HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACH

CÓMO PERCIBEN LOS ESTUDIANTES EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA INTERNACIONAL: UNA APROXIMACIÓN TEÓRICA Y PRÁCTICA

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ABSTRACT

English is no longer the language belonging to about 375 million native English speakers. It is also an international language spoken by more than a billion of second and foreign language users. The models used to teach English as a second or foreign language have traditionally been mainly native speaker models. However, in the last few years, a large number of researchers have suggested integrating a model of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) into the English classroom because it has several benefits for international communication, since international

intelligibility is now the main goal. In this work, a research study has been carried out to analyze how Spanish students of English (B2 level) value some of the main tenets of the ELF model, such as the importance of confidence, intelligibility and the dichotomy native vs. non-native accent while speaking the foreign language.

KEYWORDS: English as a Foreign Language (EFL); English as an International Language (EIL); English as a Lingua Franca (ELF); English Language Teaching (ELT); intelligibility.

RESUMEN

El inglés ha pasado de ser el idioma de unos 375 millones de hablantes nativos a ser además una lengua internacional hablada por más de mil millones de hablantes de inglés como segunda lengua y como lengua extranjera. Los modelos usados para enseñar inglés han sido tradicionalmente modelos nativos. Sin embargo, en los últimos años, un gran número de investigadores han sugerido que se integre un modelo de Inglés como Lengua Franca (ELF) en el aula de inglés porque tiene muchos beneficios en la comunicación internacional, dado que la inteligibilidad internacional es ahora el objetivo más importante. En este artículo presentamos un estudio de investigación que hemos llevado a cabo para analizar la valoración que hacen estudiantes españoles de inglés (nivel B2) de algunos de los principios del modelo ELF, como la importancia de la confianza, la inteligibilidad y la dicotomía acento nativo o no nativo en la producción oral de la lengua extranjera.

PALABRAS CLAVE: enseñanza del inglés; inglés como lengua extranjera; inglés como lengua franca; inglés como lengua internacional; inteligibilidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to provide a literature review on some important aspects of English as a global language. Also, taking into account the challenges that learning English poses to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, a research study has been carried out with Spanish students of English (B2 level) to analyze how they value the importance of confidence, intelligibility and native accent while speaking the foreign language.

In this paper, section 2 is devoted to English as a global language and native speakerism. Section 3 is about the English models used in English Language Teaching (ELT). Sections 4 and 5 are devoted to research into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the benefits of using

this model in language teaching. Section 6 is related to some current challenges for learners and teachers, and sections 7 and 8 are part of a research study whose aim is to gather information on how students perceive English accents, intelligibility and confidence while speaking the foreign language. In section 7 we describe the methodology, the informants that took part in this study and the questionnaire used to gather the students' opinions, and in section 8 the results are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn in section 9.

2. ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE AND NATIVE SPEAKERISM

English has become a global language. With about 375 million native English speakers, it is the third most spoken language in the world, only followed by Chinese and Spanish. Additionally, it is an official and co-official language in 53 countries, one of the languages spoken in the European Commission within the EU, and one of the official languages of the UN. In fact, it has been estimated that over a billion people speak English as a second (ESL) or EFL. As regards its use, English is the language of science, mass media, aviation, diplomacy, business, entertainment or information technology. Moreover, in certain fields such as computing or medicine, a certain level of English is required. Within Europe, it is the most used language, since about 51 % of European citizens speak English as a first or second language (ANANIADOU et al., 2012: 9-13).

For all these reasons, it can be said that English is no longer the language belonging to some native speakers from certain countries. Since it is a means of international communication spoken by a majority of non-native speakers, it has become public property. As Widdowson (2003: 43) points out, "the very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it". Even though some native standard accents such as the typically British Received Pronunciation (ROBINSON, 2019) or the General American (WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021: 33) still carry high prestige, the English spoken in a variety of accents is becoming the norm in this global world. The main reason is the fact that non-native speakers outnumber native ones. As mentioned before, about a billion people speak ESL or EFL, as opposed to nearly 375 million native speakers (ANANIADOU et al., 2012: 9). As Canagarajah (1999: 202) stated when he dramatically announced "the death of the native speaker", English is no longer the language of the US or the UK but a hybrid language because of its contact with many others.

However, even if most people agree with all these arguments, "the belief in native speaker ownership persists among both native and non-native speakers - teachers, teacher

educators and linguists alike - although it is often expressed with more subtlety than it was in the past" (JENKINS, 2006: 171). According to the author, standard British and American English are the varieties most commonly taught worldwide and "those considered best-placed to teach English in those places are its native speakers" (JENKINS, 2006: 172). More recently, Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020: 2) point out that "traditionally, it was presumed by curriculum developers that only American and British English should be included in the ESL/EFL curricula".

Kirkpatrick (2007: 184-186) states that choosing a native speaker model, that is, choosing a variety such as British English or American English in language teaching, has several advantages. First, it provides prestige as well as legitimacy, and second, good resources such as dictionaries, grammars or textbooks are readily available. On the other hand, it "advantages native speaker teachers", who are seen as "ideal". This is related to native speakerism (HOLLIDAY, 2006: 385), that is, the belief present in English language teaching that identifies native speaker teachers as better teachers and models to represent the Western culture and the English language. As Jenkins (2006) points out, Canagarajah (1999) has helped to raise awareness of native speakerism, which "works in native speakers' interests and sometimes marginalises non-native speakers". As a result, now the teaching materials available for English language teaching are slightly less "native-speakerist" (JENKINS, 2006: 169).

