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ELF CERTIFICATION
Stakeholders' Attitudes and Their Perceived Problems

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. David John Newbold

Graduand
Veronica Faberi
870026

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1 INTRODUCTION

In a world that is undergoing changes at a pace that even a century ago would have been unthinkable, where the rampaging globalization is contextual to a daily mix of cultures and languages, the national borders are blurring under the internationalization of universities and companies, as well as the constant interaction on social media. Just a few years ago, it would not have been conceivable to experience involvement with the lives of people leaving across the world as it is today – a fact that is even clearer with the current global pandemic. The multicultural and multiethnic reality in which we live has been posing crucial questions in the field of linguistics. English has become the global lingua franca (ELF), a concept that has gained its rightful position into linguistic research for two decades now. Initially, research focused on describing ELF and its features, but it was soon evident that, while ELF had some recognizable characteristics, it was not a variety of English on its own and more importantly, it was not codifiable. The focus then shifted to the use of communication strategies, investigated through the establishment of the first ELF corpora. It became increasingly clear that the main feature of ELF was its flexibility and that spoken interaction implied negotiation of meaning and accommodation strategies for the non-native speakers (NNS). However, ELF challenged the notion of language seen as a monolithic entity, with one set of rules and prescriptive norms; instead, it was observed that ELF users could count on their multilingual and multicultural repertoires, using them as resources to adapt to a variety of contexts. The use of this kind of fluid intercultural communication was assimilated to the notion of 'translanguaging' and ELF research became interested in describing these practices from a plurilithic and inclusive perspective.

ELF is a multifaceted concept that demands new perspectives on language. As such, it is bound to have implications in pedagogy, assessment and policy making. ELF researchers have been progressively turning their attention to teaching, textbook design, and testing, knowing that the pervasive presence of ELF could not be ignored anymore. Numerous studies have been conducted in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, both in native and non-native speaker countries. While ELF is not a codified variety, the case was repeatedly made for a need to engage teachers in ELF-aware practices. This would entail a more realistic and practical approach for language learners, who are constantly exposed to English outside the classroom, becoming to all

effects language users and upgrading English from a 'foreign' language to a second language, especially for young people. Language teachers, textbooks and curricula developers have yet to take into account the shifting role that English has in the learners' lives, a need for ELF awareness that has been advocated by ELF scholars. Nonetheless, there is still a conspicuous resistance to pedagogic and policy changes regarding language, with an attachment to standard norms and methods. While ELF researchers do not wish to replace standard varieties nor to uphold a radical change in current school systems, a broadening of the views about language teaching and testing is strongly supported. Studies have demonstrated that, given the opportunity, pre- and in-service teachers can be sensitized to an ELF-aware perspective on their teaching practices and their own rooted beliefs about language, being more mindful of whether different Englishes are represented in course materials and curricula.

The same attachment to NS norms and standards can be found in ELT materials and language tests. ELF research has shown an interest in testing, advocating for the need to devise a construct of an ELF or ELF-aware test; more radical perspectives entail a contextualization and localization of university entrance tests. Nonetheless, researchers seem to agree that a drastic redefinition of language – and especially oral – assessment has to inform ELF tests.

It seems that, slowly but steadily, teaching and testing are undergoing a change in perspective, with the aim of attaining a more inclusive approach to English and languages. A case for the shifting approach to ELF can be made by analyzing the new CEFR descriptors, which focus on plurilingual practices and do not rely on the native speaker anymore. In this context, it seems that the times might be ripe to test whether a certification of ELF would be accepted, valuable and valued by different stakeholders. As few attempts at developing an ELF(-aware) certification have been made, this research was aimed at identifying possible stakeholders, thus defining a market for said certification. More importantly, the project had the intention of investigating stakeholders' attitudes, voicing their opinions and preferences, as they are essential in informing test developers on the key points that make a certification appealing and valued, allowing certification boards to implement suitable changes or new proposals.

It was in this optic that a two-fold study was devised, divided into an online questionnaire for prospective test takers and semi-structured interviews for high school teachers of English and university English-mediated instruction (EMI) professors, with a strong focus on Italian contexts. The questionnaire ranged from attitudes towards past

certifications, to use of ELF and evaluation of possible characteristics of an ELF certification. The interviews focused on teachers' and professors' perceptions of their students' level of English. The teachers' interviews investigated attitudes towards current certifications and evaluative comments on a possible ELF certification; the professors' interviews were specifically concerned with the notion of errors, standards and communicative effectiveness related to their courses. The quantitative and qualitative results of this study painted a rather varied picture of learners' and teachers' attitudes; on the one hand confirming the resistance to an ELF perspective found in the literature, on the other hand showing an emerging request for teaching and testing to more closely reflect real-life competences. The survey is intended to sustain the developing an ELF certification, which cannot disregard inclusive and ELF-informed teaching practices.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 ELF research

2.1.1 An overview of ELF research

Conceptualizing ELF and its characteristics has been a priority of the first wave of ELF research. The first term used to describe ELF was English as an international language (EIL) in Jenkins' liminal work (2000). The most common definition of ELF refers to 'any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option' (Seidlhofer, 2011); in a narrower sense, as it is deployed in this dissertation, it refers to the use of English between non-native speakers (NNS). At the beginning of the 21st century, the first wave of ELF research was predominantly focused on form, with the few interested scholars trying to codify ELF as a variety, akin to other Worlds Englishes (WE) (Jenkins, 2015). ELF, or EIL, was still merely an intuitive concept in need to be explored. Attempts at describing ELF were made with regards to its pronunciation, the definition of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), and its lexicogrammar, aiming at identifying those aspects that fostered comprehension and those that impeded intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001). A crucial understanding of ELF paradigms and features was possible thanks to the establishment of two ELF corpora: the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA), respectively devised by Barbara Seidlhofer and Anna Mauranen (Mauranen, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004). Even though communication strategies were already recognized as important parts of ELF communication, it was believed that ELF could be fully described and eventually standardized.

The second wave of ELF research (2000-2010s) saw a shift into ELF features, recognizing ELF not as an independent variety, but as a form of communication defined precisely by its variability. The concepts of communication strategies, accommodation and online negotiation of meaning assumed paramount importance. ELF interaction was understood to depend on contextual factors, with an 'element of "online" variability' (Jenkins, 2012) that sees ELF users drawing from 'their multi-faceted multilingual

repertoires' with the purpose of successful communication (Seidlhofer, 2009). The implication of such re-conceptualization was that ELF was not on the same level as WE, as it was previously believed, but rather it entailed a repositioning of language perspectives, transcending traditional language boundaries – ELF was recognized as an inherently fluid language.

This conception caused a recent third wave of ELF research, focusing on the complex context of multilingualism. It brought a radical shift from a monolithic view of language, the tenets of which are rooted into Second Language Acquisition (SLA), to a plurilithic conceptualization of ELF: ELF features were not comparable to a deficit in the language learning process, but rather attained from the resources of multilingualism. Bi/multilingual competence is erased by the 'monolingual bias' (Jenkins, 2006); a SLA influential theory is Selinker's interlanguage, based on the notion that interlanguage is on a continuum ranging from L1 to L2; any deviation from L2 norms is the result of language transfer (or interference) and it can lead to fossilization (1972). Interlanguage theory may apply well to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but fails to grasp the facets of ELF users, who employ their own variety of English, contextual to 'the sociolinguistic reality of their English use' (Jenkins, 2006).

Subsequent ELF research focused on 'translanguaging', which was applied to ELF, identifiable with code-switching and the use of shared language resources in a way that allowed for flexible and effective communication (García & Wei, 2014; Jenkins, 2015):

> '*ELF users are oriented not only to English but also to the other languages in their multilingual repertoires; therefore, that although English is available to all present, it is not necessarily chosen as the only language appropriate to a particular interaction (spoken or written). Rather, translanguaging is a key feature of ELF communication.' (Jenkins & Leung, 2019)*

These views have been integrated with concepts of multilingualism, plurilingualism and 'multilingua franca' (Makoni & Pennycook, 2012).

2.1.2 The ownership of ELF

Posited that ELF is a complex phenomenon that differs from all other varieties, although it cannot be identified as a separate variety in itself, one has to wonder to whom it belongs. A long debate about the ownership of language denounces the intrinsic privilege of NSs. As per the words of Widdowson, standard English is 'not simply a means of communication but the symbolic possession of a particular

community, expressive of its identity, its conventions, and values. [...] it tends to be the communal rather than the communicative features of standard English that are most jealously protected', claiming that to international communities of practice 'the native speaker is irrelevant' (1994). While these conceptual issues are not particularly relevant to the present study, but they become consequential when considering the attitudes of deference and inadequacy of contemporary NNSs towards native standards and speakers; a gap that, despite current changes in general perspective, is still a huge divide between the legitimacy of NS and NNS teachers, for example. Considering ELF from this perspective, it is not only the interaction between people with different L1s, but a fluid phenomenon that has become a 'property' of the people who speak it, regardless of them being NSs or NNSs, challenging the univocal and monolithic view of language. Jenkins poignantly stated that 'ELF (unlike EFL) is not the same phenomenon as English as a Native Language (ENL), and therefore needs to be acquired by L1 English speakers too [...] NES ELF users need to be able to adjust (or accommodate) their habitual modes of reception and production in order to be more effective in ELF interactions' (2012). As surprising as it can seem, this concept veers from identifying ELF as 'deficient', lacking correctness, appropriateness or just being a simplified or culture-less version of standard English, and it becomes a language in its own rights. Using this plurilithic approach, the ELF multilingual competence acquires an intrinsic added value, allowing ELF users to navigate different contexts and to exploit their 'multilingual repertoires' through the use of pragmatic features (Blommaert, 2010). Such a theorization cannot prescind from intercultural communication, needs to reject nation-bound conceptions of culture and embrace 'intercultural awareness' (ICA), which entails a 'need for flexibility in relation to emergent communicative practices and socio-cultural relations' (Baker, 2011, 2015a).

2.1.3 NS v. NNS

The focus of research on the communities of practice – the users – led to a reconceptualization of the ELF user as a multilingual user, discarding the label of NNS. To provide further context, the terms NS and NNS come from a traditional view of language – they rely on the distinction of English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), generally related to ex-colonial countries, and English as a foreign language (EFL), referred to in Kachru's popular theory of Inner, Outer and

Expanding Circles (Kachru, 1985). As Seidlhofer puts it ‘the term “native speaker” is a notoriously elusive definition and, rather like the term “Inner Circle”, connotes evaluative associations that are difficult to avoid. This is perhaps even more the case with the term “non-native”: a definition by negation that is often felt to suggest some sort of deficit’ (2011). This issue has been discussed extensively, with Jenkins raising the problem of finding alternative terminology, focusing on the opposition of monolingual and bilingual English speakers (2000). The debate, while not the focus of this dissertation, identifies the role that specific terms have in implicitly denoting prejudices. Although is it important to keep in mind the possible implications of these terms, for the purpose of clarity the term ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speaker are used throughout the present work.

2.2 ELF in education

2.2.1 NS v. NNS teachers

In the previous chapter we have seen that ELF research has undergone a distancing from a monolithic view of language in the past 10 years; however, the NS bias is by no means eradicated from scholars’, teachers’ or even ELF users’ perceptions. NS language is perceived to be more authentic, and thus the proper language for learning (Widdowson, 1994). This view is rooted in language learning, language use and inevitably in language teaching, favouring the NS teacher over the NNS teacher in the majority of cases. As NNSs vastly exceed NSs, the question of the importance of non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST) against that of native English speaker teachers (NEST) is of relevance in today’s discriminatory contexts. NNESTs importance, especially if the share the same L1 as their students, include the ability to understand their students’ process of language learning, being in the position of better explaining grammatical structures and giving advice and, sharing the same culture, they might help the students have a more meaningful education. NESTs, on the contrary, ‘have better proficiency, better at explaining cultural issues in the target language, and are more flexible for topic changes’; given their flexibility and natural use of communicative skills, they are often used – and chosen by students – to teach pronunciation and speaking (Wahyudi, 2012). While NESTs are notoriously favoured in TESOL contexts, NNESTs face challenges related to ‘political English’, namely the

‘native speaker fallacy’[1], that has been found to influence teacher hiring in the US, the UK and Asian countries. NNESTs are often considered less competent than their native counterpart. Extrinsic discrimination is mirrored by internal challenges, such as the inferiority complex NNESTs might feel towards NESTs, and their adherence to an idealized native standard, causing a lack of confidence in their own pronunciation (ibid.). A challenge to NNESTs’ attitudes towards these self-imposed obstacles, trying to re-educate and empower teachers is reported in Llurda & Mocanu (2018) and Sougari (2018). A deference to the NS seems to affect NNESTs’ confidence and self-image, as well as damaging their socio-economic power. Can the same be said for an adherence to NS standards? Piller argues that there is a language-related ‘hidden curriculum’ in schools pertaining to the sociolinguistic reproduction of a standard variety, hindering the expression of linguistic diversity in the classroom. This is explicit in the ‘monolingual habitus of formal education’, that today is challenged by multilingual teachers and students (2016). While Piller approached this matter with regards to minorities in the classroom, the same principle can be applied to current pedagogy, where standard English is the prestigious variety that is instilled in learners’ and teachers’ heads as the only ‘worthy’ variety, discarding the pluralistic and multilingual reality that they face every day. This issue is connected to ELF awareness, as it might challenge the NS monolithic approach.

2.2.2 ELF awareness and native standards in the classroom

> ‘I had certainly been aware that there were differences between the English I taught and the English I used’ (Timmis, 2002)

The adherence to native standards in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been defied by ELF researchers, arguing that the traditional focus on the native standard could be replaced by activities fostering effective communication. Whether ELF should be taught or included in ELT has been debated in reference to using a common LFC (Jenkins, 2000), using corpora-informed materials (Seidlhofer, 2004), or devising an ELF-aware approach to materials and strategies. ‘While introducing ELF in the curriculum might not be needed at all, ELF findings can be incorporated in language classes, by “translating” and “adapting” them to students’ needs’ (T. Nagy, 2017). ELF

[1] The assumption that ‘only native speakers can be good language teachers’ (Wahyudi, 2012).

findings can surely inform ELT practices, but this transition cannot take place without a radical shift to language awareness, particularly for teachers. Learners' and teachers' attitudes towards NS accents still play an important role in the definition of language curricula, despite research reporting that students had a higher comprehensibility of NNS accents rather than NS accents (J. Nagy, 2014). A proliferation of studies in the last decade has focused on teachers' attitudes towards native standards[2]; findings indicate that NNS teachers tend to rely on native standards as a model (Newbold, 2017c). Soruç found that NNS teachers believed ENL to preserve intelligibility and hold an intrinsic prestige, while ELF had difficult implications for language teaching and might not help students achieve their goals (2015). Similarly, in-service teachers relied on the comfort of teaching standard English and increased ELF awareness did not prompt an enthusiastic acceptance of ELF practices nor a pro-active attitude into proposing changes to current curricula (Kohn, 2016). A different account came from Timmis, who investigated the attitudes of students and teachers regarding NS norms in the classroom. Findings show a higher tendency among teachers to encourage students to retain their native accent, with a focus on international intelligibility, although they reported that a NS pronunciation could sometimes be preferable. The study highlighted some conservative views about native standards, especially from students, even when they predicted that they would communicate mainly with other NNSs in their future. Teachers in general were found to want their students to retain their identity – NS teachers more so than NNS teachers. They also advocated for the authenticity of materials, exposing the students to different varieties. The general implication is that 'teachers seem to be moving away from native-speaker norms faster than students are', raising the important question of what kind of standard should be taught to students and, more importantly, whether teachers should accept some students' reactionary or ill-informed attitudes or promote ELF-awareness (Timmis, 2002). Although the study is almost 20 years old, it fosters the idea that students' voices should be heard, as language learning is tailored to them.

Taking into account language learners, Vettorel explores primary school exchange settings, considering young learners-users – in ELF research, learners and users become equivalent, refuting a clear distinction (Mauranen, 2006). Vettorel finds frequent 'instantiations of simplification/omission, addition, overextension', considering them

[2] For a comprehensive account, see Soruç 2015.

instances of ELF and rejecting a SLA perspective. These ELF users were found to 'have engaged in languaging and employed what they have learnt as a "communicatively usable" resource', using complex strategies for their age and engaging in meaningful communication despite their elementary level (A1). An account of the primary school setting forces comparisons with secondary and tertiary education, where the focus, as they reach higher levels of proficiency, tends to shift from communicative competence to adherence to NS norms. Vettorel (2013) argues:

> 'it is a change in viewpoint that is called for, one whereby language experiences of the learners–users are taken into account in the classroom and valued – rather than simply dismissed as insignificant, or confined to deficient "learner language."'

With conceptual claims of a pluralistic society, fueled by language change, adaptability, flexible users of English with different lingua-cultural repertoires, the argument for ELF-aware ELT is strong. ELF awareness is not intended by scholars as a prescriptive or global model, but rather as a 'continuum that depicts the gradual transformation of stakeholders' attitudes, to the extent that local contexts and stakeholders' needs and wants allow' (Sifakis, 2019). Whether or not teachers should to some degree let go of NS standards, embracing learners' individual variance, is a question that cannot easily be answered. Despite the strong arguments of ELF scholars in favour of a less normative approach, none goes to the length of saying that native norms should be either entirely discarded or entirely followed. It would be impossible to make the claim for a complete abandonment of ENL standards, as formal learning and testing have to be based on codified and identifiable norms. Thus, research into ELT has focused on the crucial issue of language teachers' perceptions and beliefs. Dewey advocates for the central role of teachers in promoting ELF activities in the classroom; thus teachers should be exposed to different communication strategies in ELF interaction, becoming more and more aware of the complex nature of English today and being able to recognize successful ELF communication (2012). Without a real engagement with the topics of WE, ELF strategies, intercultural communication, and ELF materials, it would not be feasible to elicit a positive response from teachers, who instead would be more likely to experience feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness if faced with radical challenges to educational tenets and language standards (Jenkins, 2007). Despite ELF researchers not wishing to impose prescriptive views about ELT practices and, first and foremost, favouring learner's choice, it is nonetheless clear that learners do not have the possibility of making an informed choice about their

preferences of varieties and approaches in the current language classroom. As Jenkins argues, the choice of which English to follow 'often is not available in traditional EFL classrooms' (2012), a situation with implications for the authenticity and relevance of normative ELT for the young learner today, who would probably agree with Timmis in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. For learners to be independent in their choice – which of course cannot happen to a full extent, as language learning and, more so, testing are bound to external policies – they have to be presented with sociolinguistic and contextual awareness. Thus, allowing learners to choose amongst all the options, for ELF researchers, it means to educate teachers on these topics and leaving it to ELT stakeholders to decide the relevance of such constructs to their classrooms and pupils, encouraging a replacement of the traditional focus on NS norms with a post-normative approach and proposing transformative teacher education (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015; Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2012; Sifakis, 2014). ELT stakeholders[3] are thus encouraged to take advantage of ELF research to develop ELF-informed pedagogy, testing and policies, as 'learners can benefit from developing into confident and efficient non-native users of English' (Sifakis, 2019). The integration of ELF into ELT curricula and materials has proven difficult – although it would arguably offer positive implications for learners – mainly because of the complexity of ELF and stakeholders' attitudes. ELF is present in multilingual and multicultural contexts, existing independently from standard English cultural norms (Cogo & Jenkins, 2010). Posited that a standardization of ELF is not possible, an ELF-informed pedagogy would heighten authenticity of the learning experience and the interiorization of both norms and varieties in contextual experiences, enriching and not subtracting from ELT pedagogy.

