

# **ELF5**

**Proceedings of  
The Fifth International Conference of  
English as a Lingua Franca  
May 24–26 2012, Istanbul**

Editors

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Boğaziçi University  
May 2013

# Non-Native English Speaker Accents in Swiss Elementary Schools: A Summary of Pre-Service Teacher Research

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## Abstract

This paper summarizes the work carried out by pre-service elementary school teacher trainees at the Zurich and Schaffhausen Universities of Teacher Education during a Research and Development course entitled “Everybody Should Speak American, Right?” in 2011. The main goal of the course was to teach pre-service teachers basic research methods and provide them with the chance to develop materials through the context of discovering to which degree aspects of English as a Lingua Franca are taught to elementary school children in Switzerland through several tasks including observations, textbook analysis, surveys and development of pronunciation activities. Some findings include: a mismatch between textbook recordings and the Englishes heard on a regular basis in Switzerland; a general openness towards various native speaker norms of English though not necessarily towards a non-native variety; and children’s general feeling of not understanding various Englishes but actually performing just as well on listening tests of native and non-native varieties. This paper provides an overview of these findings in the hopes of filling a void in the research with younger learners of English.

**Keywords:** Non-native accents, primary school, elementary school, Switzerland, student research

## 1 Course Overview

Students at the Zurich and Schaffhausen Universities of Teacher Education are required to take a “Research and Development” course aimed at providing basic skills in research methods as well as space to develop materials for their future careers. The main aims of “Everybody Should Speak American, Right?” was to see how English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is experienced, understood and represented as a principle of teaching in the elementary school English classroom in Switzerland. The instructor wanted to encourage students to get away from the idea that ‘real’ English is that of native speakers and that norms, classroom exchanges, and links to culture should only be from the few countries where English is the official / national language. The full course syllabus, student products and survey are located on the course site at <http://elf.edacross.org>.

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## 2 Contact with Englishes and Reflection in Textbook Recordings

To set the stage for the course and for the justification of the topic, students became familiar with Kachru's model of the concentric circles (1985). The first assignment was thus to clearly show that students' daily contact with and observation of English in Switzerland is not with native speakers (NS) of English but rather with non-native speakers of English (NNEs). In order to do so, students were asked to list which Englishes they hear on a daily basis. Organizing their contacts according to Kachru's concept of the concentric circles shows the following:

- Inner Circle Englishes; 18 mentions
- Outer Circle Englishes: 3 mentions
- Expanding Circle Englishes: 60 mentions

There was some difficulty in categorizing this data as students were not always sure where the speakers they overheard or had contact with were from and some assumptions of accents were based on appearance and not linguistic knowledge. The Kachru model also has its difficulty when one thinks that English language teaching starts early in many countries — like Switzerland — but yet is not an official language.

Nevertheless, the results are quite interesting though perhaps to be expected for a landlocked country in the middle of Europe: Students clearly have much more exposure to NNEs than NS. Not seamless in logic, though possibly representative, is the assumption that this is representative of children's future exposure to English. Of course children are not yet sitting on the train every day as they travel to university or work, but seeing as Swiss children commute to larger towns for high school and sport practice at a fairly early age, then we can project what we have learned about university students' exposure to Englishes onto children's soon-to-be situations.

The second step was to look into the compulsory elementary school English textbooks to see if there was any mention of criteria for accent selection and to see if there is a match between what the students hear outside of the classroom and the recordings within the textbooks. It was found that there was no ELF approach to choosing recording accents and that the variation of accents in the textbooks was a pedagogical choice based on the content of the lesson (e.g. an Indian accent used in a Mumbai setting). Though there are a few outer and expanding circle recordings many of the accents were "faked" and the majority of the recordings are in British English and some American, Canadian and Australian.

There is certainly accent variation in the recordings, which is a positive attribute of these textbooks, but the accents are not representative of the larger concept of English as a Lingua Franca. In order to be more representative of what the Swiss students hear in their everyday lives, there would clearly need to be more recordings in various Asian and Spanish Englishes and recordings in French and Eastern European Englishes (these

are non-existent in the textbooks). This need was thus the basis for student projects and materials development in the remainder of the course.

### **3 Attitudes towards and Experiences with English as a Lingua Franca**

Students had the task of learning to put together a survey to find out about pre-service teacher attitudes, beliefs and understanding of ELF. With the understanding that English is spoken by more non-native speakers than native speakers, the importance of certain elements in teaching — encouraging familiarity with non-native accents, developing ELF criteria in acceptance of correct and incorrect utterances, choosing ‘country neutral’ high-frequency target words — are essential to “globally minded” English teaching. This survey is relevant as the pre-service teachers surveyed will soon be the next generation of teachers in Switzerland promoting English standards and norms.

This survey was a group negotiation activity spurred by Murray (2003) and Erling (2004) as well as the students’ own experiences and understanding of ELF. Students developed questions they thought would be relevant to the topic and to their classmates. Categories of questions were created, questions were written, peer edited and the survey was put on the web.