Some authors such as Kirkpatrick (2007: 184-189) question the validity of a native speaker model in certain learning environments. Additionally, he states that some "people and institutions" find the spread of certain varieties of English "as being both commercially and politically extremely important for their own interests" (2007: 36). He mentions the British Council, the British government and several British publishing houses.

3. ENGLISH MODELS USED IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

As Kirkpatrick (2007: 27-28) states, when it comes to language teaching, Englishes have been traditionally divided into three main models: "English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)". ENL is the language spoken in countries where English is the most common language of the population, such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia or New Zealand. On the other hand, ESL is spoken in those countries where English is an important or an official language, but it is not the most important language of the country. In these countries, English has a special role in their institutions. This happens in some former American and British colonies such as the Philippines, India, Malaysia

or Nigeria. Finally, EFL is spoken and taught in those countries where it is learnt at school but, as a general rule, pupils or students have few opportunities to use it outside the class. This might be the case of China, Japan or some countries within the European Union such as Spain or Portugal. As Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 33) point out, EFL is the "English taught to non-native speakers so that they can communicate principally with native speakers of the language".

The three varieties mentioned -ENL, ESL and EFL- are related to the well-known Kachru's "three circles model" (1986, 1992), which represents the spread of English around the world. According to him, English is divided into three concentric circles, the inner circle is connected with ENL, the outer circle represents ESL, and the expanding circle is related to EFL. Tajeddin and Pakzadian (2020: 3) state that "the majority of English users are bilingual or multilingual speakers from the Outer and Expanding circle countries", that is, most English users are ESL and EFL speakers.

On the other hand, it is important to define what is understood as Standard English (SE). According to Trudgill (1999), SE is not a language, an accent, a style or a register. It is a social dialect spoken in different parts of the world. For this reason, we can talk about a Standard British English, a Standard American English and, of course, World Standard English (WSE). WSE is spoken in a variety of accents by people from all over the world. Crystal (1994: 24), in his article "What is Standard English", claims that SE is a variety used by mass media and institutions. Its main features are a common grammar, vocabulary and spelling. However, "a totally uniform, regionally neutral, and unarguably prestigious variety does not yet exist worldwide".

Another important term in this discussion is World Englishes (WEs). It refers, according to Jenkins (2006: 157), "to the indigenized varieties of English in their local contexts of use", that is, the English spoken in those territories in which English is co-official or has a very important role, for example, in Nigeria or India. In contrast, ELF is "a contact language across lingua-cultures" spoken by "non mother-tongue speakers". Jenkins (2006: 164) states that speakers of WEs and ELF vastly outnumber the rest. It is important to remember that there are other terms used to cover the meaning of ELF such as English as an international language (EIL), Global English or International English. For Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 33) EIL is defined as the "English taught to non-native speakers so that they can communicate principally with other non-native speakers".

4. RESEARCH INTO ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

In this section, a brief summary of some relevant aspects of research into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) will be outlined. It would be impossible to include all the authors who have studied this field as it has become very popular in the last few years. In this section, we will briefly mention the main corpuses of ELF, and other key aspects such as pronunciation, politics, intercultural communication or English language teaching.

It is important to highlight that, despite the fact that the majority of English speakers all over the world are ELF or WEs users, research into English as a Lingua Franca started quite recently, with Quirk's work in 1981, and it still has a long way to go.

There are two main instances of corpus-based research on ELF, the project VOICE and the project Elfa. Seidlhofer (2001) expressed the need to describe and codify ELF and funded the project *VOICE –Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English-* whose main aim is to provide a linguistic description of ELF. This author compiled texts and examples of lingua franca interactions from 2001 to 2009. This oral corpus is accessible online and it has more than a million words of different professional, educational and entertainment fields. The speakers of this corpus are not considered as language learners but as speakers in their own right. This was the first project of creation of a corpus based on ELF. According to Jenkins (2006), Seidlhofer (2004) focused mainly on lexicogrammar because it is a very useful aspect in language teaching since it helps to find the items which are more frequently used in lingua franca interactions. Additionally, there is an ELF Corpus specialised in academic English that was created in 2008 in Helsinki and it is called *Elfa corpus of academic ELF*. It is also available online.

As for pronunciation of ELF, it is important to mention the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) created by Jenkins (2000). According to this author, LFC consists of the most relevant groups of sounds present in interactions among non-native speakers. This core approach, it is suggested, is better able to promote both intelligibility and regional appropriateness among EIL interlocutors, as well as being more teachable, than either of the two most commonly adopted classroom models, Received Pronunciation and General American. For this author, listeners are fundamental in ELF interactions because they need to adapt to different accents since bilingual or multilingual speakers may bring some influence of their L1 (JENKINS, 2000: 64). Another researcher who has worked on pronunciation of ELF is Walker. He is the author of one of the few "appropriate teaching materials" to teach EIL, according to Sifakis (2018). The book he refers to is *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* (WALKER, 2010). In this book, the author recommends showing EFL students videos, recordings, interviews, news

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stories and podcasts whose main speakers are non-native speakers with international prestige. More recently, this author considers international intelligibility, that is, the ability to be understood when speaking to "people from different language (L1) backgrounds" (WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021: 5), as the main goal when teaching pronunciation nowadays.