Thus, ELF awareness is context-dependent, assuming different characteristics and being intrinsically flexible and plurilithic. However, three components of ELF awareness can be identified: (1) awareness of language and language use, concerning an awareness around ELF discourse, a sensitization over one's own beliefs about language and normativity, while also paying attention to 'languaging'[4] and 'translanguaging'[5] practices; (2) awareness of instructional practice, relating to textbooks, pedagogical

[3] Defined by Sifakis as 'English language teachers, teacher educators, testing experts, curriculum designers, and policy makers' (2019).

[4] Using communication strategies.

[5] 'Using multiple linguistic and nonlinguistic resources to ensure efficient communication between multilingual interlocutors' (ibid.).

approaches embodied by teachers, especially regarding the notion of errors[6]; (3) awareness of learning, regarding the interactions ELF users have outside the classroom, seldom acknowledged by ELT stakeholders (adapted from Sifakis, 2019).

Research into ELF-aware ELT[7] has focused on whether it is possible to influence teachers' attitudes towards non-normative approaches and beliefs about languages, with a focus on gradually shifting teacher's perspectives towards WE and ELF (Grazzi & Lopriore, 2020; Llurda & Mocanu, 2018; Lopriore, 2010, 2016, 2017; Lopriore & Vettorel, 2015; Sifakis, 2019), advocating for a need to shift from awareness to application (Blair, 2017) and implementing an ELF-aware teacher model (Kemaloglu-Er & Bayyurt, 2018). These notions challenge the monolithic normative approach that still has a widespread hold on ELT and ELT materials.

The Italian ELT context is influenced by similar beliefs about language of its European counterparts, as presented in the section above. The liminal work of Lopriore and Vettorel has framed Italian teachers' attitudes and focused on proposing teacher pre-education courses that allowed pre- and in-service teachers to interiorize an ELF perspective, which led to 'a shift in positioning themselves in terms of their role and function in an institutional context that demands for standards in language achievement' (Lopriore, 2016). Participants comments exposed a change in perspective towards a more inclusive and multilingual approach, however they still considered that both teachers and students have to account for the conservative language policies, syllabi and examination boards (ibid.). Other studies confirmed the same findings, namely that 'shifting perspectives in English language teacher education is certainly not an easy task and it may be characterized by resistance and contradictions', but 'teacher education is the first and most important step to sensitize present and future generations of English teachers to the inevitable implications of EIL, WE and ELF for ELT' (Vettorel & Lopriore, 2017). Recent findings show that, indeed, a change in perspective is happening, with teachers gradually shifting approaches to error correction, adherence to standard varieties, students' linguistic creativity and questioning authenticity in teaching – 'native-speakerism' is slowly being replaced by more inclusive attitudes about language and language learning (Grazzi & Lopriore, 2020).

[6] For a comprehensive account on the notion of error related to an ELF shift in education, see Newbold (2017c).

[7] For an account on ELF awareness in the classroom, see Sifakis et al. (2018).

Sifakis identified the most important ‘principles of ELF awareness’:

- ‘ELF-aware pedagogy focuses on prioritizing what structures and functions of English need to be taught, showcasing successful interactions involving non-native users, updating corrective feedback strategies, and reflecting on the role of the teacher as a custodian of standard English and as a role model (be they native or non-native users) for their learners.’
- ‘ELF cannot be delimited to a specific codifiable variety that can be taught.’
- ‘ELF does not [...] seek to replace ELT but to be integrated into it, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on teaching context and stakeholders’ attitudes.’
- ‘The process of becoming ELF-aware integrates a process of change and transformation of stakeholders’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices.’
- ‘ELF awareness does not specify a teaching methodology that is distinct from established methodologies.’

Thus, ‘the essential contribution of ELF for ELT is what has often been described by critics as its greatest disadvantage, namely, that it is not codifiable’.

(adapted from Sifakis, 2019)

Teachers can become possible agents of change, but only if they engage with ELF in meaningful ways. Essentially, ‘awareness cannot be taught, it can only be enhanced through reflective approaches where teachers explore, discover and make decisions about the subject they teach or they use for teaching, i.e. English.’ (Lopriore, 2017).

2.2.3 ELF in ELT materials

Despite the raising awareness of ELF and its pluralistic forms, ELT materials are still strongly influenced by ENL. Especially relevant to young learners, the English taught in the classroom (both idealized standard forms and ‘real’ native English) is far from representing the kind of English they need in their real life (Jenkins, 2012; Ranta, 2010). Findings regarding ELT coursebooks and materials show that ELF (as well as WE) does not make its way into the classroom. Textbooks seem to still be rather dependent on standard British English norms, with few exceptions of other NS varieties, leaving out almost completely WE and ELF. ELF-awareness activities were found to be either not present or too general and with little practical implications. At the same time, if ever

NNS were included in some dialogues, they were 'not overtly presented as "legitimate users of English", and thus viable models'; whereas sections about cultures seemed to be more promising in fostering inclusivity, providing meaningful activities of reflection on the students' own culture. Regarding communication strategies, they were found to be scarcely represented in coursebooks, showing that their fundamental relevance in ELF contexts has still not been acknowledged in ELT materials (Lopriore & Vettorel, 2015; Vettorel, 2010, 2018; Vettorel & Lopriore, 2013).

Takahashi (2016) explored the attitudes of high school Japanese teachers and learners towards ELF-oriented ELT materials[8], finding that the presence of ELF contextual factors, such as the representation of NN characters in a dialogue, was not objected by participants. In contrast, they showed diverse reactions to ELF-oriented features that were closely related to a target model (e.g. written forms of non-standard English). Although some teachers deemed positive the inclusion of non-standard contextual varieties, compelling doubts were raised about the possible detrimental effect of exposing students to this type of English at certain levels of language learning. Takahashi identified some contextual factors that could be 'safely' included in ELT course materials, namely 'representing active participation of NNS characters in dialogues', 'including contents of readings on the current/future situation of NNS users and the diversity of English' and 'including more multi-cultural topics' (Takahashi, 2016). These findings seem to suggest a strong resistance to changes in pedagogical and normative conceptions, perhaps supporting the need to educate teachers to ELF awareness, as explored in the previous chapter.

For a different account of ELT materials in Asian contexts, a study focused on Thai participants attending a course in intercultural communication and global Englishes, where the ELT materials were informed by an ELF perspective and intercultural communication. ELT materials with ELF components were well received by participants (Baker, 2012, 2015b). Baker thus proposed some examples of how intercultural communication can be integrated in the classroom, offering 'a range of opportunities to investigate the relationships between culture, language, and communication in classrooms', including:

'1. exploring the complexity of local cultures;

2. exploring cultural representations in language learning materials;

[8] For an account of the criteria of identification for ELF-informed coursebooks, see Takahashi (2016).

3. exploring cultural representations in the media and arts both online and in more "traditional" mediums;
4. making use of cultural informants;
5. engaging in intercultural communication both face to face and electronically.' (2015a)

With these adaptations to classroom practices, learners are encouraged to criticize ELT materials and discourses, posing the accent on the complexity and subjectivity of cultural representational contexts rather than monolithic and national representations of culture (ibid.); another study advocated for 'intercultural telecollaboration exchanges' in the classroom (Kohn, 2016). Similarly, Lopriore's account of teacher training courses found that Italian teachers, after having engaged with ELF topics, were capable of 'critically looking at existing materials in a 'new light' and planning locally relevant activities within a WE, EIL and ELF-informed viewpoint' (Lopriore, 2016). A recognized shortcoming of this study concerns negotiation and other communication strategies, which were not taken into account by teachers in their lesson planning.

Overall, it seems that a diffusion of ELF awareness, while concerning all ELT stakeholders, should predominantly be channeled through teacher education. Teachers are found to generally respond well to ELF-aware training, engaging in meaningful topics and interiorizing ELF and intercultural practices (whether these find their way into the classroom, it remains to see) nonetheless acting as language attitudes models for their pupils, with the ability to elicit their critical awareness – a role that should not be taken lightly.

2.3 Language testing

2.3.1 ELF testing in the international university

'The rise to prominence of English as the first foreign language of Europe has been relatively rapid, fired by developments in the wider socio-political, intellectual and economic environment' (Linn, 2016). Since the 1999 Bologna process, which introduced the two-cycle distinction and the ECTS system, the European university has grown more and more international. The role of the international university is to promote EMI courses in order to attract international students and promote the mobility of both students and teachers. However, higher education has not only undergone a process of internationalization, but also of the '"Englishisation" of European universities', implying that local students are required to engage with English, too, as confirmed by the entrance levels of European universities set either at B1 or B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Newbold, 2015). It is indeed the case that both students who participate in mobility programs and students who remain at their home university are required to use English for a variety of activities; primarily for academic purposes. Suffice it to think that English is the language of research[9] and the undisputed *lingua franca* online, making it virtually impossible to avoid English when doing research; moreover, at least in Master's programs, the majority of courses are taught in English; if not, it is only reasonable to assume that a student would attend a lecture or conference given by an international scholar – with all probability a NNS. This accounts only for academic[10] and local interaction with English, which of course lack all the everyday aspects of living abroad, or even living in an international city – for example, the writer has lived in Venice to study, where it is far easier to encounter English speakers than Italian speakers[11], witnessing a range of ELF interactions with predominantly NNSs from all over the world. The instances of using English in the international university, here presented, reflect the findings of a needs analysis carried

[9] For accounts on scientific and business English, see Ammon (2016) and Holden (2016).

[10] Academic English as a lingua franca (ELFA) has been widely studied, following the establishment of the ELFA corpus at the University of Helsinki in 2008 (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010).

[11] Ironically, personal experience suggests that, in Venice, it is more likely to hear people speaking English, immediately followed by the Venetian dialect, and only then Italian.

out in 2010 (Newbold, 2012), although it is probable that in a decade these instances have increased in frequency, if not in quality.

The establishment of an entrance level of English implies that students have to exhibit a certificate that proves their abilities; this certificate may come from international examination boards or internal university exams, posing the problem of construct validity. Recalling the arguments for an ELF perspective in teaching, Newbold sustains that, since most of the students taking the test at university were likely to use English with other NNSs and for academic purposes, the entrance test should reflect their actual needs. With the goal of preparing students for real-life practices, a test 'with an ELF element' was devised (ibid.). The entrance test focused on reception skills, proposing computer-based reading-comprehension activities relating to retrieving information from university websites, as well as listening either recorder by a NNS or authentic natural conversations between NN students. The overall purpose was to propose a test that was realistic, thus presenting a construct that reflected real-life skills more closely than international certifications for that specific context[12]; it seems it was a successful operation, given the positive feedback from test takers. A second part of the project focused on developing a test construct for the assessment of oral skills. As the outcome would be successful communication, the test should be performance-based, as per the tradition of communicative language testing. The paired interview (already used in Cambridge tests) was found to be an appropriate format, while another pertinent activity would be giving a presentation, as extremely relevant to EMI university – a task that would elicit various ELF strategies, such as 'transparent language; effective repair strategies; relating to audience; clear signposting' (Newbold, 2015). However, an ELF test more poignantly entails assessment criteria based on effective communication, which is not the case with current international tests. Newbold proposes a 'set of interlocutor-oriented criteria', as successful communication is the outcome for two (or more) interlocutors using repairing and communication strategies; the criteria include a shift from accuracy to appropriateness, from fluency to flexibility, and from lexical range to lexical transparency, shifting the focus from 'monolithic' views on language to a multilingual and plurilithic approach (ibid.).

[12] Cf. Jenkins & Leung (2019).

2.3.2 ELF-aware tests

While a proper 'ELF test' does not yet exist, some tentative approaches have attempted to lay the groundwork for a future development of such test. In this regard, Elder and Davies devised two models for an ELF test (2006). Although the models themselves are quite outdated today, because they either rely on NS norms or on ELF as a codifiable variety, the rationale behind abandoning a native standard model still hold true, with test results more authentically representing target language use (TLU) domain, a probable reduction of test anxiety for test takers and a positive washback effect on language pedagogy, with a focus on communicative skills rather than native standards (ibid.). The concept that a native standard assessment format 'might be 'ill-equipped' and not valid to be tested against ELF' (Situmorang, Nugroho, & Sembel, 2019) should be considered as a need for a radical change in assessment practices just as much as ELF awareness demands for a radical change in classroom practices. However, while language testers have been extensively criticized for not including ELF assessment in international tests, Elder and Harding serve as a reminder that test designers have to uphold principles of construct validity, fairness, and accountability to a range of stakeholders (2008). These constraints are not easy to overtake and have to be informed by extensive research. Testing construct validity has been framed by Jenkins and Leung as being bound to contextual differences, arguing that 'we need to promote multiple assessment constructs (and designs) to reflect the diverse language and literacy practices that exist in university' (2019). In the international university, linguistic diversity is the norm, however, it is not recognized by university standard entrance tests. Jenkins and Leung propose a radical re-conceptualization of language testing, stating that 'the time has come to abandon any conventional notion of a universal standard', clearly sustaining the need for different types of assessment based on different contexts (ibid.). In this perspective, proficiency is defined as the readiness of the candidate to use English in the TLU domain, identifying the main criterion as 'successful communication in situ' (ibid.).

A first attempt at a test with ELF features was carried out as a co-certification developed by Trinity College London and the University of Ca' Foscari Venice. In 2005, the co-certification was devised as a local version of an international certification (Integrated Skills in English, ISE), serving as an opportunity for the students to simultaneously pass a university exam and obtain an international certification. The

rationale for embarking in these uncharted territories was to declinate an international certification to the needs of local students, previously assessed through a needs analysis (Newbold, 2012, 2017a, 2017b). This concept reflects Jenkins and Leung's arguments for a locally contextual ELF test (Jenkins & Leung, 2019).

The certification presented two parts of an ELF-informed construct: the topics for the 'critical writing' part of the test, and the use of NNS accents in the independent listening task. The two institutions had different roles – the examining board dealt with assessment and the University of Ca' Foscari proposed the items for the writing task, which were made 'to refer to Europe-specific or Italy-specific themes with which all candidates would be familiar but which could not be used internationally' (Newbold, 2017a). In 2014 Trinity College made major changes the ISE certification with the intention to integrate reading and writing skills and introducing an independent listening task. As most students at Ca' Foscari would often encounter NNS lecturers, European NNS readers were proposed for the task. The four expert NNS readers, appointed by Trinity College, read materials prepared by the colleagues at Ca' Foscari, and were asked to not interrupt themselves if they made small errors, trying to speak in a natural way. The readers' L1s were Italian, Catalan, French and Spanish; they all had noticeable accents, made false starts, exhibited some prosodic and grammatical errors. However, as it emerged from the test takers' feedback questionnaire, there was a strong consensus that the speakers spoke clearly, with a familiar accent, and only a small proportion reported the accent to interfere with understanding. It is interesting to notice that some test takers said they felt more comfortable with a NN accent, because NSs cause a level of anxiety in interaction and at the same time tend to result less comprehensible, as they do not adapt to their interlocutor.

Recapitulating, the major points of interest of this experiment for ELF-informed tests were: the use of local-specific topics in an international test, temporarily discarding a monolithic view of language; the use of only NNS readers for the independent listening task, which again favoured the contextual local factor; and the crucial point that an international and influential examination board was involved in a local test, that could thus also serve as a certification for test takers (Newbold, 2017a, 2017b).

Overall, Newbold approaches the concept of a test of ELF, highlighting some outstanding issues and needs, for example pinpointing the lower B2 level for Spoken Interaction in the CEFR descriptors as ELF-rejecting in nature:

> 'Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relationships with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party. Can highlight the personal significance of events and experiences, account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments.' (ibid., underlined mine)

However, the CEFR descriptors were updated in 2018, when 'native speakers' was replaced with 'speakers of the target language' (Council of Europe, 2018). Almost a decade ago, McNamara argued for the urgency of inserting an ELF perspective into language testing, stating that 'current conceptualizations of proficiency in terms of gradual approximation to the competence of the native speaker will need to be drastically revised' (2012). He criticized the CEFR reference to the NS in its descriptors, further arguing that the interlocutors are always assumed to be NSs and that the responsibility of an effective communication resides entirely on the assessed NNS, making no mention of cooperation. While this held true for a decade (the CEFR being established in 2001) it has undergone major changes in 2018. Directly from the Council of Europe's website[13], the updated 2018 version of the CEFR, called the 'CEFR Companion Volume', was devised to 'broaden the scope of language education, reflecting academic and societal developments since the CEFR publication in 2001'; the new descriptors include 'mediation, online interaction, plurilingual/pluricultural competence, and sign language competences'. This essential step is supposed to represent the 'Council of Europe's engagement with language education, which seeks to protect linguistic and cultural diversity, promote plurilingual and intercultural education, reinforce the right to quality education for all, and enhance intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and democracy'. In fact, not only references to native speakers and idiomatic language have been removed from the descriptors of language competence, but more importantly the linguistic framework has radically shifted to an inclusiveness of multilingual and multicultural practices. The CEFR Companion Volume presents the notion of plurilingualism[14] and 'plurilingual competence', focused on exploiting one's repertoires in 'experimenting with alternative forms of expression' (Council of Europe, 2018). A well-rounded combination of general knowledge,

[13] https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages (accessed in July 2020).

[14] 'The dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner' (Council of Europe, 2018).

communicative language competences and communication strategies, together with the need to apply descriptors to classroom practice, defines the ‘action-oriented approach’:

> ‘The aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to “develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place”.’ (ibid.)

The utopist challenge of an ELF certification presented in Newbold (2015), i.e. devising an assessment scale that is linked to the CEFR descriptors, thus implying the need to remove any reference to NS from them, has become to a fruitful reality. As CEFR levels are considered the gatekeepers of language education in Europe, it seems that the time is ripe for proposing a real ELF certification – or at least, to gain the insights of possible stakeholders.

3 The study (part 1): prospective test takers attitudes towards a certification of ELF

3.1 Introduction to the study

The literature presented in the previous chapter shows that, although ELF is a global phenomenon and has been studied in earnest for the last two decades with increasing attention to its implications for teaching and testing, it has not yet made its way into the classroom, nor in standard tests. While there is a proliferation of studies focusing on different facets of ELF and ELF pedagogy, there is no consensus as to what should be considered when teaching it (e.g. an 'ELF-aware' education or ELF treated as a variety of English), with direct implications for testing. This becomes more relevant as ELF is spoken today worldwide by NNSs that might never need it to live or work with NSs or in NS countries, but nonetheless are required to obtain a certification that attests their adherence to a native standard. The complex and multi-faceted role of ELF is further complicated by NNSs' perceptions and attitudes about language that tend to rely on traditional views about language learning; this is especially true in the Italian context, where language learning is extremely grammar-centered. Some attempts in developing an ELF-aware certification have been made, as shown in the literature review.

In this regard, the present research aims at laying the groundwork for a more practical approach. The purpose is to identify possible stakeholders for an ELF certification, their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of certifications in general and their thoughts on the validity of different aspects of an ELF certification. The study focuses on stakeholders' attitudes in order to inform test developers and pave the way for proposing a certification of ELF.

3.2 Methodology

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, as is usual in social sciences research, with the objective of gaining meaningful data pertaining to stakeholders' attitudes towards an ELF certification. In order to take into account different views on the subject from the main stakeholders, the study was divided into two phases:

1. An online questionnaire aimed at collecting quantitative data from possible test takers (525 participants).
2. Semi-structured online interviews of high school English teachers (14) and university English-mediated instruction (EMI) professors (17).

