language; perhaps they were more attentive to the specific circumstances indicated by the phrase *as a lingua franca* in the statement ("When you use English *as a lingua franca* it is important that your pronunciation is similar to that of a native speaker"); perhaps the RIC students rushed in to this first question in the survey, and simply equated their own language learning targets with 'perfect' pronunciation. But the statement is about *using* the language, not about learning objectives; about 'life outside', rather than the classroom.

If this analysis is correct, it could also account for the difference in E02 (W = 2197.5, p-value = 0.03603). Here the LLEAP students are more in agreement (47.2%) than RIC students (33.8%) that non-native-speaker accents can be easier to understand than native-speaker accents. Again, perhaps, this suggests greater personal experience, but also the realisation (after a three-year undergraduate degree in English) that most native speakers of English have a regional accent, whether of UK, US or other varieties; indeed, the RP[7] pronunciation model typically adopted by teachers in European schools and universities is spoken only by 3% of the population of the UK (Crystal 1995, 365).

The third statement separating the 'specialists' from the 'non-specialists' is the final one in the survey, E07 (W = 2260, p-value = 0.01447). Although there is considerable indecision in both groups, LLEAP students are more likely (41.5%, compared with 24.6%) to see communication breakdown as the result of cultural or pragmatic problems, and not problems of pronunciation. Here too, one could attribute the difference to the background of the LLEAP students as English language and literature specialists, who will perhaps have spent more time at the language/culture interface in their undergraduate studies of literature in English and be more sensitive to the in-

7 Received Pronunciation, also known as 'The Queen's English' or 'Oxford English'.

tercultural dimension in international communication. But for the most 'ELF-aware' statement of all, on the importance of accommodation to facilitate communication (E06), both groups take more or less the same position, which as we previously noted, is less 'ELF aware' than the position taken by the undergraduates. Only 18.5% of RIC students agrees with the statement, a percentage which dropped to a mere 13.2% of LLEAP students. In short, an overwhelming majority of MA students think it is not necessary to adapt their pronunciation to make themselves understood. We shall return to this finding in the concluding section.

The MA survey also produced a further variable: the attitudes and opinions of international students.[8] Although their numbers were too few to be statistically significant (16, 6 of whom were enrolled in RIC, 10 in LLEAP), it is worth looking again at the statements where they differed most greatly from their (Italian) peers. For example, only one student dissents in E02: for international students at Ca' Foscari, interacting on a daily basis in English with non-native speakers, it is unsurprising that they should find non-native accents easier to understand that native speakers to whom they have probably been less exposed. Similarly, given the presence of Chinese and Vietnamese students in the group, as well as other non-Europeans, it is not surprising (E03) that they do not find European accents easier to understand than non-European accents, while nine students "strongly disagree" (E04) that the easiest accent to understand is an Italian one. At first sight, this last finding might seem a little perplexing: after all, these international students are presumably hearing Italian accents more than any others. However, it should be remembered that they are at the beginning of their course, some of them may have arrived only a few weeks, or even days, before participating in the survey, and thus they may be experiencing stressful situations, such as administrative and bureaucratic procedures, as they attempt to settle into university life. Perhaps, at the end of the year, their responses would be noticeably different.

Like their Italian peers, they do not seem particularly 'ELF aware' (E06 and E07). Only three international students think it a good strategy to adapt their pronunciation according to the interlocutor they find themselves with (E06). However, seven of them do think that cultural differences can be a major cause of communicative breakdown (E07), a rather higher percentage (43.7%) than that of the Italian respondents (32.2%). Here it is tempting to speculate that these students have had personal experiences, perhaps recent, which influenced their responses.

8 The International students in the survey declared their first languages to be Albanian, Chinese, Kazakh, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Ukrainian, or Vietnamese.

But the biggest difference of all is with E05. Only one student acknowledged annoyance when hearing a marked foreign accent, with six "strongly disagreeing". This compares with 39.5% of undergraduates admitting to feeling annoyed, and 29.6% of MA students taken as a single group (including the international students). Again, the response of the international students could be related to their personal experiences, and it is an encouraging one: frequent interaction in ELF, which is a feature of international student life, seems to lead to greater tolerance of variation, which in turn is a contributory factor in successful international communication.

5 Conclusion. Which English for Internationalisation in European Universities?

'ELF awareness' can be manifested at various levels: it can be more or less conscious, acquired over time with experience, and helping users of English to shape spoken interaction, especially in informal contexts. It is this self awareness which has been the focus of the surveys reported on in this chapter. But it can also refer to an explicit educational context, in which course designers or language teachers identify a 'lingua franca' element in international communication which can be integrated into mainstream English Language Teaching (ELT), thereby helping to prepare students for international communication.