> The ability to speak English in a way that is intelligible to listeners from all around the world who use English for international communication. The majority of these listeners will be non-native speakers. Native speakers are not automatically internationally intelligible. (WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021: 34)

An important factor to improve international intelligibility is accommodation (JENKINS, 2006: 174), which consists in improving communication by changing the way we speak or what we expect as listeners. As Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 33) suggest, it is "the ability to adapt to specific speakers or listeners in order to facilitate communication—either by modifying aspects of one's own speech or adjusting one's expectations as a listener". Therefore, accommodation can be both productive, if people are changing the way they speak, or receptive, if what they change is the way they listen. It can be safely said that accommodation can really make a difference during the communication process (WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021: 34). Jenkins (2000) and Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 13) give high importance to pronunciation, claiming that it is the main cause for communication breakdown among non-native speakers. In this sense, in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2018: 134) states that the focus should be placed on intelligibility instead of accent or accuracy, as it was traditionally done in the past, i.e. "The focus on accent and on accuracy instead of on intelligibility has been detrimental to the development of the teaching of pronunciation". Additionally, the concept of good pronunciation has changed as well. Nowadays, according to Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 13), it can be defined as being "comfortably intelligible to the listener".

Some researchers, however, have focused on the politics of English. This is the case of Canagarajah (1999). According to Jenkins (2006), his research on linguistic imperialism was carried out taking into account the speakers of the outer circle, as it was based on a community in Sri Lanka. However, it can be applied to any expanding circle countries. He suggested practical ways of "appropriating English during the learning and teaching process" (JENKINS, 2006: 168).

There are many authors who support the use of a lingua franca model in English language teaching, namely, Kirkpatrick (2007), Andrews (2008), Cook (1999), Jenkins (2000, 2002, 2006, 2012), Sifakis and Bayyurt (2017), or Tomlinson (2006:130), among others. This

last author expresses the need for a curriculum and methodology to teach English as an international language and shares with Jenkins (2006: 174) the wish that testing is also present in ELF teaching. Kirkpatrick (2007) mentions several aspects that should be included in a lingua franca model, such as Jenkins' phonological core (2000, 2002), that is, the group of sounds that are more likely to pose "problems of intelligibility". Additionally, he also believes that an ELF model should focus on differences among cultures and how these differences can affect communication.

Sifakis (2014) focuses mainly on training those teachers who might be interested in teaching ELF, and he highlights the radical change that teaching this model can produce in teachers' viewpoints as regards standard English, native speakers' roles, and non-native speakers' identities. Additionally, this kind of training could contribute to "teachers' empowerment as users of English and as pedagogues", which is a really positive effect. Sifakis (2018) believes that one of the problems with the introduction of ELF in the English classroom has been the negative view towards it on the part of teachers, students and other participants. He talks about a process that teachers go through called "ELF awareness" and he maintains that nowadays this awareness is based on the assumption that ELF is not teachable since "its inherent fluidity and seeming ubiquity means that it cannot develop into a variety". Therefore, in the near future, ELF will not reach the status of Standard English and this implies that it is not an alternative to EFL or ESL. Citing the author, he concludes that it is not an alternative but an aspect of high pedagogical and sociocultural value.

> Since ELF is not codifiable and therefore cannot be teachable as such (due to the lack of appropriate teaching materials, with the notable exception of Walker, 2010), it therefore cannot be perceived as a viable alternative to EFL or English as a Second Language (ESL) but as a further dimension of communication that needs to be acknowledged by teachers for its sociocultural and pedagogical advantages. (SIFAKIS, 2018: 7)

Therefore, ELF is not a variety that English teachers need to choose over EFL or ESL. They just need to integrate it in the EFL/ESL curriculum in a realistic way.

5. REASONS FOR SUPPORTING ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AS A MODEL AIDING TEACHERS AND LEARNERS ALIKE

According to Canagarajah (1999), 80% of English teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers. This obviously should have an impact on the variety of English used for international communication and, of course, on language teaching and learning.

The reason why many experts support the use of ELF in English Language Teaching

(ELT) is that effective communication does not depend on being more native-like, but on being intelligible. English learners do not have to sound British or American in order to get ready to live in an English-speaking country, they just need to communicate with people from all over the world by using English. As Kirkpatrick (2007: 188) points out, a native speaker model will be inappropriate and irrelevant for most students who want to communicate with bilingual or multilingual speakers. However, an ELF model is more appropriate and relevant for students whose first language is not English.

Additionally, ELT resources in an ELF model tend to provide information about other cultures and about differences and similarities among them. Learning about the differences among cultures that can affect communication is paramount and some communicative strategies are essential. This will obviously help to improve learners' intercultural communication (KIRKPATRICK, 2007). As an example of this, this author mentions a comparison of different ways of greeting, addressing and saying goodbye in Asia or the European Union. Other aspects that should be taken into account are cultural conventions and pragmatic norms typical in Asian countries, such as the use of "facework", which consists of introducing the topic of the conversation once they have talked about the other person's family (SCOLLON and WONG-SCOLLON, 1991). For Kirkpatrick (2007) it is important that students are able to make use of communicative and repair strategies "to aid successful cross-cultural communication". In this sense, Ilie (2019: 265) recommends "being open-minded, receptive to new cultural information, avoiding stereotypes and respecting difference" in order to have a successful intercultural exchange. For this author, the intercultural communicative competence consists of having three main attributes, that is, knowledge, skills and attitudes. Within knowledge, we could mention beliefs, values or norms related to other cultures. Within skills, we could highlight different abilities such as observing, listening or interpreting. As for attitudes, we can consider respect, openness or curiosity.

As Simpson Davies and Patsko (2013) claim, the goals for most English language students nowadays have changed. According to these authors, *"*the priority for students using ELF, (…) is to be as intelligible as possible to the people they are communicating with. This does not necessarily mean sounding like a native speaker". This can definitely be a relief for most students who are learning English as a second language because, as Cook (2002: 5) confirms, "few second language users can pass for native speakers". As a matter of fact, "both teachers and students become frustrated by setting themselves what is, in effect, an impossible target" (2002: 331). Therefore, the sooner they realise that speaking like a native is not a realistic goal, the less frustrated they will feel as language learners.