#### **3.1 Description of participants**

The survey was filled in by 134 primary (70%) and secondary (30%) school pre-service teachers (16% male, 84% female). It was sent to 600 students with a return rate of 22%. The majority (55%) are due to graduate in 2013, thus in the middle or towards the end of their course of study. A small number of students grew up bilingually (4%) with the majority having learnt English in secondary school (83%). In their daily lives, the majority do not use English on a regular basis (63%). At the time of the survey, 57% of the students had already acquired the necessary proof of level (C1 or C2) to teach English at the primary or secondary level.

#### **3.2 Selected results and interpretations**

The following results are a sample of what can be pulled out of the data. Generally, students supported the idea of a communicative approach to teaching as seen through Table 1 where they had to rate certain elements of teaching English. Had they not placed an emphasis on a communicative approach, perhaps grammar, reading and writing would have played more of an important role.

Sixty-two per cent of the students were unfamiliar with the term “English as a Lingua Franca”. Therefore, we wanted to know if more primary pre-service teachers had heard of ELF than secondary pre-service teachers as we assumed that secondary teachers, having a much more in-depth education in English language and linguistics than primary

Table 1: Importance of skills

	Teaching reading	Teaching grammar	Teaching speaking	Teaching listening	Teaching writing
very important	42%	17.2%	91.8%	67.9%	19.4%
important	90%	69.4%	7.5%	29.1%	66.4%
not very important	1%	11.2%	0%	1.5%	13.4%
completely unimportant	0%	1.5%	0%	0%	0%

teachers, might be more aware of the term. A chi-square test was performed to examine the relation between course of study and having heard of ELF or not. The relation between these variables was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 134) = 2.65, p < .103$ . Secondary teachers have not heard of ELF any more than primary teachers.

A series of statements was provided to find out how pre-service teachers feel about various aspects of English as a Lingua Franca. Table 2 shows the questions and the average scores.

Ninety-three students refrained from answering the question 17, though of those who did respond, they tended toward disagreeing with the question, perhaps indicating that they think teachers need a native-norm to teach.

When asked if they were ever corrected in favor of a specific standard, 56% said that they were corrected to speak British or American English and 80% of those corrected were not bothered by this. When asked if they would accept Euro-English textbooks, only 5% checked that it would be acceptable.

These descriptions demonstrate some basic tendencies: future teachers would prefer to have a native-speaker model as a reference than a “Euro-English” model and they find native speakers the “experts” in the language but are open to British/American mixes.

We further wanted to delve deeper in to the scale results to find out how those having heard of ELF or not (more or less knowledge on the subject) and those using English on a daily basis or not (more or less exposure) reacted to different questions. We analyzed the data through contingency tables and below and in Table 3 is a summary of those items which came out as having significant differences in distributions.

- When asked if they would be happy about a standardized European norm for teaching English, the frequency distributions differed significantly  $\chi^2 = 12.15, df = 4, p = .02$  between those having heard of ELF before or not. Likewise to this same question, the frequency distribution differed significantly  $\chi^2 = 10.5, df = 4, p = .03$  between those who use English on a daily basis or not.
- When asked if English teachers should make their learners comfortable with non-native speaker accents in the classroom, the frequency distributions differed significantly again  $\chi^2 = 20.16, df = 4, p = .001$  between those having heard of

Table 2: Scale questions

	1) I completely agree	2) I agree	3) I disagree	4) I completely disagree	Average
1.	I think a standardized Euro-English is the best for teaching.				2.94
2.	The Swiss teachers I have observed during my studies speak English well enough to teach it.				2.15
3.	When I am speaking to a native speaker of English, I try to speak in the way they do.				2.22
4.	I think British English is the best for teaching.				2.85
5.	I think teachers should insist that learners not mix, e.g. British and American English.				2.84
6.	I get irritated when I read or hear something in mixed American / British English.				3.29
7.	When I find someone does not speak English as well as I do, I try to "talk down"				2.49
8.	It doesn't bother me when I read /hear something in mixed British/American English				1.82
9.	I will not correct my students' pronunciation as long as I can understand them.				2.96
10.	I would be happy if there was a standard European norm for English.				3.04
11.	I think American English is the best for teaching.				3.11
12.	English teachers should stick to native speaker models when they chose recordings to play in class.				2.08
13.	English teachers should make their learners comfortable with non-native speaker accents in English language teaching				2.21
14.	When I teach English, I will try my best to stick to a native-speaker norm				1.84
15.	Native speakers of English should decide what is correct in the language or not.				2.33
17.	I think Swiss-English is fine for teaching				3.00

ELF or not.

- When asked if native speakers should decide what is correct in the language or not, the frequency distributions differed significantly again  $\chi^2 = 18.5$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .001$  between those having heard of ELF or not.
- When asked if English teacher should stick to native speaker models when they chose recordings to play in class, the frequency distributions differed significantly again  $\chi^2 = 10.9$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .028$  between those who English on a daily basis or not.