The questionnaire was designed to have an overall view of possible test takers' attitudes, with closed-ended questions that asked for their preferences, thoughts and motivation, while also allowing personal comments through open-ended questions. In contrast, school teachers and university professors were thought to have a more comprehensive perspective towards ELF and certifications, as well as the students' use of language and their needs; for these reasons, a qualitative approach was considered more appropriate, so that they could offer their point of view in a more flexible way. All parts of the study were conducted online due to external causes[15], which in turn made it possible to reach a wider number of participants. Although the interviews might have benefited from in-person interaction, they would have only included participants from a more restricted area of Italy; thus, in a world increasingly defined by remote and flexible working (especially for people in academia) online interviews and meetings are becoming the new normal.

In a final analytic phase, the quantitative and qualitative results were put in relation with each other to draw inferences from different perspectives, in a triangulation of results concerning the perceptions about a possible ELF certification. The specific methods and results are presented in the following chapters, divided by participant category for the sake of clarity.

3.3 Prospective Test Takers

3.3.1 Method

Prospective test takers were interviewed through an online questionnaire on Google Forms, which consisted in both open- and closed-ended questions. Social media platforms were used in order to reach a large number of participants, specifically Facebook and Instagram.

[15] The global pandemic that struck the world from January 2020, in Italy from March, made it impossible to travel (both within the state and between the regions) and to meet in person.

3.3.1.1 Participants

One of the aims of this research was to identify possible test takers. As such, mainly university students were targeted, who are both easy to contact and who constitute the majority of test takers due to university entrance tests and the requirements for studying abroad. Other candidates were high school students, whom I was unfortunately unable to reach[16], and employees of international companies, as well as immigrants, teachers, etc. As ELF is defined in this dissertation as the interaction between non-native English speakers (NNESs), the survey was primarily concerned with the attitudes of NNSs; thus, NSs were discouraged from participating[17], although not precluded from doing so, as they might have nonetheless had some interesting opinions. Furthermore, a focus on the Italian context was maintained, which allowed for a comparison of test takers' and teachers' data, as well as to draw conclusions based on various influencing local factors.

The participants were reached through Facebook and Instagram, particularly through Facebook groups of various universities and subject areas. Delivering the questionnaire online seemed the best method to ensure a high participation rate from university students, while also allowing for international and non-student participants. Between the 16th-19th of March, the questionnaire was posted on about 50 Facebook groups, the majority of which belonged to 15 different Italian universities[18], 15 subject areas[19] (both Bachelor's and Master's courses), and 12 Erasmus+ groups, while the rest consisted in non-student groups[20]; it was also posted on my personal FB and Instagram pages and

[16] A hard-copy questionnaire was devised for high school students, which would have allowed to contextualize the project in person and given them a support if they did not understand some parts of the questionnaire, both from their teacher and the researcher. Unfortunately, due to a global pandemic that in Italy started at the beginning of March, all schools were closed down. With lessons switched to online learning in a matter of weeks and the subsequent three months of extreme confusion about how to deal with the emergency in the school system, it was not considered an appropriate time for proposing the questionnaire, as well as it being extremely difficult to reach entire classrooms (for an account of how high school teachers were contacted, see Chapter 4.1.1).

[17] The posts made it explicitly clear that the study focused on NNSs and this information was repeated to NSs who asked whether they could participate.

[18] Universities of Bologna "Alma Mater Studiorum", Venezia "Ca' Foscari", Urbino "Carlo Bo", Perugia, Roma "Sapienza", Roma "Marconi", Roma Tre, Torino, Milano Statale, Milano "Cattolica", L'Aquila, Napoli "Federico II", Modena-Reggio Emilia (MORE), Pisa, eCampus.

[19] Languages, Literature, History, Economics, Law, Engineering, Physics, Psychology, Pedagogy, Learning Sciences, Pharmacy, Environmental Science, Cultural and Social Education, Communication Studies, Fashion.

[20] Such as groups to find apartments in different cities, city groups, engineering and math groups, etc.

stories, with a few people reposting it, in order to encourage participation from international contacts.

As stated above, this method was used in order to reach a variety of people belonging to different categories and parts of Italy and Europe, which would not have been possible at all if done in person. The obvious disadvantage of such a method is the possible self-selection of participants (Dörnyei, 2003) – only those interested in the topic tend to take part in the study – although in this case it was not an issue as much as a desired outcome: the questionnaire focused on the opinions towards certifications of English and ELF, meaning that participants had to be at least interested in the topic to some degree, having already taken a certification or in need of getting one; thus, the self-selection helped identify prospective test takers, which was the first goal of the research.

A total of 525 participants completed the questionnaire.

3.3.1.2 The questionnaire

The test takers questionnaire consisted of 30 questions in total, which were distributed into four sections:

1. English Language Certification (Section I-II, see Appendix 0): aimed at people who had already obtained an English language certification (of any kind). It was designed to investigate their experience in taking the test, their motivation, its perceived authenticity, utility and its advantages/disadvantages. It also investigated the perceived validity of test results.
2. English as a Lingua Franca (Section III, ibid.): targeted at all independent users of English who were interested in a language certification. This section opened with a definition of ELF and then aimed at making the respondents reflect on their use of English in real life. Lastly, it focused on the characteristics of effective communication, including the use of communication strategies.
3. Certification of English as a Lingua Franca (Section IV, ibid.): a direct continuation of the previous section, this section presented some characteristics of a possible ELF certification, with which participants were asked to agree or disagree, and to express their thoughts on the validity of test results of this specific certification. It then asked respondents what kind of components they

would prefer in said certification and if, given the chance, they would rather obtain a traditional or ELF certification.

4. Personal info (Section V, ibid.): The personal data gathered included gender, country of origin, first language, whether they were students and whether they lived abroad at the moment or intended to live abroad in the future. They could also leave their e-mail if they wanted to (which many respondents did).

The questions were mainly attitudinal, as the research is concerned with opinions, defined by Dörnyei as 'subjective, factually based and more changeable', as well as with attitudes, defined 'evaluative responses [...] deeply embedded in the human mind. [...] they can be rooted back in our past or modeled by certain significant people around us', thus being 'rather pervasive and resistant to change' (Dörnyei, 2003). The type of questions used varied, ranging from multi-item scale – consistent with a scientific approach, they maximize the reliability of different items which might be unreliable due to wording or other unexpected effects (Dörnyei, 2003) – to multiple-choice questions (including an 'other' and 'don't know' answer to allow for more sincere responses), three- and five-point Likert scales, check lists (to account for different advantages/disadvantages), numerical rating scales for statistical inferences, and yes/no questions to gather personal information. There were also open-ended questions in the form of 'why' or 'please explain', in order to elicit more meaningful answers after polarizing closed-ended questions.

Four of the questions were adapted from Basso's questionnaire aimed at students and lecturers at Venice International University (VIU[21]). Appropriately reworded, expanded and adapted for my own purposes, four of Basso's questions became my questions III.2, III.3, III.4, III.5 (cf. Basso, 2012:36–40). For the complete test takers questionnaire see Appendix 0.

Before administering the questionnaire, I carried out a piloting phase in which 5 potential respondents completed the questionnaire and gave feedback on some unclear or ambiguous points. Following this, a few minor adjustments were made to solve these issues:

[21] VIU is a consortium of 20 universities based in Venice, specifically on the island of San Servolo. It has programs relating to global challenges and promotes integration, being officially recognized by the Italian government as 'an international centre of higher education and research'. Its relevance to the study was that all the staff communicates in English, using ELF, which Basso's research focused on. The VIU website is www.univiu.org

- Question II.4 (‘In your opinion, is the material used in the exam close to authentic language use?’): in the first version, there were five instances to be graded in a three-point Likert-scale (Written texts; Writing topics; Listening dialogues; Listening lectures; Speaking topics) which caused some confusion in the piloting phase, especially terms like ‘lectures’ and the ambiguous difference between ‘written texts’ and ‘writing topics’ for non-language students. To clarify the meaning and make them more accessible, they were then changed to the four typical tasks of language tests (Reading-comprehension tasks; Writing tasks; Listening tasks; Speaking tasks), which are immediately recognizable by all who have already taken an English test – they are also used in language courses and in school textbooks, which are tailored to international language certifications.
- Question II.9 (‘In your experience, what do you think were the downsides (if any) of doing a language certification in English?’): this question was originally ‘In general, what are the downsides (if any) of doing a language certification in English?’, but it seemed to cause some ambiguity because any downside listed could either be related to one’s own experience or to what they thought in general. It was decided that personal experience was more of interest to the purpose of the research, so to have more reliable results indicating what test takers actually encountered when taking the certification.
- Question III.1 (‘What kind of interactions have you had in English in your life, beyond school or language courses?’) was originally a statement, which created some confusion as to what was asked.
- Question III.2 (‘Think of your experience of using English with non-native speakers (ELF). Which statement do you agree with the most?’): in the first version, one of the two possible responses was ‘You can communicate successfully despite using non-standard features’. As the term ‘standard’ might have caused some misunderstanding, it was changed to a less ambiguous ‘non-native features’.

Some disadvantages of administering a questionnaire are (1) the possibility of unreliable responses, which leads to (2) the impossibility to intervene if respondents have doubts about how to fill the questionnaire that is not in person, and (3) some questions that may imply prestige/socially desirable answers, which are usually clear to

the participants and might influence them to select answers in which they do not believe (Dörnyei, 2003). As regards to point (1), unreliable or sloppy responses cannot be completely avoided, although the online format allowed me to control for incomplete responses on some level, which might at least prevent questions from being left blank or answered inappropriately. Point (2) is one of the reasons why the questionnaire was not administered to high school students, who were deemed less independent in the process of questionnaire filling and it was not possible to do so in person, as explained earlier; university students and other adults were considered more than capable of completing an online questionnaire, mainly because the language and topic of the questionnaire prevented people who might not be familiar with certifications from participating. Lastly, point (3) might pose a problem for some of the questions, which were manipulated not to offer an obvious bias, but overall the prestige bias attached to the topic of certifications might present itself in two opposite ways – people who deem languages to be monolithic and traditionally subject to strict rules and people who might deem it socially desirable to endorse progress and language or policy changes. These two prestige biases are present in today's society and were considered to balance each other out.

The tool used to create the questionnaire was Google Forms. Its intuitive interface, its availability in the Google Suite, the possibility of customizing the types of questions, adding collaborators online and having a visual summary of results, were all fitting properties for the project. Moreover, it allows you to control the order and manner in which questions are answered, e.g. it impedes answers that are not in the required format or to proceed without having answered appropriately all the compulsory questions, which can be problematic with hard-copy questionnaires. The results are available in real time: a statistical summary of results is provided to give an immediate visual understanding of the data, while also presenting results divided per question or per person, after which all results can be downloaded in an Excel format.

The questionnaire was opened on the 16th of March and it accepted responses for only two weeks, given the high response rate (with 300 responses in the first three days). This allowed me to try to obtain more balanced data, e.g. sharing the form in FB groups of study fields that were under-represented or groups that included more international students. The results seemed to have reached saturation from 300 responses upward, as the percentages remained basically unchanged from then onwards. The questionnaire took around 15-20 minutes to complete (and significantly less if the

respondent hadn't ever taken a certification before, thus skipping section II), in line with Dörnyei's statement that 'most questionnaires in the L2 field concern topics that have a low salience from the respondents' perspective', thus calling for an 'optimal length' of less than 30 minutes (Dörnyei, 2003). Results were processed using Excel statistical analysis tools, while open questions were coded and subject to thematic analysis, in order to determine the occurrence of frequent and unexpected themes.

3.3.2 Analysis of results

3.3.2.1 Participants' profile: age

While there were no age limits to participate in the survey, the fact that university students were the main target surely influenced the age groups of respondents. The range of the age variable was 51, with the youngest respondent being 17 years old and the oldest 68. The figure below presents the frequency of participants' age distributed into age groups of five years; the total participants were 525.

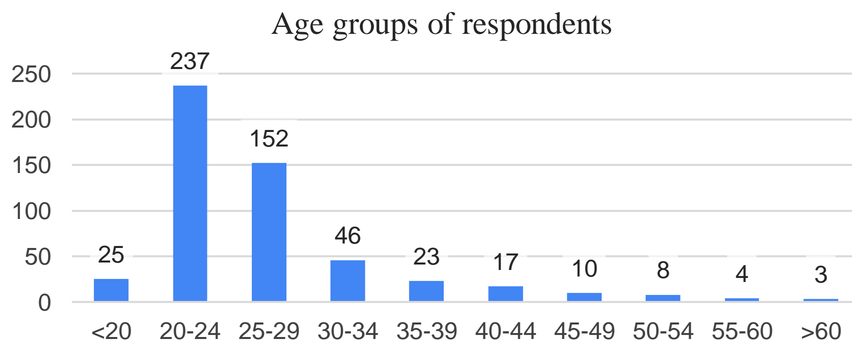


Figure 1 – Age groups of respondents

As is showed in the graph, the majority of respondents are in the age groups 20-24 and 25-29. The histogram shape is skewed to the right, with just a small percentage of respondents aged over 50, which is understandable considering the FB groups in which the questionnaire was posted. To better represent the data, quartiles of respondents' age were calculated and summarized in Table 1, following the tenets of statistical analysis for highly skewed graph shapes (Agresti, Franklin, & Klingenberg, 2018).

Min	Q1	Q2	Q3	Max
17	22	25	28	68
\	**1st quarter**	**2nd quarter**	**3rd quarter**	**4th quarter**
\	17-22	22-25	25-28	28-68

Table 1 – Quartiles of respondents' age

Looking at the table, it is immediately clear that the fourth quarter is the widest (40-year span), even though it contains only the upper 25% of the data. While the total range is 51 years, 50% of the data fall between 22 and 28 years old, with an Interquartile Range (IQR) of 6 years. The second quartile also represents the median (25); similarly, the mode was 22. These analyses show that the sample consisted of young people who are in an age range that is typically associated to higher education; this, as expected, is in line with the high participation of university students. In the next sections, the age of participants will be put in relation to gender, country of origin, and student status.

3.3.2.2 Participants' profile: gender

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to state their gender, choosing among the usual 'female' and 'male', and the inclusive 'other' or 'I don't want to specify'. The chart below is a visual representation of the percentages of each option.

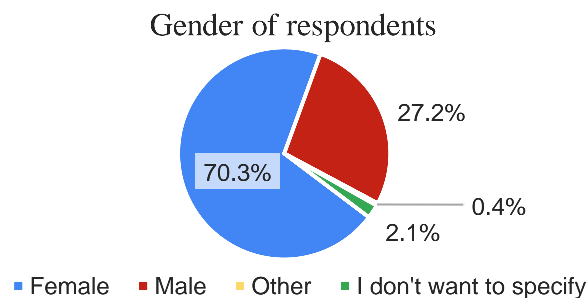


Figure 2 – Gender of respondents (4 original options)

Over a total of 525 participants, the majority were female, around 30% were male, and a small percentage (around 3%) either were other or did not want to specify. Overall, 512 participants chose either male or female; because the overwhelming majority identified in a binary gender, those were the ones kept into consideration for the rest of the analyses relating to gender, so as not to make the data unnecessarily heavy. Gender distribution per each age group is listed in Figure 3.

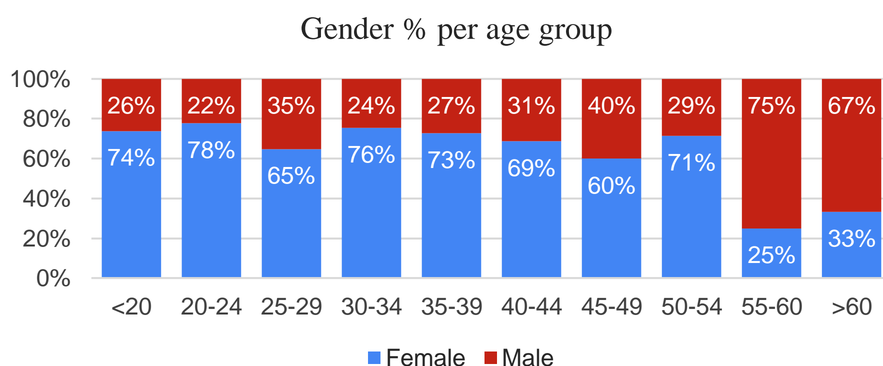


Figure 3 – Gender percentages per age group

As shown in the graph above, in the age groups that contained the highest number of data (ages 20-29), the percentage of females remained around 65-75%, while in the right tail of the age shape (see Figure 1) the male-female ratio was upturned. This is easily explained by the low frequency of people aged 55-60 years old (7) and can thus be disregarded. Overall, the high percentage of females might be significant to other researchers, given that it was not controlled for, but dependent on participants' self-selection; it is useful to notice that the academic fields of university students (which were the majority of respondents) were varied enough and the representation of the female gender might not be contingent to female-only fields[22] (cf. section 3.3.2.4). The fact that the gender percentages were highly unbalanced made the comparison of the genders inconsequential to other analyses, that were rather compared with student status.

3.3.2.3 Participants' profile: country of origin, first language and country of residence

The survey asked respondents for their country of origin and their first language (L1), offering a drop-down menu of 196 world countries and 143 languages. Respondents came from all over the world (51 countries and 37 different languages[23]),

[22] Women-dominated fields include the Humanities, in which women constituted the 80% of graduates in 2017 in Italy, as per the Ministry of Education (MIUR) statistics (Morana & Sagramora, 2019).

[23] For a full account, see Appendix 1 – Test takers questionnaire.

but for most of the countries had an extremely low frequency. Thus, only the five top-tier countries and L1s are presented in Table 2.

Top 5 countries	Frequency	Percentages (over 525)	Top 5 languages	Frequency	Percentages (over 525)
Italy	409	77,9%	Italian	410	78,1%
Turkey	9	1,7%	German	12	2,3%
Austria	7	1,3%	Turkish	9	1,7%
France	7	1,3%	Spanish	8	1,5%
Germany	5	1%	French	7	1,3%
Total	**437**	**83,2%**	**Total**	**446**	**85%**

Table 2 – Top five respondents' countries of origin and L1s

The table shows that the top five countries and languages constitute the 83% and 85% of all responses, respectively. A prominent majority of respondents were Italian and spoke Italian as their L1, which was an understandable result since the questionnaire was focused on Italy and posted mainly on Italian university websites. Other countries represented in the top 5 were all European, and the European countries represented in the data were 33 overall; of the remaining countries, 6 were in the American continent, 7 in Asia and 5 in Africa. To find the first non-European country, one has to go to position twelve of the list (Brazil), which confirms that the data represent primarily European countries. It is likely that the questionnaire being posted on international mobility groups elicited responses from all over the world, although no non-European country was truly represented in the data. On the same line, there is the much shorter list of languages. The numerical gap can be easily explained by the fact that people who come from different countries might share their L1 – suffice it to think about Spanish in Latin America, or German in Austria, both cases illustrated well in Table 2. By and large, Italy and Italian were the focus of the survey and were thus highly displayed in the data.

Lastly, participants were asked about their intention of living abroad in the future and whether they were living outside of their country of origin at the moment. The results are presented below.