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Students who are learning English within an ELF model are more likely to be careful when using idiomatic expressions, since Seidlhofer (2004: 220) has demonstrated that one of the main "causes of communication breakdown" takes place when a speaker uses "an idiom, phrasal verb or metaphor, that the interlocutor does not know" (JENKINS, 2006: 170).

An ELF model can help students raise awareness of how diverse English can be, which might help them gain confidence in the variety they speak. Jenkins suggests some ideas in which this could be done in the English class, such as exposing students to different WEs or ELF speakers or discussing the cause of English spread as cited below.

> For less proficient learners this awareness raising could involve exposure to a range of WEs and ELF varieties, while for more proficient learners, it could include discussion of the reasons for the spread of English, the development of diverse standards, the relationship between language and identity, and the like. This exposure is likely to encourage learners' confidence in their own English varieties, and in turn reduce the linguistic capital that many learners still believe native-like English to possess. (JENKINS, 2006: 174)

Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 33) recommend English teachers "introducing learners to accents they may encounter in their future use of English, highlighting features of each accent that might make it difficult to understand". This is what they call "guided exposure". Thus, it will be easier for students to understand the English spoken in many different parts of the world.

For Jenkins (2006: 174), accommodation skills are key factors for speakers of WEs and ELF. They need to make an effort in order "to be intelligible to interlocutors from a wide range of L1 backgrounds, most of whom are not inner circle native speakers".

Another factor that should be taken into account in interactions among non-native speakers is their wish to keep their identity when they speak English, which will be done by keeping their accent. As Jenkins (2000: 71) suggests, "the majority will not want to lose their L1 identity when they speak their L2 English and this will mean preserving something of their L1 accent". This is a very relevant and positive point for English learners.

Sifakis (2014) focuses mainly on the training of teachers who want to teach ELF and he highlights how teaching EIL can help them boost their confidence as educators and as speakers.

6. CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

Probably, the most important challenge both native and non-native English speakers face nowadays is that of being able to speak English in an international context. There is a good deal that can be done to become more accomplished communicators but what matters is what

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speakers are really willing to do.

Native English speakers should be able to feel comfortable when they speak English to non-native English speakers, however, they should not be overconfident because they are natives and know the language better. On the contrary, they do need to adapt their discourse in order to understand others or to be understood. For instance, they should use their accommodation skills (JENKINS, 2006 and WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021) in order to speak and listen to other speakers. They should bear in mind, that, as Walker, Low and Setter (2021: 31) point out, "native speakers of English are not automatically the most intelligible speakers, and some features of native-speaker accents, such as connected speech, can interfere with international intelligibility".

On the other hand, non-native, bilingual or multilingual English speakers should be able to feel confident and satisfied with the way they sound and comfortable when they speak to both native and non-native English speakers. They should feel that English is also their language, that it belongs to them, that it is also their property (JENKINS, 2006: 74; CANAGARAJAH, 1999). In general, it should be as easy for them to understand native speakers as non-native ones. Moreover, they should also use their accommodation skills when they both listen and speak in English.

In the past, the vast majority of recordings and videos students listened to in their English class, were mainly from native speakers who had very strong standard accents. Nowadays things are gradually changing and there is a variety of publishers that include speakers from all over the world in their ELT textbooks. This can be challenging at times since students are exposed to some speakers that can be difficult to understand because of the influence of their L1. Obviously, on the Internet, a variety of resources which include lingua franca speakers is available and highly recommended because of its positive impact on the learners. On the one hand, learners can get used to listening to speakers with different accents. On the other hand, they learn to value and accept their own accent. Some useful resources recommended by Simpson Davies and Patsko (2013) and Walker, Low and Setter (2021) are found in the Speech Accent Archive, the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) and the English Language Listening Library Online (ELLLO).

Finally, the fundamental role of digital humanities and information and communication technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process should be mentioned. Some students need to meet this challenge as soon as they enrol on an English course. In most cases, they will have to use different learning platforms such as Moodle, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams

or Schoology. For some students, this can present a huge challenge, especially if they are not used to using ICT at work or at school. According to Escandell Montiel (2017), one of the places where students can acquire a basic knowledge in digital literacy is the foreign language classroom. Therefore, attending an English course can make students enhance their level of digital literacy.

English teachers also need to be updated on the technological resources they are planning to use in class and on their online or blended courses. This can be quite challenging at times, as they need to be open to learning new tools and ready to react quickly if they encounter some technical problems. Additionally, there are also new techniques and methodologies that are now essential in the teaching process such as gamification or flipped classroom.

7. RESEARCH STUDY

The aim of this study is to examine the students' perception of their oral skills while speaking and listening to English. More specifically, we want to analyze how confident and motivated they are when they speak English, and how they perceive the concepts of intelligibility and native accent vs. non-native accent proposed in the ELF model.

All students in this study are native Spanish speakers who are doing an English course because they need to get a B2 level certificate or because they need it to travel or work.

In order to assess the students' own perception on their English oral skills, a questionnaire on oral communication, EIL and English language learning was created. Its main aim was to find out about the following aspects related to motivation, self-perception, preferences and goals in English oral performance (see Appendix 1 for more details on the questionnaire).

1) the students' goals and motivation to learn English
2) the students' confidence and self-perception of their own speech
3) the students' goals as regards native-like pronunciation
4) the students' self-perception of the language variety they speak
5) the student's self-perception of being international English speakers
6) the students' self-perception of their own intelligibility
7) the students' perception of their ability to understand native and non-native English speakers
8) the students' accommodation skills
9) the students' preference for native or non-native English teachers,

10) the students' context of English use outside the class.