The surveys, which as we have seen underline a lack of 'ELF awareness' in students at the start of their courses, at both undergraduate and MA levels, beg the question whether or not an ELF-oriented, or at least 'ELF aware', approach to a formal English language teaching input would be beneficial to them in their university careers. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to speculate in detail about the possible nature of this input, but it could include exposure to a variety of NNS accents, a reflection on World Englishes (starting perhaps from Kachru's [1986] well-known model of *inner circle*, *outer circle* and *expanding circle* of users of English), and the observation of ELF strategies at work. Such an aim is likely to sit comfortably within the objectives of most English language courses in a globalised world, an enrichment to a norm-focused approach based on a single NS model, and not necessarily in conflict with it. Kohn (2019) believes that adopting an 'ELF-aware' element could bridge the conceptual gap between ELT pedagogy and ELF research, which have led to conflicting views over the past two decades.

But beyond the 'reconciliation' of ELF theory and ELT practice, there seem to be cogent reasons for introducing an ELF element to the Italian university context described in these pages. These reasons include the possible future careers of university graduates, and

how they relate to the learning outcomes of their courses. Whatever the career, either as language 'specialists' (such as graduates of LLEAP) or as 'non-specialists' working in an international environment (graduates of RIC), 'ELF awareness' is likely to be an asset. For the latter, most of their interactions in English are likely to be with non-native speakers, and hence require their interpretation of non-native accents; for the former, many will themselves become teachers of English, and will need to prepare their students for the reality of international English.

This reality has been acknowledged in the revised phonology scales in the recent *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2018) of the *Common European Framework for Languages. Learning Teaching and Assessment* (CEFR). Commenting on the revision process, Piccardo (2016), refers to phonology as one of the "grey areas" in the original CEFR, and goes on to refer explicitly to the use of ELF as a catalyst for change in the revised Framework's criteria for teaching and assessment. Thus the term 'native speaker' is no longer used as a default model against which learner's pronunciation is to be measured, but is replaced by *intelligibility*, and accents are no longer labelled as 'foreign', but rather, as indicative of the speaker's bilingual (or polylingual) background. The implications for language teachers at university level are significant. They include the need to extend beyond an 'informative' approach to the phenomenon of ELF, to the assessment of pronunciation. In particular, the next few years are likely to see international examining boards responsible for the best-known English language certifications recalibrating their assessment criteria to bring them more into line with the revised CEFR scales. Given the importance of certification for many students, both on the jobs market, or to continue in higher education in an international English medium environment, teachers would do well to keep abreast of these ELF-related changes.

But an 'ELF-aware' element would have a more immediate relevance: it would provide insights into the process of internationalisation at work in European universities today. At the moment of writing, the Ca' Foscari University of Venice has just issued a press release stating that it has become "the 'number one university in Italy for internationalisation".[9] 'Internationalisation', as we have already suggested, implies the ability to attract foreign degree-seekers, and to facilitate the mobility of its own and incoming students, but it also refers to engaging in research at an international level, and promoting conferences and events which have an international appeal. All this comes at a cost; part of that cost is the investment in language

9 https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=10900&cHash=8db705b21d80aaee728b6cb0cc5d5443.

resources, which, in essence, translates as the tacit, uncritical, adoption of English as the (academic) lingua franca.

Uncritical, since the question of *which* English should be used as the interface between the university and the world is rarely an issue; it is premised on the belief that there is a monolithic native-speaker variety of the language which should inform (among other things) support courses for teachers lecturing in English, scholarly research articles, and user-friendly webpages intended to attract international students. That English has become the academic lingua franca of the world is not in question; what is needed is an awareness that the monolithic model is neither realistic nor necessary for European universities to be able to compete with UK and US counterparts in the higher education market which is driving the process of internationalisation.

Pronunciation is of course only one aspect of the reality of ELF in academia, but it is a vital one, a key to intelligibility and the co-construction of meaning. Whatever the contents of the language courses they will follow, the students in our survey will be encountering written and spoken English on a daily basis outside their language classes during their two- or three-year degree programme. A targeted 'ELF-aware' element in their language courses could help bridge the gap between their aspirations towards 'native-speakerism' as revealed in the survey, and their ability to communicate as protagonists in the process of internationalisation.

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