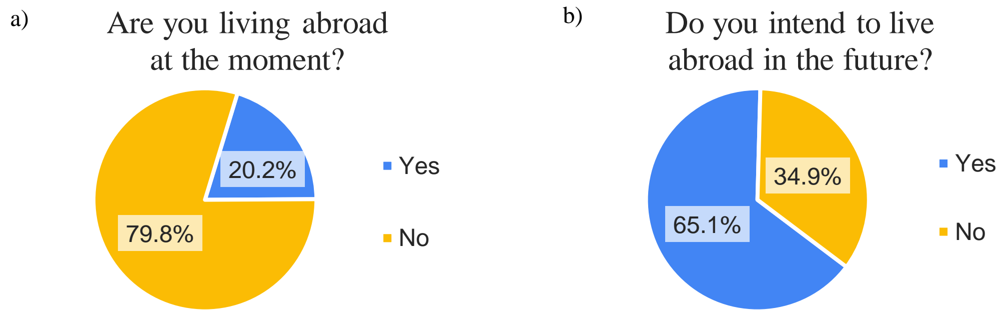


Figure 4 – Percentages of participants who live abroad (a) or intend to do so in the future (b)

Error! Reference source not found. reveals that around 80% of respondents live in their country of origin, although 65% of respondents wish to live abroad in the future. These statistics might inform us about possible differences in attitudes between people who are currently living abroad or intend to do so in the future.

3.3.2.4 Participants' profile: student status and academic field

To distinguish students from non-students, participants were asked about their student status and, if they were a university student, their field of study. Over 525 participants, 382 were university students (73%), 131 were not students (25%) and 12 were high school students (2%). The student response rate was fairly predictable, while the turnout of non-student participants was unexpected, given the selection process for the survey. The percentage of high school students is noticeably low, as they were not targeted; inevitably, given their small number, they are not considered part of the sample, nor comparable with the other categories. To gain further information on the data, the percentages of students and non-students per age groups are shown in Figure 5.

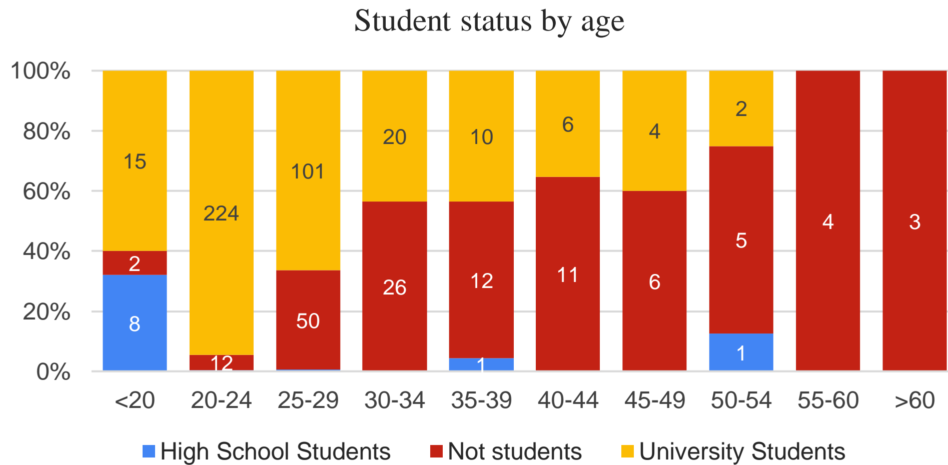


Figure 5 – Student status per age groups, with percentages and frequency

The figure presents the proportion of high school students, university students and non-students, showing inside each portion of the columns the category frequency[24]. The data are presented using a percent scale to have better understanding of proportions. Figure 5 thus shows that university students had the highest occurrence at age 19 to 29, while non-students were in the highest numbers at ages 25-34. The proportion of non-students, as one could expect, increased with age. It is notable that some university students were aged as far as 50 years old. However, concerning high school respondents, I find it extremely unusual and unrealistic that anyone could be a high school student above the 20-24 group; those respondents can only be assumed to be 'sloppy' respondents and to have answered inaccurately.

The university students were then asked what their field of study was, to have a better understanding of the collected data and especially to check the proportion of language students, who were expected to have opinions based on their area of expertise. The students' academic fields were also important in order to compare the data with the interview data, particularly the university professors' results. The percentages per field of study are exemplified in the chart below.

[24] The age groups 20-24 and 25-29 each had one high school respondent, which does not show in the graph due to its extremely low frequency.

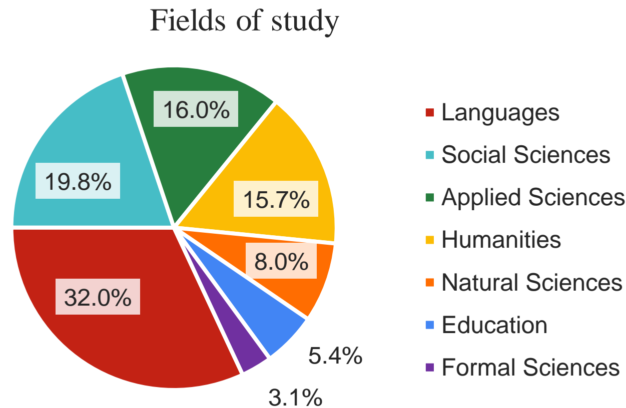


Figure 6 – Fields of study of university students

Figure 6 shows the proportions of each field of study. Different disciplines were grouped under a wider branch of academic studies, organized as follows:

- Languages (Foreign Literature & Cultures, Translation, Linguistic Sciences...)
- Social sciences (Archaeology, Political Sciences, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Management...)
- Applied Sciences (Architecture, Business, Engineering, Technology, Medicine, Law...)
- Humanities (Arts, History, Literature, Philosophy, Theology...)
- Natural Sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Physics...)
- Education (Pedagogy, teacher training programs...)
- Formal Sciences (Computer science, Mathematics, Statistics...)

Disciplines related to languages were kept in a separate category in order to identify responses coming from language experts, whose opinions about certifications might be biased by a 'linguistic lens'. Apart from the great participation of language students (32%) – which can be explained by the survey topic – social sciences, applied sciences and humanities were set at around 16-19%, balancing each other out. On a lesser degree, there were respondents who studied natural sciences and education, and a small percentage of formal sciences students, which can be explained by the stricter range of disciplines that the field includes. It is important to note that, given the high participation rate of the survey, and after having reached about 300 participants in two days, the questionnaire was posted in university groups of fields that were under-represented in the data, so to elicit responses from a wider sample – both in terms of figures and variety. The process resulted in an incremented participation rate,

particularly from the applied sciences field[25], thus balancing the different academic approaches. The purpose of this variable was to offer a comprehensive set of data that represented university students on the whole.

3.3.2.5 Past certifications: which one and why

The participants who had already taken a certification of English had to answer an additional set of questions concerning their motivations and to comment on the authenticity of materials and the reliability of results (section II of the questionnaire[26]). The percentages of respondents who took a certification at the B1 level or higher are shown below.

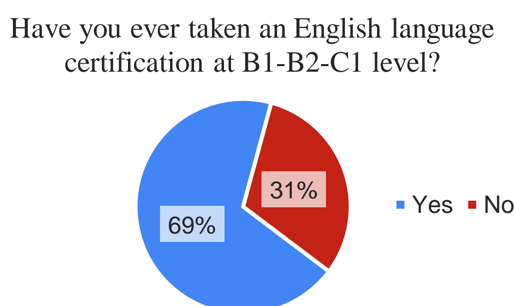


Figure 7 – Percentage of respondents who had already taken a certification

The majority of participants (69%) had already obtained a certification of English, a figure in itself revealing of the extent to which certifications are part of our lives, willingly or not – especially considering that they are often taken as a requirement for university entrance and job or citizenship applications. Such a high percentage of test takers can also be explained by the fact that mainly university students took part in the survey, who more easily might have been required to obtain a certification, either by their university, because of a mobility period, or in general if they lived abroad. This was not necessarily the case, as can be seen in Figure 8.

[25] Mainly Engineering and Law students.
[26] See Appendix 1 – Test takers questionnaire.

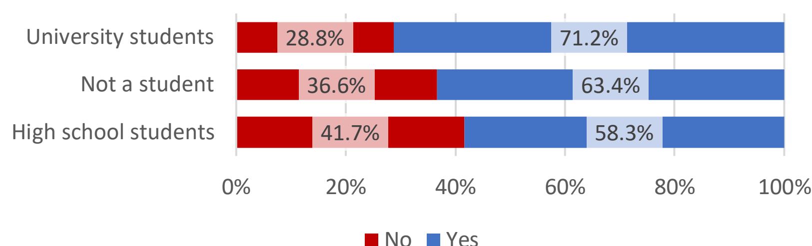


Figure 8 – Percentage of respondents who had already taken a certification by student status

While the proportion of university students who have taken a certification is a little higher than in the results for all participants (71 v. 69%), it is not extremely different from high school students or non-students; nonetheless, it is important to remember that high school students were very few, making their data unreliable, while non-students might in fact have been students in the past (recent or not), thus might still have taken a certification for academic reasons.

The motivation for taking a certification in the first place were investigated in question II.2 and are exemplified in the following graph.

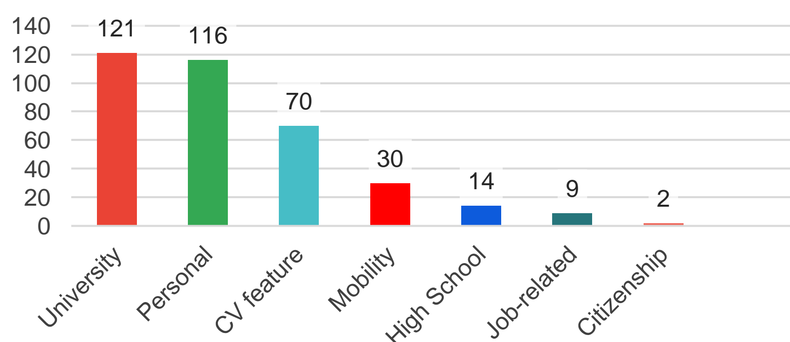


Figure 9 – Main motivation for taking a certification of English (frequency)

Among the different possibilities only one answer could be chosen, in order to pinpoint what was the main or original motivation for taking the test. The answers included an ‘other’ option where respondents could insert additional responses that the researcher had not previously estimated; these answers were coded and added to the categories, with the results of Figure 9. For spatial reasons, the tags were shortened. The first and

main motivation to obtain a certification was as a university prerequisite, which was to be expected both because of the high frequency of university students and because European universities require an entrance level of at least B1, making ‘university requirement’ an extremely popular motivation. Surprisingly, the second most voted motivation was ‘personal’, a response that may appear quite strange, considering the amount of effort that goes into obtaining a language certification – be it cost, time, pressure, sometimes travel expenses, etc. Admittedly, the reasons for this high occurrence could be varied: an answer including certifications done during high school was not included, while it was an option many chose in the following question about motivations (see Table 4); another reason could be that, while one possible answer was ‘university prerequisite’, a lot of universities offer English courses preparing for certifications for free, thus promoting attendance. Although some participants chose the option ‘other’ and specified that their high school gave them the opportunity to do it, it is worth considering that not all of them might have wanted to take the time to type an answer under ‘other’, or that, because it was proposed by their school and it was not mandatory, they feel the main reason they did it was for personal growth or as something that could be useful in the future. On the same note, universities offering courses, together with certifications proposed by high schools or summer schools at lowered prices, might encourage students to take a certification of English, taking away the cost factor and focusing on the benefits of said certification. Such reasoning leads to the other high-frequency motivation, i.e. ‘an added feature on my CV’. This answer was, again, somewhat unexpected, but it is explainable by the same logic for the previous ones: students who have free courses available at their university, especially in their final year, could find it extremely useful for their CV (that basically represents the possibilities in their future), as well as non-students who are looking for employment. It is then possible that ‘personal’ and ‘added CV feature’ represent two sides of the same coin, namely the fact that it opens an opportunity in the test taker’s future. Other motivations were ‘Erasmus/other mobility program prerequisite’, ‘to get a job in my or another country’, which are fairly unequivocal answers, and the added categories of ‘proposed by my high school’, explained earlier in the paragraph, and ‘to obtain citizenship’, which might have been significantly higher with a different sample, for example oriented at expatriates or migrants.

The following question focused on the specific certification taken by participants. To make the results less dispersive, an array of the most common certifications was provided, with a particular attention to the European context.

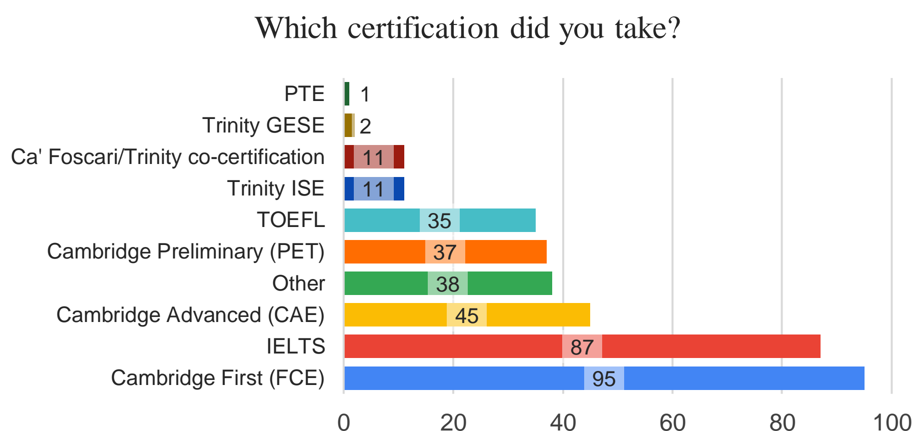


Figure 10 – Certifications taken by respondents (frequency)

Figure 10 unsurprisingly shows that Cambridge certifications have the most occurrences, immediately followed by IELTS and TOEFL – all certifications that are extremely popular, depending on the context considered; the first are very common in high school, while IELTS and TOEFL are usually necessary for academic or work contexts, respectively in Europe and the US. The questionnaire included the 'Ca' Foscari-Trinity co-certification', which was presented in 2.3.2 as an attempt at an 'ELF-aware' certification; students who took this certification were invited to take part in the survey.

To better grasp the data, a pivot table showing which kind of certification was taken by students and non-students is presented below.

	PET	**FCE**	**CAE**	**IELTS**	**TOEFL**	**GESE**	**ISE**	**Co-cert.**	**PTE**	**Other**	**Tot**
HS students	1	5								1	**7**
Non-students	8	15	9	18	11	2	5	1		14	**83**
University st.	28	75	36	69	24		6	10	1	23	**272**
Tot	**37**	**95**	**45**	**87**	**35**	**2**	**11**	**11**	**1**	**38**	**362**

Table 3 – Frequency of certification types by student status

As expected, high school students mainly took Cambridge certifications. If participants obtained more than one certification, they were asked to choose only the most recent one, which could explain the rather low occurrence on the B1 Preliminary

(formerly PET) and the prevalence of the B2 First (formerly FCE), the latter being the most common certificate obtained in high school. Cambridge Assessment English also offers all of its certifications up until the B2 level in a ‘for schools’ version, targeting high school students and thus making the certifications extremely common during school years. Given that the B2 First certifies an upper-intermediate level, it would be expected to be fairly common, as is can be used to access university programs, job interviews and traineeships; while the C1 Advanced (formerly CAE), being aimed at proficient users, is done to certify proficient users who might want to access prestigious jobs or post-graduate programs, as well as high-level high school students (see 4.1.2.2). IELTS was the most common certification taken by university students, on a par with the B2 First, as it is the most accepted certification to access university courses in Italy and in the rest of Europe. The IELTS certification, along with the TOEFL, does not represent a particular level of proficiency, but it is rather based on a numerical scale that refers to the CEFR. This is a core motivation for test takers, as will be shown below.

The motivations for choosing one particular test were investigated, providing participants with a set of answers and the possibility of specifying other motivations. The purpose of this question was to understand if some motivations differed among different kinds of certifications. Differently from the previous question, the participants could choose more than one answer and add their own, which resulted in a list of motivations relating to particular certifications. Overall, the strongest motivation was ‘it was specifically required by my university/employer/government’ (120 occurrences), the second one was ‘cost’ (61 occurrences), followed by ‘I preferred the testing methods used (computer-based, interactions with other students...)’ and ‘convenient exam dates’, with 47 and 42 occurrences respectively. From these general frequencies it is clear that the first motivation for choosing a test (namely, it was required by the institution) is not a matter of preference, but external in nature; the second most-voted motivation (cost) is also external, and it is only the third that entails a preference concerning the specific methods used, thus addressing the particular characteristics of the different tests. The data were subsequently elaborated, determining the motivations pertaining to the top three certifications obtained by participants, i.e. FCE, IELTS and CAE.

FCE	F	%	IELTS	F	%	CAE	F	%
Proposed in HS	47	41%	Specifically required	38	33%	Specifically required	14	28%
Cost	16	14%	Preferred testing methods	15	13%	Proposed in HS	11	22%
Specifically required[27]	15	13%	Cost	14	12%	Preferred testing methods	6	12%
Preferred testing methods	11	10%	Convenient exam dates	14	12%	Cost	4	8%
Convenient exam dates	9	8%	Proposed by university	12	10%	Convenient exam dates	4	8%
No expiry of results	5	4%	The tasks looked easier	7	6%	Prestige	4	8%
Prestige	4	4%	Prestige	6	5%	No expiry of results	4	8%
Exam duration (longer)	4	4%	Speed of results	4	3%	Exam duration (longer)	2	4%
Speed of results	3	3%	Exam duration (longer)	2	2%	The tasks looked easier	1	2%
The tasks looked easier	0	0%	All levels tested (not pass/fail)	2	2%	Speed of results	0	0%
Exam duration (shorter)	0	0%	Exam duration (shorter)	1	1%	Exam duration (shorter)	0	0%
Total	112	100%	**Total**	115	100%	**Total**	50	100%

Table 4 – Top 3 certifications taken by respondents and their motivations, given in absolute and relative frequency

The data in Table 4, presenting motivations both with their relative and absolute frequency, reveal a slightly different approach to the three certifications by test takers. The ‘other’ answers for each certification were coded and the main themes were added to the above list. The additional themes include ‘proposed in high school’, ‘prestige’ and ‘proposed by my university’. ‘Proposed in high school’ often meant that the English teacher, a particular credit program, or the school encouraged students to take a certain certification, which was at a reduced price. ‘Prestige’ refers to the perceived quality of the certification or the overall popularity it has, assessed by the amount of international universities and institution that accept it. ‘Proposed by my university’ is quite self-explanatory and it was inserted as a separate category from ‘specifically required by my university’, as the students took it not as an entrance requirement, but because their university offered courses and exams. As reported in the table, the B2 First (FCE) was first and foremost taken because a teacher or the high school of the respondent proposed it, which is directly linked to lower cost, the second motivation. This occurrence moves ‘specifically required’ to a third position, followed by ‘preferred testing methods’, thus following the motivations referring to all certifications. The same can be said for the C1 Advanced (CAE), with a switch between the first two answers, and more balanced relative frequencies; it could be explained by the fact that the advanced exam is not necessarily common in high schools, as it might only be proposed to students who have a good level of English, usually in *licei linguistici* (as it emerged from the teachers’

[27] By university/employer/government.

interviews) and want to access university with a certificate at a higher level. It is interesting to notice that both certifications had some occurrences (albeit low) of ‘prestige’ and ‘no expiry of results’ – an advantage often identified for Cambridge certifications. Whereas IELTS was mostly taken because it was specifically required by the respondent’s institution, while the rest of the motivations remains the same. IELTS has been chosen because of its prestige, too – an answer that was not in the original set – and because it was proposed by the university, which often offers free courses, hence the ‘cost’ factor. As an added feature, two respondents specified that IELTS was their preferred choice because there is a single test for all levels and it is not a pass/fail exam, which would be the case for Cambridge certifications.