The questionnaire was answered by learners who studied an intermediate level in English (B.2) at the Official School of Languages of Murcia (EOI Murcia). Approximately, half of the students of this sample belonged to the main headquarters of the Official School of Languages of Murcia, based in Plaza de la Opinion, an up-and-coming area near the centre, next to two secondary schools (IES Miguel de Cervantes and IES Miguel Espinosa) and the Cultural Centre Puertas de Castilla, which is coordinated by the town hall and has an important cultural offer. The other half of students received their English classes in a high school based in Avenida Juan de Borbón (IES Alfonso X El Sabio), which is also an urban area quite close to the center. Students at EOI Murcia are heterogeneous in age, career and education profiles but they all share an interest to learn languages and get a certificate. Most students in both headquarters are middle or working class and live in the city of Murcia or surroundings. Most informants are professionals or are students doing a vocational training course or completing their studies at university or at secondary school. In fact, in the sample, 25 people out of 90 are students and 46 are currently employed.

The total number of students replying to this questionnaire is **90**, **40** are men and **50** are women. Regarding age, most students are adults from 18 to 55 years old, and there are 6 teenage students under 18. Given the heterogeneity of the sample, we need to interpret the data cautiously and more research should be done to reach more reliable results.

Once the questionnaires were answered, the data were introduced in a table. Afterwards, the results were analyzed and some conclusions have been drawn. The next two sections are devoted to the results of the questionnaire and the conclusions of the research study.

8. ENGLISH STUDENTS' RESULTS ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON ORAL COMMUNICATION, EIL AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

For a full account of the results of the questionnaire, see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendices 2 and 3 respectively. These two tables include only the answers to close-ended questions related to these topics. Figure 1 shows the number of answers related to the reasons why students are learning English. It is interesting to notice that the most common reason why students are really interested to learn the language is because they like it as **46** out of **90** students chose this option. Additionally, **22** want to learn English because they need it to travel and **22** think it is good for their mind. This is all related to integrative motivation, as described by Gardner and Lambert (1972), that is, learning a language is seen as something they do for personal growth and cultural

enrichment through contact with speakers of other languages. However, a high number of students need the language for very immediate or practical goals, namely, **29** of them need to get a B2 official certificate in English and **28** of them need to use English at work. This is known as instrumental motivation according to these authors. As the authors state, both kinds of motivation are linked to success in language learning.
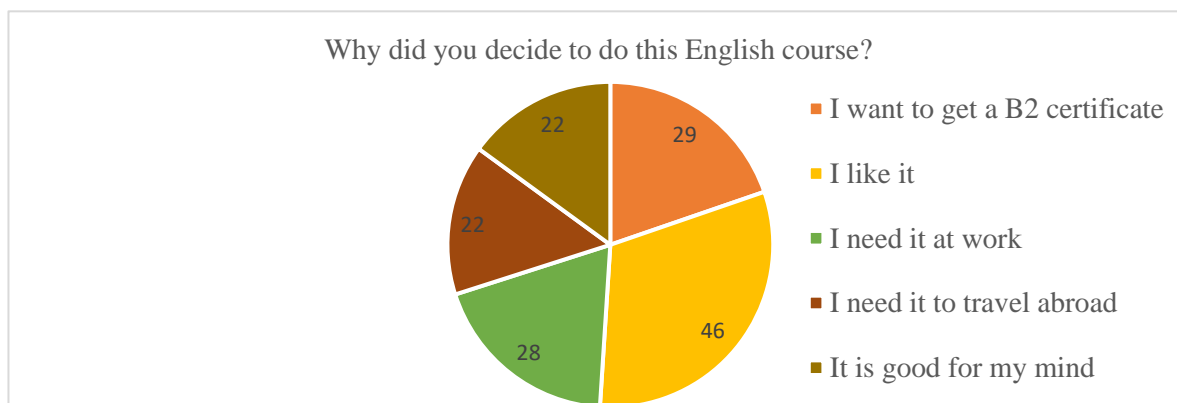

Figure 1. Number of answers related to why informants want to learn English.