Table 3: Items with significant differences in frequency distributions

	Those having heard of ELF	Those not having heard of ELF	Those using English daily	Those not using English daily
A standardized Euro-English is the best for teaching.	Slight disagreement	Disagreed more strongly	Distribution evenly spread	Disagreed more strongly
English teachers should make learners comfortable with non-native speaker accents in English language teaching	Agreed more strongly	Distribution evenly spread	No significant difference	
Native speakers of English should decide what is correct in the language or not.	Strong agreement, strong slight disagreement	More even distribution	No significant difference	
English teachers should stick to native speaker models when they chose recordings to play in class.	Relatively even distribution, more disagreement			Strongly agreed — slightly disagreed

## 4 Discussion

These results indicate that very generally, amongst pre-service teachers little is known about the term “English as a Lingua Franca” and that native-speaker norms, though acceptable as mixed, are still prevalent despite the fact that Switzerland is surrounded by languages and cultures and English is often a vehicle of communication between people of different countries. That said, that students are not so concerned about mixing standards is perhaps a positive change from the past and indicates a gradual openness towards global English. However, the fact that very few students mentioned liking their own accents in English, but that they rather strived towards a more native model indicates that our judgments about what is necessary to teach English are still bound by native-speaker influences and that Swiss-English is not as respected as it should be.

Though not significant, that fewer secondary school students had heard of ELF even though they are enrolled at the university and study literature and linguistics much more in-depth than primary teachers do, leaves the feeling that the topic of ELF should definitely be treated in the secondary course of study.

Students who did not regularly use English tended to disagree more strongly with

statements in support of non-native speaker norms than their peers who do use English regularly, thus the idea that exposure influences points of reference for acceptable models. Thus, those who have less exposure tend to be more critical towards non-native varieties and were much more adamant about it not being a good thing than those who use English regularly. This could indicate that they are less aware of English in the world around them and what this means in terms of exposure. It could also indicate that they abide by a more traditional definition of the use of English. Again that here those having not heard of ELF should only agree and tend to disagree more than those having heard of ELF indicates that perhaps they are unaware of English in the expanding circles and stick to more traditional models and have a rather monolithic view of what is acceptable. Likewise, an awareness of ELF can make people more tolerant towards statements referring to non-native norms and perhaps willing to ponder. The fact that no one having heard of ELF disagreed that non-native accents should be used in the classroom indicates that ELF awareness can contribute to future teachers' mentalities in selecting materials.

This study is just a sampling of attitudes towards English as a *Lingua Franca*. The questions written are our understanding of what ELF is and are not a judgment call about what is better or worse, but simply what we think needs to be done in order to make students aware of ELF and also to see what an understanding of ELF could entail in the classroom. Perhaps we did not ask enough about with whom students speak English to and the range of accents they hear outside the classroom, though within our course we did do this and we hope this is slightly representative of both other students and a younger elementary-school aged population. Perhaps if students having taken the survey understood how a non-native speaker norm could be used (e.g. excluding grammar items from the language curriculum that are not necessary for mutual understanding), they may have answered some questions differently. Despite this, the survey is grounds enough for a decision to include mention and analysis of ELF into the compulsory pre-service teacher training courses.

## 5 Conclusion

Much more was done in this course than the above-mentioned survey. Students re-recorded various texts from the textbooks and tried these exercises out in primary classes. Procedures and findings were quite varied, but there was one thing in common — learners performed just as well with native as with non-native accents. Furthermore, one group found that even though learners said that they would not understand a certain accent (Indian English), they actually performed just as well as those who had the exercise with other accents (American and Swiss). Students prepared a range of same text/different accent recordings and film clips of interviews with same question/various speakers, as well as ideas for implementing these elements into lessons. Students analyzed textbooks and created pronunciation activities based on the *Lingua Franca Core*. They created a list of ideas for starting with an EFL approach with beginners and making learners aware of where learners can use English in the world. Project design

and materials development varied and there is much room for criticism in things such as recording quality and test design. However, these projects were learning experiences in developing listening tests, in creating sound and film materials and the process was the important part.

This paper provided an overview of the findings from a productive course with pre-service teachers in the hopes of filling a void in ELF research and materials development with younger learners of English. It sheds some light on how English as a Lingua Franca is experienced in Switzerland and highlights directions for further research at the elementary school level. This study was colored by the instructor's and participants' willingness and interest in creating classrooms which support diversity of accents, of cultures and which don't stick to inner-circle standards in the belief that ELF is a positive change to "traditional" classrooms. However, there is a long ways to go in convincing other students who did not take this course — as while others might be relatively accepting of mixed native standards, they are not quite ready for non-native speaker norm. Seeing is believing and hopefully future courses and ideas implemented into other compulsory courses will be a step in the right direction!

### About the author

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