Overall, the results reflect that test takers tend to choose based on convenience, which might refer to external factors (acceptance of certain certifications, cost) or to the preference of methods, duration, and general approach. Some of these motivations were identified as advantages in the teachers’ interviews, which mainly referred to Cambridge certifications.

3.3.2.6 Past certifications: authenticity and reliability of results

While many researchers have focused on the authenticity of certifications, a topic prominently discussed and of interest for certification boards themselves, it is not the main focus of this research, insomuch as a necessary step that leads to questions in section IV about possible features of a certification of ELF. Given that one of the items specifically asks whether an ELF certification should use authentic materials, it was deemed necessary to ask respondents about the authenticity of materials of certifications already obtained. The results are shown below.

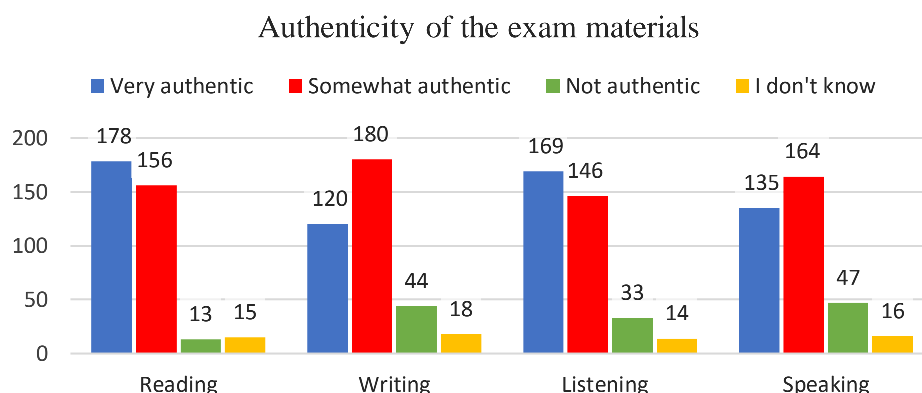


Figure 11 – Degree of authenticity of the exam materials, divided by task

The materials taken into consideration in this question refer to the four language skills, given that tests are usually divided into these categories and they would be unambiguous for all respondents (cf. 3.3.1.2 for the previous version of this question and the reasons for its change). The four items read ‘a) Reading-comprehension tasks; b) Writing tasks; c) Listening tasks; d) Speaking tasks’ and they were to be graded on a three-point scale of authenticity, with the additional option of ‘I don’t know’, which served the purpose of discouraging inaccurate responses if the participants were unsure about their judgments. As Figure 11 shows, all tasks were considered somewhat or very authentic by the majority of respondents, with a total of 362 respondents per item. Moreover, a similar proportion of respondents (around 4-5% for each category) answered ‘I don’t know’. A closer look reveals that the reading materials were considered the most authentic by respondents, with almost 50% of respondents marking them as ‘very authentic’ and a close 43% as ‘somewhat authentic’. Similarly to reading, the listening materials were considered mostly authentic (47%), although to a slightly lesser degree, favouring the ‘not authentic’ answer that from a frequency of 13 raised to 33 (in proportion, from 4% to 9%). This perceptible difference could be related to the representation or under-representation of different accents and varieties in the listening portion of the exam. It is to be expected that materials concerning the reception of language are considered more authentic than those related to production, because, while reading or listening materials might be extracted from some real-life source (or mimicking real life), the written and oral production is necessarily artificial in tests – be it for the setting, the time constraint, the topics, the testing conditions, and the high stakes of the performance. Indeed, this is reflected in the judgments on the authenticity of the writing and speaking materials, whose ratings on ‘very authentic’ decreased to 120 (33%) and 135 (37%) respectively. For both items, a close half of respondents deemed the materials ‘somewhat authentic’ (50% for writing, 45% for listening), while a noticeable minority chose ‘not authentic’ (around 13% for both). In order, the least authentic materials were thus found in the speaking tasks, immediately followed by writing, and to a lesser degree listening; as stated above, the reading-comprehension materials were generally considered very authentic. To better understand exactly what was considered not authentic in the production tasks, one has to look at the open question responses. The most inauthentic task was considered speaking, with some of the comments explaining that the topics and the setting usually felt uncomfortable and unnecessarily artificial; while a special mention was dedicated to students who took the

TOEFL exam, who complained about having to speak to a microphone and not being able to interact with another human being at all. By way of example, here are some responses pertaining to speaking:

> ‘You are asked to talk forcibly about things, pretending to have a certain opinion, it does not feel authentic.’
>
> ‘I found speaking very stressful, because you have to come up with ideas, that is the most difficult part.’
>
> ‘In the speaking section you often need to describe a photo but in real life a lot of terms you use in the exam are pretty useless.’ [28]

Concerning the writing part, test takers often criticized the topics, which were found to be unrealistic or too academic, while also expressing doubts about the type of task required, especially concerning the IELTS graph commentary. Some examples from the comments that help contextualize these topics:

> ‘If I remember correctly, writing tasks were like "write a letter or a postcard". Even if I do think that these may be useful in some kind of circumstances, nowadays, these kinds of needs are less and less popular. Maybe some tasks could be revised a little, and offer some "updated" version of the classic "write a letter to your friend".’
>
> ‘In the IELTS the first writing task had to do with describing graphs. The graphs were confusing and there wasn’t much to say. Additionally, I don’t think it evaluates whether someone is a good writer or not.’
>
> ‘Because no one in real life talks about the pro and cons of having your house filled with mirrors. It looks to me that some of the topics were almost surreal, they were probably chosen just to check on one's ability to use or not use certain grammatic forms.’
>
> ‘The writing tasks did not allow for much flexibility in terms of writing. It almost feels like you have to write in the way they want, and that is all. That does not evaluate the writing skill accurately.’

The listening materials were sometimes found not authentic as not representing real conversations or native accents, and other times as extremely authentic, as they were extracts from podcasts, radio interviews and so on. Reading materials were generally considered authentic.

Peculiarly, a respondent brought up the use of ELF in their life as the reason for rating some materials as not authentic:

> ‘The classes I've taken had too much focus towards scholastic English. I think they might be similar to what students study in England, but I have to say that I've never used that type of writing or speaking. First because I write in English only in social

[28] These and all subsequent extracts are left unaltered and presented as they were written in the questionnaire responses.

> network, so I don't have to use a higher language. Second because, at the moment, I hardly speak English, and when it happens I always find a way to communicate with the other person without using a difficult construction of the phrases. It's easier for me to speak in a simple way and the other person has more possibilities to really understand what I' saying.'

All in all, some problems arise when talking about task materials, which tend to be perceived by test takers as too artificial or academic, with topics sometimes detached from real life use, although not all respondents seem to feel this as a problem.

To elicit a clear answer on the perception of the validity of test results, given the identified problems, the following question asked how well the certification score reflected the respondents' ability to use English on a five-point Likert scale, both for their everyday life and their academic or professional environment.

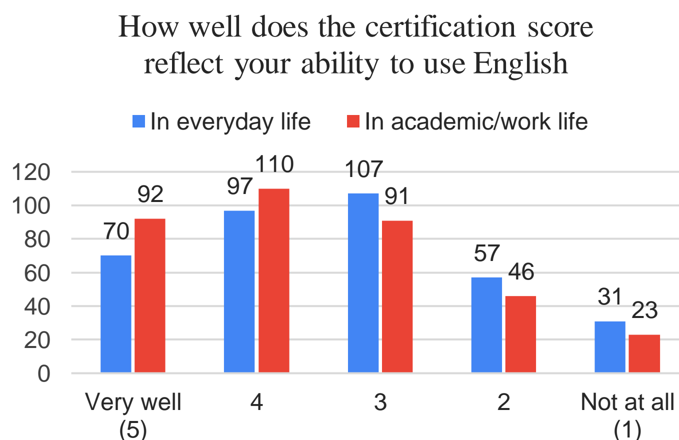


Figure 12 – Ability of the certification score to represent respondents' academic or everyday use of English

As can be seen in the figure above, the evaluation of the degree of reliability of test results seems to go from neutral (3) to high (5), while just a small percentage of respondents chose the lower numbers on the scale. It is immediately clear from the graph that respondents perceive certification scores to better represent their English in their academic or professional life rather than in their everyday life. More than 30% of respondents said that the scores reflected their ability to use English in their academic/work life fairly well (4), and a similar proportion (25%) answered very well or they are neutral about it. In their everyday life, they perceived that the score was only somewhat representative of their ability to use English, with almost 30% of respondents voting '3'; all in all, answers still leaned towards a fairly good evaluation (4). The relative frequencies of very well (5) and not so much (2) were quite similar for everyday life – 19% and 16% respectively – while they had a more than a 10% difference when

talking about academic/work life. From the data, it is clear that certifications tend to test more academic skills, usually focusing on writing, rather than everyday life skills, which concern oral interaction, communication strategies, accommodation to the interlocutor. These results seem to confirm that certifications are strongly based on formal environments and do not necessarily entail that a test taker with a good score is capable of communicating effectively, an issue that will emerge again in the second part of the study.

3.3.2.1 Past certifications: usefulness and (dis)advantages

The following question on the section focused on whether it was useful to obtain a language certification, as shown in Figure 13.

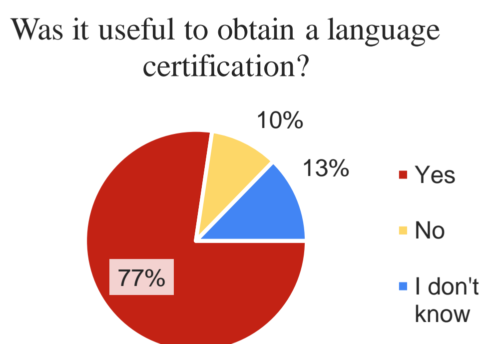


Figure 13 – Respondents' perception of the usefulness of the certification obtained

The aim of the question was to assess the perceived usefulness of having a certification, not considering its effective representation of one's real abilities, but solely if obtaining one lead to any benefits. The results show that an overwhelming majority thought it to be useful, while similar groups of respondents either did not think so or did not know. As presented in section 3.3.2.5, the strongest motivation for taking the test is that certifications are required by universities or employers; it may thus be expected that they prove useful in granting access to a university program, to a job interview or for a career advancement, as well as other benefits. To have a wider perspective on its usefulness (or not), respondents were asked to pinpoint any and all advantages and disadvantages they encountered in taking a language certification, as presented in the next paragraphs.

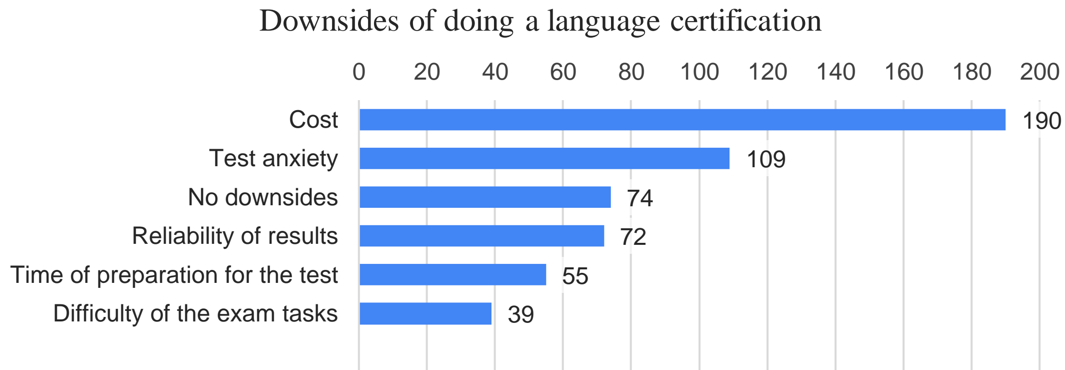


Figure 14 – Disadvantages of doing a language certification

Figure 14 shows the disadvantages of doing a language certification identified by test takers. The results are shown with their absolute frequencies, as respondents could choose multiple answers. The main downside found by test takers was ‘cost’ (190 occurrences), followed by ‘test anxiety’ (109) and ‘reliability of results’ (72); while 74 participants did not find any downsides. Cost can be a huge downside when taking a certification, especially if the certification is specifically required and therefore inevitable; for this reason, as analyzed when talking about motivations for taking the test, many respondents took advantage of free options provided by their high schools or universities – this was later confirmed by the high school teachers. Test anxiety is a common problem that relates to high-stakes tests; it is not an issue easily resolved, as it revolves around the individuals who take the test, even though it could be alleviated by the testing conditions. It could be argued that test anxiety is associated with how much the test tasks and topics relate to real-life situations and are therefore authentic, because less authentic tasks might feel less familiar and only connected to how well the test taker is trained in passing exams, rather than to perform in conformity to their real abilities – an issue that, again, came up in the teachers’ interviews. The issue of test anxiety could then be linked to the reliability of results, in the sense that respondents who believed that test results did not represent their real skills, might also have experienced anxiety in relation to tasks that they perceived as artificial and unrealistic. This kind of perception is common in test takers, although not explored in depth in this study, and one respondent encapsulated the concept fairly well:

> 'Sometimes I had the feeling that I was studying how to complete a task and not how to improve my English. I believe that my English skills did not improve during the course, but that my ability to complete the tasks did.'[29]

Other themes that came up from respondents who chose the 'other' open option are the prestige of particular certifications and their recognition by institutions (a theme already prominent in the motivation section); the fact that certifications are not equivalent (one might seem easier than another); and issues relating to cost and expiration dates. Regarding this last issue, two respondents expressed opposite views in a structured manner, maintaining important points when arguing in favour or against a two-year validity of results:

> 'The fact that once you have it, you have it forever. My certification, I got it in 2009. If I had not used any English since then, I would be that level by certificate, but probably not in reality. So I would brag on my CV my level (or a higher level) which I got after an intensive session of training with a competence-collapse in the short-term period. So, I would prefer a renewable certificate, as the driving licence: every X years, if you want to keep it, you re-do the test.'[30]

> 'The TOEFL, and some other exams are only valid for 2 years, which is the downside to those exams. In my opinion, due to the nature of knowing a language as well as the costs of these exams, all language certificates should be valid forever, or if not forever, their validity period should be extended to e.g. 5 years.'

The two quotes explain succinctly the main pros and cons for having an expiry period for certifications: while a certification that has no expiration date after a while ceases to represent one's actual ability to use English, thus being deceptive to possible employers or school boards, it is nonetheless not very feasible to repeat a test every two year – were it necessary for different reasons – because of its effort in terms of money and time. The question seems one without an easy solution. Although some prospective employers might look favourably towards one's ability to demonstrate their knowledge rather than a certificate obtained more than two years earlier, many public institutions require certificates that are still valid. However, even for certificates that have no expiration date, such as the Cambridge ones, it is highly unlikely that they might be accepted as proof of linguistic knowledge by universities after more than 2 years.

The following and last question of the section focused on the possible upsides of doing a language certification, as shown below.

[29] This extract is taken from the 'other' option of question II.9 of the test takers questionnaire.

[30] Ibid.

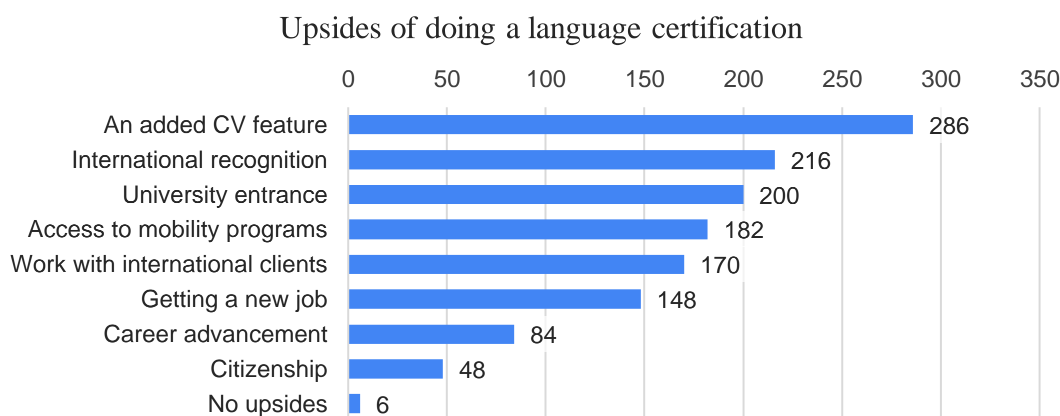


Figure 15 – Advantages of doing a language certification

The strongest advantages identified with taking a certification are ‘added CV feature’, ‘international recognition of results’ and ‘university entrance’. Giving the high participation of university students, it is only natural that answers related to higher education are so prominent, while added CV feature might be an advantage recognized by all participants, thus its position as first of the list. To confirm this, the upsides were divided based on whether participants were students or not: the first three upsides were the same in both groups, revealing that many non-students are probably ex-university students. The two groups differed from the fourth item onward, with non-students putting ‘ability to work with international clients/colleagues’ in the fourth position, followed by ‘getting a new job’, which is not surprising, given that non-students probably have or are searching for a job, thus it being more relevant for them. Other upsides were ‘career advancement’ and ‘obtaining citizenship’, while a negligible number or respondents did not find any upsides. In the ‘other’ column, the additional theme identified by respondents was ‘personal satisfaction’, pertaining to the urge of wanting to prove oneself, a sign that certifications also have a rewarding value – once again, a strong motivation confirmed by the teachers’ interviews.

After having explored the attitudes towards certifications in general, the following section of the questionnaire focused first on the use of ELF and lastly on an ELF certification, presented in the next chapter.

3.3.2.2 Use of ELF: context

Section III of the questionnaire was oriented at determining the respondents’ real life use of English and their attitudes towards different aspects of ELF, with the goal of

gathering data on their perceptions and to have an introductory set of questions that could elicit respondents' reflection on what they actually do when using ELF and what they consider important in interaction.

Figure 16 shows a graph of the interactions in English that respondents experienced in their lives.

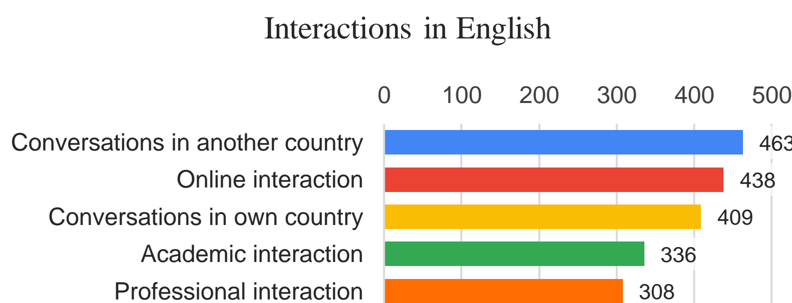


Figure 16 – Respondents' interactions in English in their lives

The main uses of ELF happen when visiting foreign countries (463), a fact to be expected as English is in fact the world's lingua franca, but just as many interactions are located online (438) – a fact that confirms that internet, social media and instant messaging are shaping language and social codes. Following the emerging online global context, there are occurrences of conversations in respondents' own country (409), which could include tourists, foreign friends, etc., and to a lesser degree, academic (336) and professional interaction (308). It is important to notice that, for example, the academic interactions include students from different fields of study, of whom only a small proportion were language students (124 in total). This could relate to the programs at international universities that welcome international students, professors, and scholars. Inferences cannot be drawn from the occurrences of professional interactions, as there is no information about the different career paths of respondents, but it is still significant that 308 of them have interactions in English during work, especially because 80% of respondents (419) live in their country of origin. Again, this could entail an internationalization of professional environments, but more data need to be gathered. Overall, the majority of participants seemed to have interactions in ELF in their countries, in foreign countries and online, which suggests a pervasiveness of English in the population's everyday life. The next section focuses on the attitudes towards these interactions and ELF.