Questions 2-4 explore the informants' confidence, and the negative and positive perceptions of their own speech (see Appendices 1 and 2). Figure 2 shows the students' general confidence when they speak in English. It is interesting to highlight that **47** students out of **90** do not feel very confident when they speak English, which is more than 50% of the total students. Additionally, **8** feel very unconfident. In contrast, **32** of them feel confident and **3** of them feel very confident. As can be seen from the graph, students' confidence is something that needs to be worked on. In Figure 3, when students are asked if they ever feel embarrassed when they speak English, most students say they do, in fact, **55** students said they feel embarrassed quite often and for **9** of them, it only happens sometimes. On the other hand, **23** students never feel embarrassed. Regarding their satisfaction with their own speech, which is also represented in Figure 3, the results are quite more positive if we compare them with the previous questions. However, the number of students who are happy with their own speech is similar to those who are not happy with it. While **43** students are satisfied with the way the sound, **46** are not satisfied.
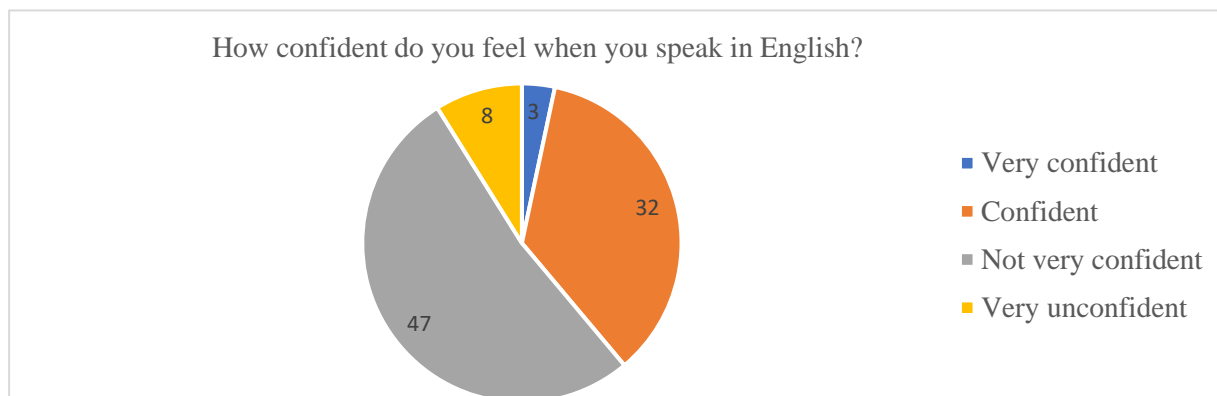
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Figure 2. Number of answers related to the informants' confidence when they speak in English.
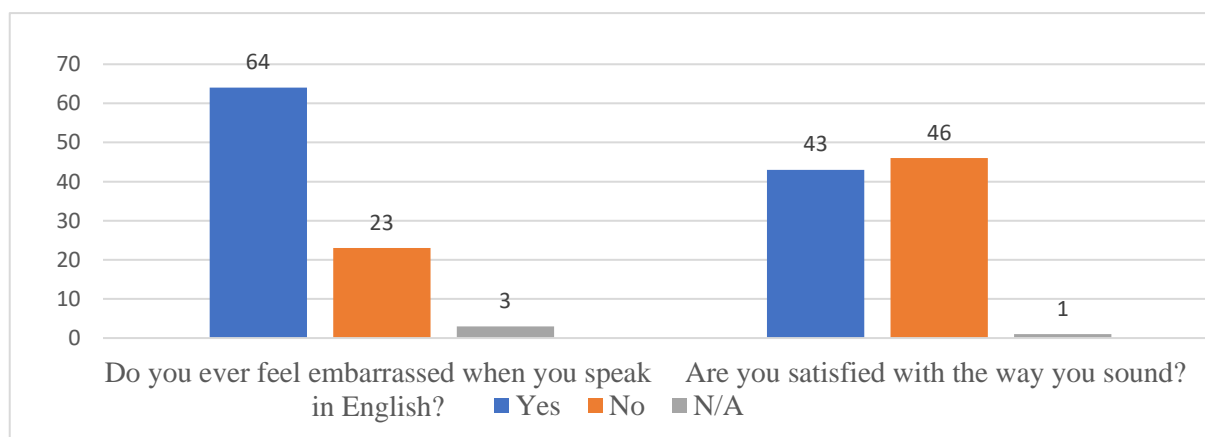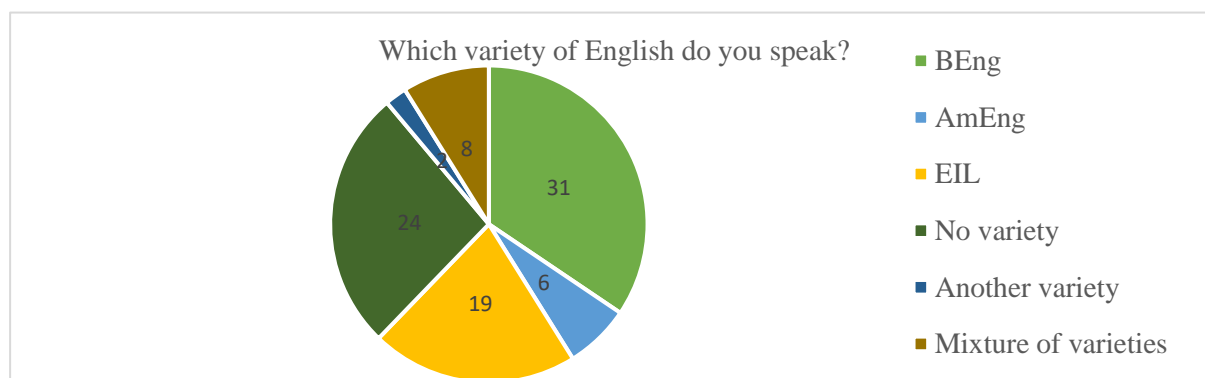

Figure 3. Number of answers related to the informants' negative and positive feelings about their oral skills.

Questions 5-8 are focused on finding out students' perceptions of the way they sound as compared to a native speaker's speech and how they feel about it. It can be said that most students -**78** out of **90**- would like to sound more native-like. As for how important it is for students to be able to speak like a native speaker, **32** students think that is not important at all, **47** students consider it quite important and only **11** of them see it as very important. When they are asked if they think they will speak like a native English speaker in the future, most students -**59**- think they will not. **16** of them think they will speak like natives and **13** of them are not sure or think that, if they live in an English-speaking country for long enough or if they get enough practice, they will be able to speak like natives. Finally, when they are asked how they would feel if they were told they will never speak like a native speaker, most students would accept it or would not mind, **63** out of **90**. Only **21** students would feel disappointed with this fact.

The next question is related to students' perception of the variety they speak as language

users. This is represented in Figure 4. It is important to highlight that, even though there are more than one billion speakers of English as an international language all over the world, very often students do not consider themselves as part of this community. In the questionnaire, **24** students out of **90** do not consider themselves as speakers of a variety in particular, **19** of them consider themselves EIL speakers and **31** of them think they speak British English since it is the variety they are exposed to most of the time in class. Interestingly, 2 students describe their variety as English with a Spanish accent. Not feeling as belonging to a certain language variety can give us the idea of how insecure students feel as regards their own speech. Therefore, more ELF awareness (SIFAKIS, 2018) is needed so that English students realize that they actually are international or lingua franca speakers. In fact, when they are asked, in question 16, if they consider themselves international speakers, **54** of them replied no and only **29** of them think they are international English speakers. Those who do not consider themselves as international speakers is because they think they do not have the level, the fluency or the knowledge to consider themselves so. Even if most students do not know the concept of international intelligibility, what most of them answer or measure in this question is their ability to communicate successfully in international contexts.

Figure 4. Number of answers related to the informants' perception of the variety of English they speak.

As mentioned before, Walker, Low and Setter (2021) consider international intelligibility as the ability to be understood when speaking to "people from different language (L1) backgrounds". As regards students' self-perception of their own intelligibility, most students feel that it is very easy or easy for other people to understand them -**4** and **56** respectively out of **90**-. However, about a third of students perceive themselves as difficult to be understood.

Questions 11-13 aim to explore students' ability to understand native and non-native English speakers. Most students feel more comfortable when they speak English with other

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non-native English speakers because they can understand each other better. Within non-native speakers, most students find it easier to understand non-native speakers who have the same first language as them.

Questions 14 and 15 are related to the accommodation skills students use when somebody does not understand them or when they do not understand. Although most students have a wide range of strategies to deal with this problem when they cannot make themselves understood, such as rephrasing, repeating, speaking more slowly or using body language, when the problem is that they do not understand the other speaker, most of them just ask the other person to repeat or to speak more slowly.

As for native-speakerism (HOLLIDAY, 2006: 385), that is, the belief present in English language teaching that identifies native speaker teachers as better teachers and models to represent the Western culture and the English language, according to this questionnaire, students are not strongly influenced by this belief. **24** students would prefer a native English speaker as their English teacher, **34** students would prefer a non-native English speaker as their English teacher and **30** do not really mind if their English teacher is a native or a non-native as long as they are competent in their job. It is important to highlight that some students find important the ability of their English teacher to understand and speak Spanish.

Regarding the contexts in which students use English outside the class, a summary of the results can be found in Table 2 (Appendix 3). The most common contexts where students use English is when they listen to music or they travel, with **76** students who listen to music in English and **71** who use this language when they travel abroad. This is closely followed by watching films, series and videos in English with **62** students. About a third of students listen to the radio, use social media or read in English at work. More than a quarter of the informants play video games in English or read in English for pleasure. As for writing in English at work and socialize in English, about a fifth of students interviewed do it.

9. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have examined students' perception of their oral skills while speaking and listening to English. Specifically, we have analyzed how motivated and confident they are when they speak in English and how they perceive the concepts of intelligibility and native accent. Although we are aware of the limitations of this research study in terms of the small size of the sample, some generalizations can be made according to the results of the questionnaire.

The results of this study show that students need more awareness and exposure to EIL

in order to become more confident and more intelligible language users. Furthermore, the responses of the students have demonstrated that most students lack confidence as regards their own oral performance; most students would like to speak like native speakers and they do not realize that, in most cases, it is nearly an impossible goal; most students do not consider themselves EIL speakers; most students consider themselves intelligible to other speakers; most students find non-native speakers easier to understand than native speakers. Within non-native speakers, they tend to find it easier to understand non-native speakers whose first language is the same as theirs; most students have a wide repertoire of accommodation skills to make themselves understood; and most students would not prefer to have a native English speaker as their English teacher.

As for the reasons why learners are studying English, it was unexpected to find a very high number of students who study English just because they like it. Additionally, most students are likely to succeed in their language learning path as they have either integrative or instrumental motivation.

According to the results, it is evident that students' confidence and self-esteem as language users need to be worked on. There are several things that could be done to boost students' confidence, such as, increase their exposure to audios and videos of other EIL users, work on EIL pronunciation exercises, do exercises to improve their international intelligibility and do some language awareness exercises on the importance of ELF to boost their confidence.

Regarding students' perceptions of the way they sound as compared to a native speaker's accent, it can be said that, although most students know that they will probably never speak like a native, they still would like to sound more native-like. In fact, the majority consider being able to speak like a native speaker as "quite important" or "very important". Therefore, students should be told at some point that, as research states, speaking like a native is not a realistic goal in the majority of cases, and more importantly, it is not going to make them more intelligible.

It is interesting to mention that a high number of students do not view themselves as international English speakers. Being aware of their belonging to a vibrant community of international English speakers might give language students a sense of identity and might help them to improve their confidence as language users. Additionally, more research should be done as to how teachers can improve learners' self-esteem as language speakers.

Regarding international intelligibility, since a third of students consider themselves as difficult to be understood, some exercises should be done in class to work on their intelligibility (JENKINS, 2006: 174) so that they become more understandable. Acting out some situations

in class in which they have to react to a communication problem might help them to increase their range of accommodations skills.

As can be extracted from the data, most students interviewed feel more at ease with non-native English speakers who speak the same language as them. Therefore, a guided exposure to a series of different accents both from non-native speakers from other countries and native speakers is needed to improve their listening comprehension (WALKER, LOW and SETTER, 2021).

Most of the students who took part in this research are not especially influenced by native-speakerism (HOLLIDAY, 2006: 385), that is, the belief present in English language teaching that identifies native speaker teachers as better teachers and models.