3.3.2.3 Use of ELF: native standard

Participants were asked to choose a statement between ‘your English should be as close to a native speaker's as possible to avoid misunderstanding’ and ‘you can communicate successfully despite using non-native features’ in relation to their experience in using ELF, defined as the interaction with NNSs.

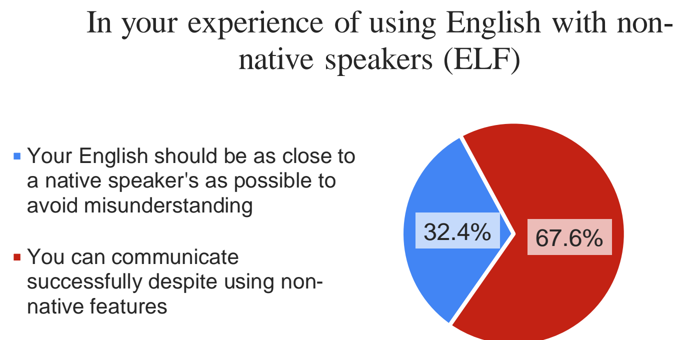


Figure 17 – Respondents’ evaluation of whether ELF should adhere to native standards

The question was formed trying to be as unbiased as possible, as not to influence respondents’ opinions; it also had two opposite statements with no third option available with the intent to polarize the answers, so that respondents had to choose one side. The obvious disadvantage of such a question is that it cannot be argued that all respondents who chose a particular answer fully agree with it, but rather that they tended to agree with it more than the contrary. With this in mind, Figure 17 demonstrates that a strong majority of participants (68%) believed that it is not necessary to adhere to native speakers’ standards and instead there can be successful communication when using non-native features. This surprising result already shows the main attitude towards ELF, although it is not a thorough representation of respondents’ opinions. The following questions offer a wider perspective into understanding the many facets that entail attitudes towards ELF.

Question III.3 asked respondents to identify the characteristic that, more than others, deters comprehension in oral interaction; respondents could only choose one answer, the most important to them, and the results are presented below.

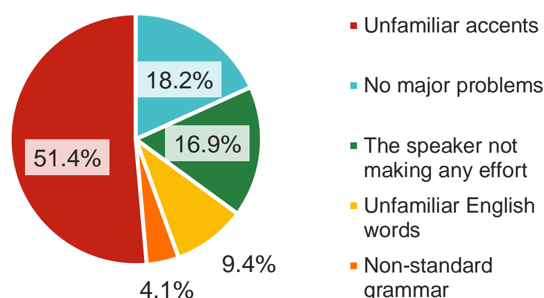


Figure 18 – Difficulties in comprehension as perceived by respondents

Amongst the options, ‘unfamiliar accents’ was chosen by the majority of respondents (51%), the second was ‘I don't have any major problems in comprehension’ (18%), with a close ‘if the speaker does not make any effort to help me understand’ (17%), whereas the options ‘English words I don't know’ (9%) and ‘non-standard grammar’ (4%) had very few occurrences. 18% of participants did not find any major problems in comprehension. It is relevant to note that – in oral interaction at least – unfamiliar accents pose a serious threat to successful communication, while non-standard grammatical forms or unfamiliar vocabulary do not seem to deter comprehension. This can be explained by the fact that the third-to-last option was ‘if the speaker does not make any effort to help me understand’, which is deemed more important than a perfect grammatical correctness or even vocabulary accuracy, both of which can be simply bypassed by accommodation strategies and a negotiation of meanings. In this regard, the speaker that does not make any efforts to help the interlocutor understand what he means is not a successful communicator, because resolving ambiguities or misunderstandings seems to have a more prominent role than the errors themselves. The difficulty then lies with unfamiliar accents – ‘unfamiliar’ does not necessarily mean non-native, as well as it does not mean difficult accents or ‘bad’ accents. ‘Unfamiliar’ puts the matter on the interlocutor’s hands, because he or she is not familiar, not trained in hearing a particular accent; it also implies that successful communication is the responsibility of both interlocutors, that in order to understand each other, they have to accommodate to each other, using strategies that allow them to be on the same level and speak the same language.

3.3.2.4 Use of ELF: communication strategies

Communication strategies are considered the most important part of ELF interaction – and within reason, given that people with different linguacultural repertoires not only have a whole different set of words and concepts to draw from, but also do not necessarily share social norms, non-verbal expressions, cultural references, and other important aspects of communication. The next two questions focus on the perceived use and importance of those communicative aspects, assessed by test takers on a five-point Likert scale.

Communication strategies	**Repetition**	**Slowing down**	**Paraphrasing**	**Simplification**	**Gestures**	**Smiling**
Very frequently	19	65	151	129	157	161
Usually	101	183	216	188	141	181
Sometimes	248	178	118	132	116	118
Rarely	124	81	31	59	82	36
Not at all	33	18	9	17	29	29
Total	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**

Table 5 – Communication strategies used by respondents when talking in English with a NNS (frequency)

Question III.4 investigated which communication strategies were used by respondents when talking in English with another NNS, here presented in Table 5 for lack of space. Six strategies were explored, here given with percentages:

- Repetition: used ‘sometimes’ by most respondents (47%), ‘rarely’ by 24%, ‘usually’ by 19% and the rest on very low frequencies.
- Slowing down: used equally ‘usually’ (35%) or ‘sometimes’ (34%) by respondents, with ‘rarely’ and ‘very frequently’ chosen by less respondents (15% and 12% respectively).
- Paraphrasing: it was used ‘usually’ by 41% of respondents, ‘very frequently’ by 29% and ‘sometimes’ by 22%.
- Simplification: mainly used ‘usually’ (36% of respondents), and to a lesser extent ‘very frequently’ or ‘sometimes’ (both 25%).
- Using gestures: it had 30% of respondents answering ‘very frequently’, 27% ‘usually’ and 22% ‘sometimes’.
- Encouraging attitude (e.g. smiling): used ‘usually’ by 34% of respondents, ‘very frequently’ by 31% and ‘sometimes’ by 22%.

Considering the above scheme, the most used strategies were, in order, using an encouraging attitude, using gestures, paraphrasing and the simplification of vocabulary. These communication and non-verbal strategies are those identified in ELF interactions. They tend to be used either by the speaker, where one might feel insecure or not know how to express a concept and thus resort to these strategies to get the message across, or at the communication level, where paraphrasing or simplification of vocabulary could be the effect of the interlocutor asking for clarification, in an interactive exchange of information and meanings, thus pertaining to accommodation. ‘Repetition’ was used sometimes to rarely, and ‘slowing down’ usually to sometimes, demoting them to less used; this could be because they tend to be strategies associated with lower levels of proficiency (respondents were supposed to be at least a B1). While slowing down might help if someone’s accent is difficult to understand by the other person, repetition does not generally help. Again, it is not a matter or saying the ‘right’ words, but of making the other understand the message, so resorting to paraphrasing or simplification might be more effective than simply repeating a word – in fact accommodating to the interlocutor.

Respondents were then asked which features were important to be a successful communicator in English today, also rating them on a five-point Likert scale; the results are presented in Table 6.

Successful communication	**Native-like pronunciation**	**Grammatical accuracy**	**Fluency**	**Non-verbal language**	**Communication strategies**	**Accommodation**	**Intercultural communication**
Very imp.	52	98	201	111	128	205	196
Sometimes imp.	116	199	189	155	208	191	146
Somewhat imp.	164	166	105	153	132	94	123
Not very imp.	138	51	26	85	48	27	44
Not at all imp.	55	11	4	21	9	8	16
Total	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**	**525**

Table 6 – Perceived importance of different features to be a successful communicator in English today

There were seven features of a successful communicator that were presented to respondents:

- Native-like pronunciation: it was deemed ‘somewhat important’ (31%) and ‘not very important’ (26%) by respondents, although a fair percentage chose ‘sometimes important’ (22%).
- Grammatical accuracy: mostly considered ‘sometimes important’ (38%) or ‘somewhat important’ (32%).

- Fluency: considered ‘very important’ by respondents (38%) and ‘sometimes important’ (36%), then progressively decreasing.
- Effective non-verbal language: respondents valued it as ‘sometimes’ and ‘somewhat important’ (30% and 29%), immediately followed by ‘very important’ (21%).
- Communication strategies (repetition, paraphrasing...): strongly considered ‘sometimes important’ (40%), ‘somewhat important’ (25%) or ‘very important’ (24%).
- Accommodation (making adjustments in how you speak based on your interlocutor's reactions): considered foremost ‘very’ (39%) or ‘sometimes important’ (36%).
- Intercultural communication (taking into account the culture/s of the people speaking to you): considered ‘very important’ (37%), to a lesser degree ‘sometimes’ (28%) and ‘somewhat important’ (23%).

Given the relative frequencies per each feature, the most important were identified in accommodation, fluency, and intercultural communication. These results show a strong preference for cooperation with the interlocutor, by taking into account the speakers’ culture when communicating, and conversation flowing at a normal pace. Communication strategies fall a bit down the list, deemed sometimes important, along with grammatical accuracy and non-verbal language – strategies that were confirmed to be used by the previous question. The least important feature was native-like pronunciation, which was found mildly relevant by respondents, again confirming judgments about native standards made for question III.2 (Figure 17). Overall, it seems that respondents think that adapting to one’s interlocutor and trying to make each other understood might be the best way to ensure a successful communication in today’s world.

3.3.2.5 ELF certification: possible features

After having explored participants’ opinions about communication strategies and accommodation, as well as towards grammatical correctness and native pronunciation, section IV finally focused on the characteristics of a certification of ELF. Question IV.1 asked them whether they agreed with statements regarding possible features of such certification.

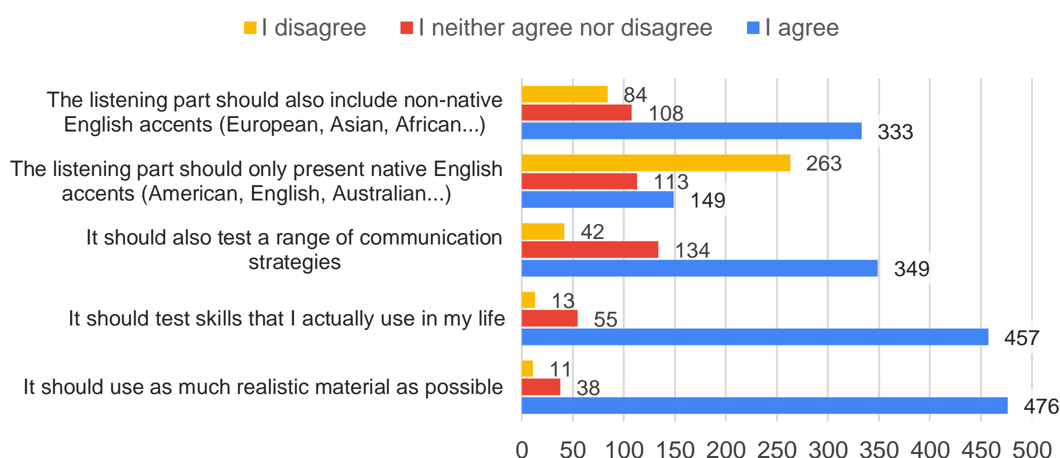


Figure 19 – Respondents' agreement on possible features of an ELF certification

Figure 19 shows that the features that obtained the most approval were 'it should use as much realistic material as possible' (91% or respondents agreed) and 'it should test skills that I actually use in my life' (87%). These seem straightforward statements with which people would generally agree, although it is relevant when compared to the issues found for the past certifications, i.e. non-authenticity of materials or tasks, not representing one's real-life skills. In this perspective, the strong agreement with these statements outlines a request for future certifications to improve their methods and materials. To a lesser degree, participants agreed with 'it should also test a range of communication strategies' (67%), substantiating the importance attributed to communication strategies in ELF interactions (see 3.3.2.4), while a growing percentage was neutral about it (26%). The last two categories relate to accents in the test materials, namely 'the listening part should only present native English accents (American, English, Australian...)' and 'the listening part should also include non-native English accents (European, Asian, African...)'. A certification with only native accents was refuted by 50% of respondents, although 28% agreed with it instead; on the contrary, a certification including non-native accents was warranted by 63% of respondents, while around 20% were neutral about it. These two statements, taken together, show a clear preference for non-native accents to be included in the listening materials of an ELF certification. In the broader context of the respondents' use of ELF, it could be correlated with the difficulty they identified with unfamiliar accents and importance attributed to adapting to the interlocutor.

3.3.2.6 ELF certification: validity of results and preference

To conclude section IV, judgments on the validity of results and a preference for which type of certification were required from participants. The results are shown below.

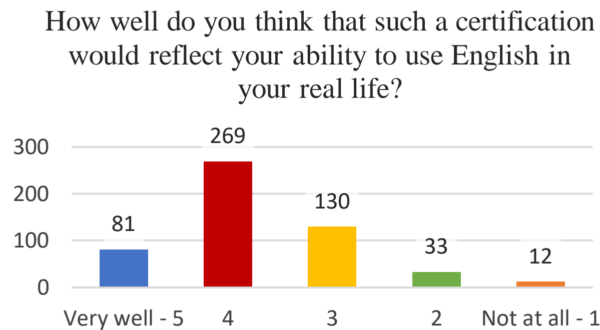


Figure 20 – Ability of an ELF certification to represent respondents' real-life use of English

Figure 21 shows the degree of representation of real-life language use that a certification of ELF would have in the respondents' opinion. Half of the respondents chose '4', meaning fairly well, while a quarter of respondents chose the neutral option. If we compare the results to those shown in Figure 12, it is clear that participants who took a certification in the past thought it to represent their real-life abilities generally worse than a possible ELF certification would do, with scores 3 and 4 evenly distributed and a preference for the neutral option. Based on participants' own judgments, an ELF certification would be more suited to present authentic materials and real-life English.

Lastly, they were asked whether they preferred a traditional certification of English or a certification of ELF.

Would you prefer to obtain a traditional certification of English or a certification of ELF, if both were equally recognized?

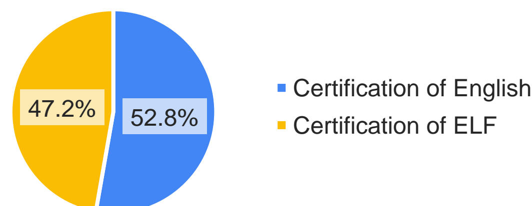


Figure 21 – Respondents' preference for either an English or ELF certification

As Figure 21 shows, there was a slight preference for a traditional certification of English (53% against 47%), although to better understand the choice, an analysis of the comments in the following open question was done.

After having chosen either an ELF or English certification, respondents could expand their answer, if they wished to do so. The ensuing 146 comments were coded on an Excel spreadsheet and a category was assigned to each theme, for a total of eight macro-themes. To offer an overview, they were summarized, along with their absolute frequencies, in the table below.

	THEMES		**F**
1.	**Certification of English**		3
	Not useful (–)		2
	Topics: repetitive or forced (–)		2
	Focus on grammar and pronunciation	Positive (+)	23
		Negative (–)	7
	Does not reflect real-life abilities (–)		4
	Qualities	Appropriate (+)	6
		Familiar (+)	3
		Prerequisite for teaching (+)	2
	It includes proficiency in ELF (at higher levels) (+)		6
2.	**Certification of ELF**		6
	Useful or relevant	Always useful (+)	20
		Only for non-English institutions (–)	1
	Topics/materials: realistic (+)		6
	Focus on ELF as a tool for communication (+)		27
	Mainly focused on speaking	Positive (+)	3
		Negative (–)	2
	Useful to find a job	Professional or academic career (+)	7
		Only professional career (–)	1
	Acquisition of real-life/soft skills (+)		17
	Qualities	Fair (+)	1
		Reliable (+)	6
		Flexible (+)	1
		More difficult, inclusive (+)	14
		Easier (+)	3
	It does not necessarily imply a good English level		2
3.	**Standards**		
	Standard of ELF	Need for a worldwide standard (+)	3
		Impossible to define a standard (–)	3
		ELF perspective (+)	1
	NS standard	Necessary (+)	12
		To be abandoned (–)	1
4.	**Recognition of results**		6

	Traditional certifications have more prestige/internationally recognized (+)		9
	Stigma around an ELF certification (–)		2
	An ELF certification would have more prestige (+)		1
5.	**NS/NNS**		
	Inclusion	Of NNS accents (+)	14
		Of NNS teachers (+)	1
	English speakers	NS are not the majority	7
		NS/NNS communicate differently	3
6.	**ELF/global English**		
	English needs to be practiced		3
	ELF is the English encountered in real life		8
	ELF is not well known (not proposed in class)		1
	Culture	ELF has no cultural attachment (–)	4
		ELF is multicultural (+)	5
7.	**The two certifications should co-exist**		6
8.	**Don't understand the difference or need to know more**		19
Total			**284**

Table 7 – Themes identified from respondents' comments to open question IV.5, with corresponding frequencies

In Table 7 are shown the 8 macro-themes found in the respondents' comments. Each comment presented at least one theme, but most had more; out of 146 comments left by participants, only 66 had just one theme. Given that they were asked to comment on why they chose an English or ELF certification, it is only natural that the first two categories concerned certifications.

For a traditional certification of English, the main theme was positive (reported in the table as +) and linked to the fact that these certifications focus on grammar and good English, which was considered extremely important. Other themes were its familiarity, suitability for teaching, and the conviction that such a certification already included proficiency in ELF. Some meaningful extracts from the actual comments are:

> 'I think that you should first learn proper English before adapting it to your audience, it makes it also a lot easier to use.'
>
> 'Even though English is used around the world with different accents we need common understanding in terms of pronunciation and grammar.'
>
> 'I believe that having a good use of the English language, which is certified by a standard English exam, more or less includes having the ability to be a successful ELF speaker. On the other hand, being successful with ELF does not necessarily entail being successful with (standard) English.'
>
> 'I think it is important when studying another language to learn it in the most accurate way possible.'

> 'I think that through experience you can achieve an "ELF level" more easily than you could achieve a "proper English level". I would prefer to know deeply the language even if I had to use only 20% of that knowledge in everyday life. Moreover, I fell that I can communicate successfully with most of people who speak English, but when it comes to native speakers I know my abilities are not enough.'

> 'Because I think that it's more important to first have an "original" education/training path of the language with its formal rules and only than, when you are able to manage and deal with it, to skip to a next level with even non verbal and intercultural aspects.'

These comments highlight different parts of learning English, including the difference of communicating with NSs or with other NNSs, and a recognition that ELF strategies are useful in real life, but a traditional certification is a starting point for knowing the language, as English can then be adapted through personal experience.
The critical themes emerging from the comments were already covered when discussing past certifications and the authenticity of results, with traditional certifications not reflecting real-life abilities and being too artificial in their choice of topics and methods.

Regarding an ELF certification, respondents were fairly confident that it would focus on ELF as a tool for communication, using more realistic materials, being more flexible, inclusive, reliable and useful for a professional or academic career. These themes are exemplified by the respondents' comments:

> 'Communicate nowadays is not just know the correct verbs or vocabulary. Nowadays we interact with people coming from different regions and countries, the world has evolved and the certifications needs to evolve accordingly. There are the tools to automatically help people to write in a correct English (more or less, as mine) but there aren't tools to help people to communicate in a good way.'

> 'ELF would include both academic knowledge and practical competency, reflecting better a complete picture, general ability to express yourself in English rather than knowledge of English as such.'