As for the contexts in which students use English, they use English outside the class in a variety of contexts, being the most common ones listening to music, travelling or watching films, series and videos in English. Therefore, teachers could encourage learners to use English in as many contexts as possible, especially in those ones where they can interact with other people such as travelling abroad, socializing or using social media in English.

Finally, we would like to highlight the need for more research into the pedagogical actions that teachers of English should take to help students become more confident and more intelligible language users.

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APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE ON ORAL COMMUNICATION

1. Why did you decide to do this English course? (tick as appropriate)
   I need to get an official certificate in English
   I really like speaking in English
   I need to use English at work
   I need English to travel abroad
   I think it is a good exercise for my mind
2. How confident do you feel when you speak in English? (circle as appropriate)
   Very confident / Confident / Not very confident / Very unconfident
3. Do you ever feel embarrassed when you speak in English?
   If your answer is yes, why? In which situation?
4. Are you satisfied with the way you sound? (circle as appropriate)
    Yes/No
   Why/Why not?
5. Would you like to sound more native-like? (circle as appropriate)
   Yes/No
   Why/Why not?
6. Is it important for you to be able to speak like a native speaker? (circle as appropriate)
   It's not important at all / It's quite important / It's very important
7. Do you think you will speak like a native English speaker in the future? Why/Why not?
8. How would you feel if you were told that you will never speak like a native speaker? Why?
9. Which variety of English do you speak? (circle or tick as appropriate)
   British English / American English / English as an International Language /
   I don't speak a variety in particular / Another variety (specify which one)
10. How easy do you think is it for others to understand you? (circle as appropriate)
    Very easy / easy / difficult / very difficult
11. As a general rule, do you feel more comfortable when you speak English to native or to non-native speakers? Why?
12. Who do you find easier to understand, native or non-native English speakers?
13. Who are easier for you to understand? Non-native speakers who speak the same first language as you or non-native speakers whose first language is different from yours?
14. What will you do if you realize the person you are talking to doesn't understand you?
15. What will you do if you don't understand someone who's talking to you in English?
16. Do you consider yourself an international English speaker? Why/Why not?
17. In general, do you need to communicate with native or with non-native speakers?
18. If you could choose, would you prefer to have a native or a non-native English speaker as your English teacher? Why?
19. In which context do you use English outside the class? (tick as appropriate)

I watch films/series/videos in English	I socialize in English
I listen to the radio in English	I use English when I travel abroad
I listen to music in English	I use social media in English
I play videogames in English	I speak on the phone at work
I read in English for pleasure	I read in English at work
I talk to customers or co-workers in English	I write in English at work

20. How easy is it for you to use Moodle (Aula Virtual) as part of your English course? (circle as appropriate)
    Very easy / Easy / OK / Difficult / Very difficult / I have never used it
21. Apart from your student's book, workbook and your learning platform, which other online resources do you use to study English? (Tick as appropriate)
    Online dictionaries   Search engines such as Google
    English language learning websites Blogs
    Others (please specify):
22. Do you use any smartphone applications to learn English? Yes / No.   If so, which ones?

APPENDIX 2

TABLE 1. RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1 Why did you decide to do this course? (Multiple answers are possible)	I need to get an official certificate	I really like speaking in English	I need to use English at work	I need English to travel abroad	I think it's a good exercise for my mind
	29	46	28	22	22
2 How confident do you feel when you speak in English?	Very confident	Confident	Not very confident	Very unconfident	
	3	32	47	8	
3 Do you ever feel embarrassed when you speak in English?	Yes	No	N/A		
	65	22	3		
4 Are you satisfied with the way you sound?	Yes	No	N/A		
	43	46	1		
5 Would you like to sound more native-like?	Yes	No	N/A		
	78	11	1		
6 Is it important for you to be able to speak like a native speaker?	It's not important at all	It's quite important	It's very important		
	32	47	11		
7 Do you think you will speak like a native speaker in the future?	Yes	No	I don't know/ It depends	N/A	
	16	59	13	2	
8 How would you feel if you were told that you will never speak like a native speaker	I wouldn't mind	I would accept it	A bit disappointed /sad/frustrated	N/A	
	32	34	19	5	
9 Which variety of English do you speak?	BrEng	AmEng	EIL	No variety in particular	Another variety /mixture
	31	6	19	24	10
10 How easy do you think is it for others to understand you?	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult	N/A
	4	56	26	3	1

11 Do you feel more comfortable when you speak to natives or non-native English speakers?	Natives	Non-natives	Both	N/A	
	16	56	17	1	
12 Who are easier to understand?	Natives	Non-natives	It depends	N/A	
	14	66	9	1	
13 Who are easier to understand?	Non-natives with same L1	Non-natives with different L1	Both are similar	I don't know	Both are difficult
	54	15	9	11	1
16 Do you consider yourself an international English speaker	Yes	No	I don't know or N/A		
	29	54	7		
18 If you could choose, would you prefer to have a native or non-native English speaker as your English teacher	Native	Non-native	I don't mind	I don't know	
	24	34	30	2	

APPENDIX 3

TABLE 2. CONTEXTS OF ENGLISH USE OUTSIDE THE CLASS (Question 19)

19 In which context do you use English outside the class? (tick as appropriate)	
I watch films/series/videos in English	62
I listen to the radio in English	28
I listen to music in English	76
I play video-games in English	24
I read in English for pleasure	26
I talk to customers or co-workers in English	19
I socialise in English	17
I use English when I travel abroad	71
I use social media in English	30
I speak on the phone at work	7
I read in English at work	26
I write in English at work	18