> 'Since I mostly interact in English with other non-native speakers I think it would be better to certificate my ELF instead of my proficiency in a language (British, American or whatsoever English) that I rarely use. This is mostly true for the speaking and listening part. For the reading instead I would equally test both texts in ELF and texts written by native speakers.'

> 'EFL would certificate my abilities as a international and multicultural communicator, not only as an English speaker, which I think would be great.'

> 'It's a more realistic certification, especially in the global world we are living today. If it covers a more broad range of resources or materials both in examination and grading, I'd say that'd be more fair as well.'

These comments analyze the benefits that an ELF certification would pose, focusing on its added values of using the English that they will actually encounter in their lives, while testing the ability to use ELF, to communicate internationally, rather than simply

speak English. This kind of perspective was also adopted by a NS who completed the questionnaire, whose comment I choose to report, for it clearly states that NSs should be included in the conversation too:

> 'I am a native English speaker, so I think an ELF certification would actually be more useful for me and a good training exercise for monolingual English speakers (Americans) who are not skilled at intercultural communication.'

This relates to macro-themes 3 and 5, that refer to which standard should be used in testing and to the attitudes towards NSs and NNSs. Regarding standards, a significant group sustained that the native standard should not be abandoned, while a smaller group either warranted the definition of an ELF standard, or endorsed an ELF certification but recognized that a NN standard could never be achieved. These reflections emerged also from the EMI professors' interviews. Nonetheless, the inclusion of NN accents was generally deemed a good idea, considering that NNSs are in fact the majority of English speakers. This pivotal point in ELF discourse was brought up in all phases of the present study, whether by test takers or by teachers and professors, a topic that relates to whom we consider a language to belong to, or if there can be multiple varieties of a language and that all could be considered valid. It seems this is not the case for all participants in the study, but it certainly is for most of them.

Other themes were connected to the perception of ELF (category 6), which was identified as the language spoken today by the majority of English users, but polarized opinions as whether this voided it from a cultural attachment or it included more cultures. As two respondents put it:

> 'English as a language specific to some nations can be associated also with a specific tradition and culture (literary, musical etc.). A "lingua franca" english would be a language without culture (past culture at least) and I wouldn't like that.'

> 'Comprehending other cultures and approaches to the English language would result in a wider understanding and usage of the language.'

This issue with ELF was also brought up by high school teachers of English and will then be discussed in more detail.

Concerning the recognition of results, some participants believed that a traditional certification would have more prestige, with a stigma being attached to an ELF certification. It represents a realistic issue for test developers, as they would need to take into account the attitudes towards English and ELF that are shown in the present research, too. In turn, this conception led to a small number of participants sustaining

that the two certifications should co-exist, as they cater to different needs; a topic that will be further discussed in the next part of the study.

4 The study (part 2): other stakeholders' Attitudes towards a certification of ELF

4.1 High school teachers of English

4.1.1 Method

High school teachers of English were consulted through online interviews of various lengths, in order to obtain qualitative data. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for personal views to emerge if and when needed, and were conducted using video communication platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Google Meet.

4.1.1.1 Participants

The participants of the second part of the study were selected among Italian high school teachers of English. They were identified as important stakeholders, given that they frequently prepare students for language certifications, as well as (in some cases) propose such certifications to school. Moreover, they contribute to the perception students have towards English, which might later influence their understanding of its role and the importance of language certifications.

The teacher interviews were designed for any high school teacher of English or private school director, in an attempt to gather qualitative data with reasonable variety in participants' perception about language, standards, certifications and ELF. For this reason, participants were selected from a variety of schools, including vocational schools, *licei classici*[31], *licei linguistici*[32], from both state and private sectors. In order to gain meaningful data, and due to the project schedule, the intended interview number of participants were limited to around 15 high school teachers and 15 university professors. The participants were approached by different means, mostly by FB posts and e-mail to contacts provided by university professors, Trinity College London and personal contacts. While the FB posts did not have many respondents, the teachers that

[31] Classical high schools

[32] Foreign Language high schools

were contacted by e-mail had a fairly good response rate, resulting in 12 high school teachers and 2 private school directors interviewed.

4.1.1.2 The interviews

The high school teacher interviews were composed of 14 outlined questions, which referred to three main themes (see Appendix 0):

1. Background: the brief preliminary questions focused on their experience in teaching English, the age group of their pupils and whether they had any international students in their classes.
2. Current international certifications: this part focused on the specific certifications proposed at their school, investigating who had decisional power over which certification to choose, the perceived (dis)advantages of such certification and its washback effect. Then – as for test takers – teachers were asked to comment on the perceived validity of test results.
3. Certification of ELF: given that English teachers are already familiar with linguistic terms and tasks, as well as with the general structure of tests, in this part of the interview they were simply presented with some characteristics of a possible certification of ELF. Subsequently, they were asked to comment on the utility and validity of such certification, whether the students could benefit more from a traditional or ELF certification and if they would consider implementing some of these 'ELF aware' features in their courses. Finally, they were given space for any comments or further questions.

As stated above, the interviews were semi-structured; whilst there was a list of prepared questions, participants could offer their own insights on different aspects of the topics, or shed light on themes that might have not been previously considered. As claimed by Gillham, a semi-structured interview is the most reliable method of conducting social research, given its 'flexibility balanced by structure' (Gillham, 2005). The open questions elicit qualitative data, while the structured character of the interview allows for a comparability of results; in order to prompt meaningful responses, the researcher uses some 'probes' to investigate specific points that have been brought up by the interviewee and that seem relevant to the study (ibid.).

The purpose of the interviews was not only to paint a picture of the current views of high school teachers on certifications of English and a possible ELF certification, but

also to consider the school context and let them express problems or setbacks they have experienced with students, school boards, colleagues, textbooks and more. Thus, the participants who were inclined to do so, were left free to voice issues that they felt were relevant to the topic, which is why interview duration varied a lot. The interviews were carried out online[33] for four weeks (7th-30th March). They lasted on average 30 minutes; the shortest had a duration of 17 minutes, while the longest of 78 minutes.

Given the impossibility of meeting in person, participants were made to feel as comfortable as possible, using a flexible schedule and having them choose their preferred platform among three possibilities – Zoom (6 participants), Google Meet (5) and Skype (3). All interviews were recorded with their consent and were carried out in English; the recorded files were converted into audio-only and transcribed. They then underwent 'data reduction' and the results were summarized in spreadsheets (Gillham, 2005).

The interview began with a short exchange where I introduced the project, followed by some fixed questions but also allowing participants to add relevant pieces of information and pose questions themselves. The size of the sample group impedes generalization; however, it allows for more in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and beliefs, which are presented in the next chapter.

4.1.2 Analysis of results

4.1.2.1 Participants' background in teaching

The participants, as stated in the previous chapter, were 12 high school teachers of English. Private school directors were included in this part of the study, as they are the both teachers and the ones making decisions about which certification to adopt in their school. The data from these different stakeholders were presented together – with the necessary distinctions – to compare stakeholders that might influence students' attitudes towards language and certifications. Thus, 14 interviews were presented in total.

The state school teachers mainly taught in *licei*, 5 of them being scientific high schools (*liceo scientifico*), 2 classical (*liceo classico*), and 4 language high school (*liceo*

[33] Due to the ongoing pandemic (see note 16) we were forbidden to meet in person and travel through regions, which hindered face-to-face meetings, but also allowed for interviews with teachers in faraway parts of Italy that would not have been otherwise reachable.

linguistico). Only two teachers taught at a vocational school (*istituti professionali*), but it should be noted that one was also teaching at a *liceo*, while the other recently taught in a *liceo linguistico*. Unfortunately, the sample was not varied enough to grant a degree of representation for different types of state schools; instead it had a strong focus on *licei*. In Italy, *licei* are considered prestigious schools and usually students who attend these high schools tend to continue their education at university. Technical schools (*istituti tecnici*), not represented in the sample, prepare students for either a vocation or for university studies, while vocational schools prepare students to directly enter the work life (Pedrini, 1996). Vocational schools tend to be oriented at practice, whereas *licei* have a mainly academic approach; differences can be found not only in the taught subjects and opposite approaches, but also on the attitudes towards the different schools: vocational schools are attended in higher proportion by pupils coming from the lower social strata and children of immigrants, who might not benefit from family support in reaching a higher level of study (Barban & White, 2011; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001). This situation leads to students of vocational schools being subject to prejudices about their level of culture and education, while students of *licei* are generally regarded as educated and 'achievers'. While this is not intended as a social commentary, the reality of these situations might help non-Italian readers framing the context of the interviews, as teachers mainly came from *licei* and socio-cultural factors are not to be underestimated when investigating attitudes.

The participants had a varied experience in teaching, although the years of teaching tended to be either high or low, with 8 teachers being in state high schools for around 25-30 years, 3 teachers for around 5 years, and only one for 10 years. In general, the majority of teachers had a long experience with teaching, usually in different high schools; most of them had previous experiences in teaching in technical or vocational schools (8 teachers). The 12 participants were Italian native speakers, except for one who was bilingual (Italian and English). On the contrary, the two private school teachers had never taught in a state school and had different life experiences: one was an Italian that traveled throughout Europe and eventually found a passion for teaching, thus founding their own language school; the other was a NS of English who moved to Italy 30 years ago and had been teaching English at various institutions ever since, opening their own school 10 years ago. Regarding the age of their students, the state school teacher tended to have students from 14 to 19 years old, with the exception of 4

teachers who only had either *biennio* or *triennio*[34]. Contrarily, private schools had pupils of all ages, from elementary school to adult learners, including high school students.

4.1.2.2 Certifications done at their school: which one, whose choice and washback effect

Before focusing on certifications, interviewees were asked about the presence of international students or students with different background in their classes. Generally, the 'foreign' students belonged to two categories: some students participated in exchange programs, attending classes in Italy for a short amount of time with the intent of learning Italian, and used ELF; other students either came from other countries or had parents from other countries, but were considered to all effects Italian, being regularly enrolled in the school and speaking a good Italian. This distinction helps identifying the students that are truly considered international, coming to Italy on mobility programs, and students who are mostly Italian, but have another language available to them and different cultural backgrounds. The former students are comparable to the international students found in university courses, while the latter compose what Lopriore calls 'multilingual and multicultural learners' (2016). In general, there were few to none international students in the classrooms taken into account in this study. The private schools had no international students, but had prepared students with different backgrounds.

Concerning certifications, all state schools prepared their students for Cambridge certifications, either PET, First or CAE. The two private schools prepared their students for Trinity certifications, both ISE and GESE. The data, crossed with the kind of certification done at the interviewee's school and the preparatory course teachers, are shown in the following table.

[34] Italian schools are divided into two periods: the first two years are called *biennio* and treat more general subjects, while the last three years prior to graduation (*triennio*) teach subjects relating to specific curricula, called *materie d'indirizzo*.

Type of school	Certification		Course		
	First	CAE	only NN teachers	only N teachers	both
Language school		4		2	2
Classical/scientific school		7	2	3	2
Vocational school	2		1		1

Table 8 – Certification levels and type of preparatory course teachers per kind of high school

Table 8 presents the higher certification level offered at different kinds of school. It also shows whether the preparatory course for the certification was taught only by internal NNS teachers, only by external NS teachers or by both. When the course was held by both internal and external teachers, it was always the case that external NS teachers dealt with the speaking part, while internal NNS teachers prepared the students for the rest of the exam. From the summary table, it is clear that all *licei* also offer the possibility to prepare for CAE to their students, while vocational schools stop at the First certification. This is not an unexpected situation; as explained earlier, students who attend *licei* are more likely to go to university (in Italy or abroad), hence the highest occurrence of CAE done at this type of school; although the advanced certification was introduced only in recent years. On the contrary, students from vocational schools who take a certification are more likely to need it to apply for a job or as an added CV feature. A vocational school teacher who had students from the first two years (*biennio*) was extremely disheartened about the level of their students, who at that stage should have reached the A2+/B2 level, but were found to be lacking in even basic understanding of the language. A separate discourse should thus be made concerning vocational schools, as this teacher's experience exposed a deeper problem related to vocational schools, such as that sometimes students are not familiar with Italian grammatical structures, and definitely less so with English structures. Although this teacher was also a Cambridge examiner and participated in the CELTA program, acquiring skills and strategies to deal with student motivation, they nevertheless felt they were not equipped to deal with an extreme loss of engagement from the majority of the students. This might not be the experience of all English teachers in vocational schools, but it certainly warrants for further investigation to assess the reason for this huge gap and possible interventions to reduce it.

While Cambridge dominates certifications in high schools, 5 teachers said that their school gave the students the possibility of doing IELTS, TOEFL or Trinity certifications: in every case, it was not a successful proposition due to low student

participation rates. The reasons behind it were linked to the expiration date of those exams, as well as the higher cost (Cambridge certifications are usually in part covered by the school) and more importantly they were not perceived as much prestigious by the families and the students. Some teachers related this not to the superiority of the Cambridge certifications, but to their higher popularity in high schools[35], claiming that in order to allow for different certifications to emerge, there would need to be a shift in the majority of high schools, otherwise there would be complaints from families and students.

Regarding the preparatory course for the certifications, language schools appear to always have an external NS who either does the entire course or only the speaking part. The other *licei* also tend to have NSs, although two only employed teachers from the school; vocational schools had internal teachers doing the course, with one school integrating a NS. Motivations for having external teachers often referred to exposing the students to a native accent, while also giving them the opportunity to train their oral production skills with a teacher that – as is implied – is more suited to assess them. Additionally, finding school teachers that were willing to do the course was found to be an issue in some schools, as it is an additional responsibility that not all wanted to take on. A teacher from a language school claimed that the headmaster explicitly wanted NSs teaching the course for certifications. All in all, there is a clear preference for the native standard, especially in *licei*, with language school teachers confirming that they have to uphold to the British standard; in fact students are expected to aim at a British accent and are corrected when they do not use British spelling. Due to lack of data, claims cannot be made with regards to vocational schools. Talking about NSs teaching preparatory courses, a participant observed that 'sometimes Italian teachers have a better perception of certain grammar points which still sound unusual to native speakers', a point that was then strongly advocated by another participant, who stated that being a NNS makes you more empathetic and aware of second language acquisition problems, because 'you know your students, because somehow you think like them [...] you can understand their problems cause we all share the same problem'.

In order to identify the stakeholders who are involved in the decision process in high schools, participants were asked about who proposed that particular certification in their school. As the responses disclosed, it was always a choice made by a teacher or a cohort

[35] Cambridge certifications have a 'for schools' version, that is usually considered easier.

of teachers of the foreign languages department, which still need the approval of the headmaster. In most cases, the Cambridge certifications were chosen more than 20 years ago when the only two available certifications were offered by Cambridge and Trinity, with Cambridge gaining more popularity in high schools and Trinity in middle schools. The choice was either dictated by the Cambridge popularity, the fact that the teacher proposing it had contacts with Cambridge[36] or because Trinity was associated with GESE, which only tests for the oral and aural skills. Although one participant stated that students and teachers do not even consider certifications other than Cambridge, however valid they might be[37]. While teachers chose the certification and *licei* tended to have a twenty-year experience with a particular certification board, these certifications are offered to students, who can request other certifications, may they need them.

All teachers were found be influenced by international certifications in the classroom activities. It was mainly due to textbooks being structured to reflect the Cambridge exam format, with specific exercises modelled on the actual test. Many teachers are now familiar with these structures and those who also prepare the students for a certification tend to propose the same type of exercises in class, using methods and textbook activities. Their teaching is not only influenced by certifications, but also by the CEFR levels and ministry policies. High-stakes certifications were found to have a washback effect, which seems to be maintained by two teacher who were either focusing only on oral interaction because it was the only part required in the graduation state exam, or on essay writing, as it was an important part of certification tests that was not otherwise exercised. As the literature confirms, if a skill or format is present in a high-stake test, it is going to have a prominent role in teaching, eclipsing other important parts of language learning (Erickson & Gustafsson, 2005; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996).

From this data it emerged that high school teachers are in fact the stakeholders who relate to teenagers; despite them being in turn influenced by CEFR levels, the Ministry of Education policies and curricula developers, they hold the advantageous position of

[36] Through personal contacts; one teacher was also an examiner for Cambridge.

[37] In this case, they were referencing Trinity certifications as being well organized, with a good structure and that checked the four abilities quite well.

being in direct contact with the students, thus being able to pass on their beliefs and point out the advantages and motivation for doing a language certification.

On the contrary, private school directors chose Trinity certifications because it was more in line with their teaching approach – as one stated, Trinity ISE and GESE are ‘communicative examinations that were based on people's ability to communicate effectively, rather than a mere […] assessment of their grammar knowledge and memory’. A similar stance was the rationale of the other school director, stating that the focus should be first and foremost on communication and only at a later stage include grammar. They were found to be less influenced by certifications in their teaching, given that Trinity College does not provide required materials, but rather puts the focus on teaching communicative skills in order to pass the exam. Both teachers seemed to have this approach and tailor the lessons to the individual student, which might be a physiological difference between state and private language schools, with the latter having the opportunity to interact with motivated students individually, rather than whole classrooms.

4.1.2.3 International certifications: reliability of results, advantages and disadvantages

The perceived reliability of results was then explored. Just as test takers[38], teachers were asked whether the certification scores reflected the students’ ability to use English in their real lives. Answers were quite varied, with emerging opposite attitudes, and were again coded on a Likert scale to allow comparisons.

Do international certifications reflect the students’ ability to use English in their real lives?

Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Uncertain	Rather agree	Strongly agree
	2	4	4	4

Table 9 – International certifications’ ability to reflect students’ use of English in real life, as perceived by teachers

Table 9 shows that 8 respondents thought that certifications reflected students’ real-life use of English, 4 were uncertain and 2 rather disagreed. To explore the reasons behind such answers, the different attitudes are presented with examples:

[38] See 3.3.2.6.

- Teachers who agreed: they thought that test results were generally reliable. Studying for the test and attending courses is an input for the students to improve and usually there is a noticeable change in their performance. Furthermore, by doing a certification, students are obligated to acquire a certain thought structure, e.g. learning to paragraph. Additionally, students have the opportunity to learn language in context, which seems to draw from authentic materials[39]. On the same line, while it is true that certifications do not reflect the students' use of English outside of school – for example using social media, music, TV series – it is not a flaw as much as it is a way for students to qualitatively improve their English by using the four skills, building vocabulary, lengthening their listening and speaking time, reading and writing to improve future chances of success. Another teacher raised the issue of students that, at university, sometimes have difficulties in passing the 'idoneità linguistica'[40], a problem which would have been solved by taking the certification in high school.
- Teachers who were ambivalent: they sustained that students in fact use English differently in everyday contexts, although it might be useful to learn different registers of the language, observing that sometimes students use a correct but inappropriate English during classroom activities – such a distinction should be learned in school and certifications help teachers do that. At the same time, 'the exam gives you a specific format, a specific range of topics and you might be very good at them, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you can use the language in a profitable way', reflecting the main point made by teachers who did not think results were reliable. On a different note, another participant thought results to be reliable, depending on the certification, but convened that 'a certification is a photograph of someone's abilities in a time and place', so it only assesses performance at that particular moment, being accurate only to a certain extent.
- Teachers who disagreed: two teachers did not think that certification results were reliable. They both stated that certification scores can be disappointing or

[39] This was opposed by a participant to the 'old ways' of teaching language, when it was not authentic at all.

[40] The English exam that all university students in Italy are required to pass. The level is at least B1 for Bachelor's programs and B2 for Master's programs.

surprising, resulting in good students passing with a low mark or non-proficient students scoring highly. The reason is that the course specifically prepares the students to pass the exam, rather than improving their linguistic skills. There is mismatch between fluent students, who might be good at communicating and less so at grammar, and students who perform well in grammar tests but fail to communicate in real-life situations. The certification score does not distinguish between the two, favouring students who have learned ‘test-passing’ strategies – the ‘tricks’ to have a high score. This was exemplified by a teacher’s eloquent response:

> ‘Preparing for an exam means going straight to the core of the exam. In my opinion, it has nothing to do with the use of language. It has to do with the practice for the exam, which are completely different stuff. [...] Not all my students who took the B2 are actually a B2. They were good enough to do the exams. They practiced hard. They knew all the tricks. They knew all the methods. They knew how to manage time. They knew which kind of grammar was required. They knew how to apply the right structures in the right moment, and they did best. They practiced a lot with the listening, which is completely different than facing a conversation like this. Their performance in the exam was, for example, completely different from the performance they did when we were talking in school about literature [...] I don't think [the test] totally reflected the real use of the language or the knowledge of the language. It's about practicing more than knowledge.’[41]

Overall, some teachers recognized a mismatch between students’ real-life use of English, their normal performance and the test results. For about half of them, this was not a problem, because the preparatory course offered the students the possibility to improve their English, identify appropriate registers, and acquire a new thought structure – these skills would not have been otherwise practiced. Participants who tended to be critical of the reliability of certification scores sustained that the course mainly prepares students to pass the exam, not improving real-life skills, but learning to perform well in that particular format, managing test-related issues. Overall, certifications were seen as generally positive starting points for the students’ future, and even if they did not accurately represent their abilities, they could have great advantages.

Participants were asked to comment on possible advantages or disadvantages of doing a language certification, referring to those with which they were familiar. A

[41] This and all other citations are direct quotes from the teachers’ interviews.

comparison can be made with the questionnaire results, found in 3.3.2.1. The advantages are presented in the histogram below.

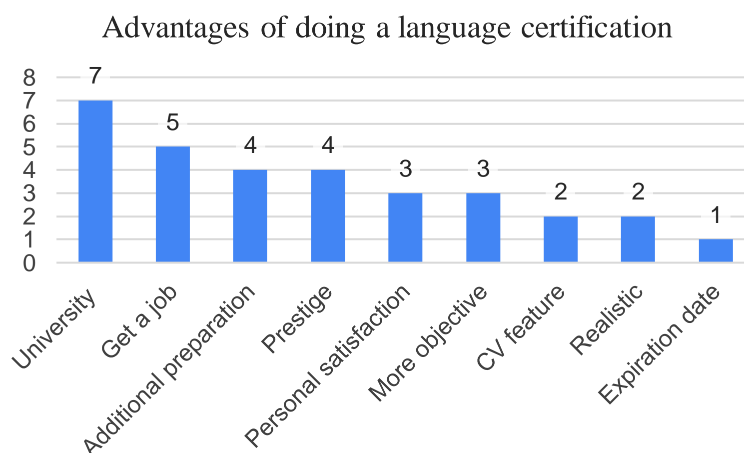


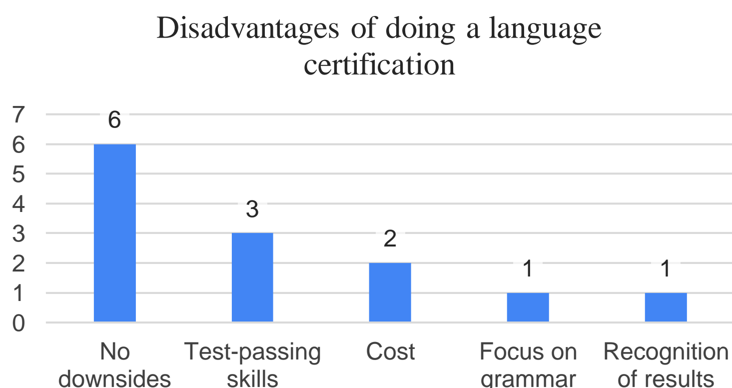
Figure 22 – Advantages of doing a language certification, as identified by high school teachers

The main advantages referred to the students' future, such as applying for university programs or jobs and adding a CV feature. A certification was defined as a 'passport' by one of the participants, exemplifying the potential of a certificate to open doors for young people. These advantages also emerged from the test takers' questionnaire. In addition, test takers identified 'prestige' as a motivation for taking Cambridge certifications, which is a theme that appeared with teachers, too. Prestige is linked to the international recognition of such certifications and how they are perceived by families and students. Another advantage identified by teachers was reflected by the test takers' motivation for obtaining the certification in the first place, namely 'personal satisfaction'. Teachers were confident that students' sense of achievement played an important role in doing the certification and recognizing its importance, which seems in part reflected in the questionnaire. From the interviews it emerged an additional theme which test takers did not identify[42], which in the graph is marked as 'additional preparation'. Many teachers thought that the preparatory courses prompted students to generally improve their English, as depicted in the previous question, exposing students to a variety of structures and forms and letting them experiment with academic writing

[42] Admittedly, it was not part of the provided options, which might explain why it was not chosen by respondents. At the same time, questionnaire participants who wanted to add answers that were not on the list, did so in the 'other' section, which was not the case for this particular theme. It can thus be disregarded as not important for test takers, although results might be different if the questionnaire were to be administered to high school students.

– this was considered important by teachers, as many recognized that the Italian school system does not prepare students for it. On the same note, two teachers found that the materials used in the course and the test were authentic and reflected real-life English, which was considered an advantage. The expiration date was considered an advantage by only one teacher, while test takers identified it as one of the main motivations for taking a Cambridge certification[43]. More importantly, an unexpected theme relating to the school system emerged, i.e. objectivity of results. Three participants found that the certification scores were in fact impartial, as opposed to their own assessment of students' performance. This was traced to teachers being more subjective and biased when assigning grades, with the same mark having a different weight based on the teacher. In contrast, an external institution was considered unbiased and trained to evaluate the actual level of students, according to the CEFR.

On the contrary, few disadvantages were found by teachers. There might be a self-explanatory reason behind it, given that participants in the study were usually preparing their students for certifications, and generally believed in the importance of certifications, while students themselves – the actual test takers – might be more prone to find disadvantages. Indeed, the data show this discrepancy. Test takers found many disadvantages, i.e. cost, test anxiety, reliability of results, time of preparation for the test, difficulty of the exam tasks. However, a significant minority found no downsides. The teachers, instead, more the most part found no downsides, three criticized the 'test-passing skills' aspect of doing a certification, two identified the cost as being excessive, one the prominent focus on grammar and another the recognition of results, stating that not all universities accept them. These results are shown in the graph below.



43 See 3.3.2.5.

Figure 23 – Disadvantages of doing a language certification, as identified by high school teachers

Through a comparison with the questionnaire responses, both groups identified cost and reliability of results as an issue that might be encountered when doing a certification. Although, regarding cost, two teachers specifically mentioned that, while students might find it a downside, they did not think it was too expensive. While it is true that the school often has funds pertaining to certifications, generally a part of the cost weight on the families and it can be a financial burden, however low – this was explained by a teacher who discouraged students from taking the B1, B2 and C1 certifications during high school, as they might find use for the highest levels and not go through an economical and time-consuming effort three times in a few years. Additionally, students with low-income families might not have this opportunity; although a participant discarded this issue, due to the possibility of paying for the course with the 18-app[44] bonus as of 2016. While the bonus is considered a great help from teachers and families, it is only applicable to students in the year of their 18th birthday, which would not cover for students wanting to take a certification before their last year. Overall, teachers identified many advantages for taking a certification, exposing the numerous benefits for the students' future lives. They were less inclined to find disadvantages, which might relate to them being in the position of proposing certifications, while the students did in fact identify some ulterior disadvantages related to certifications.

4.1.2.4 ELF certification: usefulness and reliability of results

After having explored the advantages and disadvantages of certifications with the high school teachers, the interviews finally focused on a possible ELF certification. The questions pertaining to this certification were again coded on an agreement Likert scale and summarized in Table 10.

[44] The 18-app is a bonus of 500€ devised for students turning 18 years old and usable for cultural spending (theater, cinema, concerts, museums, electronical supplies for school and language courses). It was instituted in 2016 by the then Renzi government and has been maintained for 4 years.

ELF certification	Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Uncertain	Rather agree	Strongly agree
Useful	3	1	3	2	5
ELF features included in the classroom	1			7	6
Ability to represent students real use of English	2		3	3	6
Acceptance/preference of an ELF certification	1	2	4	4	3

Table 10 – Summary of respondents' opinions about a possible ELF certification

As evident from the summary above, teachers' attitudes towards an ELF certification were varied. First of all, interviewees were presented with the main features of a possible ELF certification[45] and had to comment on its utility. Half of the teachers (7) agreed with this proposal, 3 were ambivalent and 4 were against it. To investigate the different reasons for such variety, the prominent themes supporting an ELF certification are presented, with relevant extracts from the interviews:

- NNSs are the majority of English speakers. Teaching and testing should be adapted to this
    - useful for going to study or work in non-Anglophone countries
    - students should be exposed to NN accents

> '[There are NSs] then the rest of the world uses English as a lingua franca. So we focus on adjusting and adapting ourselves to them, which is okay, but consider that they should be the one to adjust to us because we are more than them.'
>
> 'When you start working, you have to be able to cope with people from all over the world.'
>
> 'If they are continuously exposed to RP then they are not able to understand Eng. spoken by other nationalities.'

- more realistic, thus more useful in real life
    - use of authentic materials
    - focus on communication rather than grammar

[45] See Appendix 2 – Interviews

> ‘In school we have to teach grammar, but what counts at the end of the day is that people are able to express what they think, even though the way is not the most correct one. But what counts is to be effective in communication.’

> ‘[we should identify] the typical mistakes in writing that people that use English as a lingua franca do. So maybe you should start not considering them as mistakes [...] having a rank of the acceptable – not mistakes – but characteristics of those who speak English, even if they do not come from English speaking countries.’

- speaking focused on being understood rather than standard pronunciation

> ‘In ELF you can focus on what makes the person understandable and that's it. [...] Everything that doesn't affect the meaning is acceptable in ELF.’

- importance of communication strategies

- it would offer a good alternative to current certifications

> ‘There is a big gap in the market for that. [...] for international relations, education, finance etc. the language has become English.’

These points highlight that an ELF certification is indeed necessary, because it would cater to the actual needs of today’s global society, where NNSs of English are the majority of English users and one constantly comes in contact with people from all over the world. In this perspective, effective communication is the goal, and common mistakes that do not hinder comprehension should not have the same weight on assessment that they have in current certifications.

Participants who expressed some doubts about an ELF certification raised different themes:

- some of these features are already present in current textbooks/certifications
- an ELF certification would be more flexible
- a focus on ELF lowers the prestige of English as a language
- need to know more (first time hearing about it)

The three teachers who were ambivalent about this certification thought that while it would prove useful, further consideration has to be done regarding certain aspects, for example the implications for English as a language – this topic will be discussed later, as it emerged a lot in the ‘disagree’ group. Other ambivalent responses stemmed from the fact that it was the first time that they heard and thought about an ELF certification, so they had not yet formed a definite opinion. The sensitization of teachers about ELF was found to be of paramount importance in the literature and it can cause teachers to re-evaluate the importance of ELF-aware classroom practices, becoming more flexible and attentive to the students’ multilingual and multicultural needs, as well as being able

to actively manipulate ELT textbooks in order to forge ELF-aware activities (Lopriore, 2016; Lopriore & Vettorel, 2015; Pavone, 2015; Sifakis, 2019).

The four teachers that declared disagreement towards a certification of ELF expressed the following themes:

- students should learn ‘good’ English

> ‘In a liceo linguistico, there is a great focus on trying to learn good English as much as possible.’

- students should imitate NS accents
    - they can be exposed to NNS accents

> ‘That's English too, but we're always working to improve their pronunciation, to make it more British’

- there is no standard for ELF
- ELF has no culture attached to it

> ‘I don't think we can give it the same value we give to a real language’

- ELF should not lower the bar for correct English

> ‘English is everywhere, so there is no excuse not to be good at it.’

- if applied to independent users, then it’s not necessary, as they already know the ‘correct’ English
- it might be more useful for adults, not students

These points, some of which also emerged from the test takers’ questionnaire, focus on native accent as the norm, conceptualizing ELF from a ‘deficient’ perspective (Jenkins, 2006, 2015), seen as just a simplified version of English. Some teachers believe that ELF would not be necessary for independent users of English, thus discarding the role of communication strategies and negotiation. Similarly, issues about ELF not being attached to any culture were raised by participants of the present two-part study, as ELF is a vehicular language that has no connections to a literature or history. Once again, ELF can be argued to be the language of the scientific literature today; in interaction, it includes the multilingual and multicultural repertoires involved in the conversation (Mauranen, 2006). All in all, these concerns depend on the perspective with which one approaches the language. A participant eloquently highlighted the Italian’s ‘obsession’ with grammar, because ‘we were raised in the nightmare of making mistakes’, which often causes students to stop and correct themselves when they realize they are making

mistakes, not understanding that it would be better to continue if it doesn't affect the performance. As they put it, 'it's a habit which is difficult to get rid of', a stance that also emerged from the professors' interviews.

Regarding the use of ELF-aware practices in the classroom, most of the teachers said that they were interested in it, with only one teacher strongly against it. The majority of the teachers agreed that communication strategies would be useful to teach in class, with one teacher claiming that they already do 'debate class', which helps the students interact with others and acquire communication strategies. Furthermore, all teachers agreed on the importance of exposing students more to NNS accents and authentic materials, although a teacher raised the issue of not doing so at the elementary level, which might only confuse beginners. Everyday skills could also be implemented in the class, helping students navigate university websites and discern different registers. Contrarily, one teacher stated that, while students improve their communication when attending the course with a NS, in their school the standard is British English and students should only work towards that, considering that they are later assessed based on their ability to correctly use British pronunciation and spelling; this participant taught in a language school. From the data, it appears once again that in some schools, especially language schools, there is a definite focus on correctness and native standards, but at the same time teachers acknowledge the need for students to be prepared for their future real life, which inevitably involves communication mainly with other NNSs.

When asked about the ability of such a certification to represent the students' real-life use of English, teachers were mostly lenient towards an agreement (9), although 3 were uncertain and 2 argued against it. The teachers who though the certification would be more pertinent to real life praised its authentic materials, its flexibility and the fact that students would feel less pressure to conform to a standard and actually be judged for their abilities. A teacher expressed some doubts with regards the non-verbal communication that students would learn if they were exposed to NNSs and had a NN teacher – this participant believed that students need to acquire the 'body language' of NSs, again a point in favour of ELF not having a culture and the need for assimilation when learning English, especially for language students.

Ultimately, the teachers had to state whether they would propose this certification to their students or discard it. While most teachers agreed on the usefulness of ELF practices, 50% of them either were ambivalent about it or did not think it would be

appropriate for their students. Regardless of their preference, 11 out of 14 teachers believed that it would cater to different needs and that an ELF and a traditional certification should co-exist, working in parallel to provide an option for all NNSs. The different categories that would benefit from an ELF certification were varied, though. Three teachers thought that certifications would best fit vocational and technical school students, with one further specifying that even in *licei* it would be more fitting to curricula other than classical or foreign languages. The rest of the teachers believed that, since its utility depends on the actual life goals of students, an ELF certification should be proposed only to adults, teenagers being too young to have a clear path in mind. Two teachers thought it more appropriate for university students, while the rest (6) would recommend it for workers whose job might require to be fluent in international contexts (white collars, politicians, CEOs, etc.). Another issue discussed by participants was the possible recognition or prestige of such a certification, an issue closely linked to institution, university and employers' policies. This topic was found to be rather important also to test takers, who surely would not want to take a certification that lowered their possibilities of being accepted to university or a job. In this regard, a teacher stated that certifications offered in high school are connected to university policies, with schools trying to help students fulfill university requirements. In order for the certification to be accepted, a teacher sustained it should be 'spendable as a B2/C1 certificate [..] it needs to represent a benefit for students' career, university and life, even internationally [..] it needs to be appealing to students'. For it to be appealing, another teacher stated it could have a significantly reduced price, since cost was found to be a major factor playing in choosing a certification[46].

An advantageous point identified by the three teachers, two of whom were also private school directors, was that an ELF certification could open up a new market by taking into consideration the needs of all NNSs, to which traditional certifications have been partly blind. On this note, the vocational school teacher stated that they would actually prefer an ELF certification for their students, as they have a low level of English, and that this certification would be more flexible, saying: 'if I have an alternative form suitable for my students, why not?'. Furthermore, not only would this certification be suitable for lower-level students, but it would be more inclusive for students with difficult backgrounds who do not have the opportunity to 'go to summer

[46] See 3.3.2.5.

schools and exchange programs and don't have access to Netflix' to practice their English as much as other students do. In this perspective, the certification would be 'democratic', an opportunity for them to 'take part in something European'. While this stance should not be considered the only reason for taking an ELF certification, it certainly would offer a new range of possibilities.

4.2 University EMI professors

4.2.1 Method

This part of the survey consisted in interviews of university professors who use English as a medium of instruction (EMI). They were consulted through online interviews in order to obtain qualitative data. As was the case for high school teachers, the interviews were semi-structured – which allowed for personal views to emerge if and when needed – and were conducted using video communication platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Google Meet.

4.2.1.1 Participants

In the second part of the study, university EMI professors were also interviewed. Although they might not be the ones who generally choose what certifications are required for university students, they have insights both into academic life in general and on how their students use English. While high school teachers of English offered an understanding of the preparation required to obtain a language certification, university EMI professors can illustrate the linguistic needs of their students from a non-specialist point of view. At the same time, they fill a privileged position where they can identify the shortcomings of the current certification system: on the one hand, they have a personal experience with an international environment – being part of an international academic context, while often also having spent a period of time abroad (generally in Europe or the US) – which gives them a longitudinal perspective into how the 'international university' has changed over the years; on the other hand, they can pinpoint the students' linguistic abilities, what kind of English they use or are required to use and whether they lack some basic competences which might be important to succeed in the course itself or in academic life in general. For all these reasons, university EMI professors were considered important stakeholders and included in this study. Their relevance extends to the possibility of comparing these results with the test takers questionnaire, which was filled mainly by university students.

A total of 17 professors were interviewed, in line with the number of high school teachers. They were selected both using university websites (which have contact pages for each professor) and through contacts at the University of Ca' Foscari. They were

contacted via e-mail, with a preliminary one that served as an introduction to the purpose of the study and the researcher. With a response rate of almost 50%, the professors that answered came from five Italian universities. Although the kind of university attended was not asked for in the test takers questionnaire (given that it was also open to non-students), they were asked what their field of study was. When selecting university professors, the proportion of the different academic fields in the questionnaire results were taken into account, trying to balance the fields so as not to collect opinions which might refer only to a specific field or to a broader academic approach (e.g. humanities v. applied sciences). While the small number of professors interviewed does not allow for statistical inferences, it was useful to vary the quality of the answers[47].

4.2.1.2 The interviews

The outline of the EMI professor interview (which can be found in full in Appendix 0) was divided in three sections:

1. Background: the first section focused on their experience in teaching in English and the international component of their students (which varies a lot in university courses, depending on the type of course, university, etc.).
2. Course linguistic requirements: this section was the most important in terms of information collected, as it focused on the course linguistic requirements, especially on how the students are required to use English, and the professors' perceptions of the students' level of English (which reflected their own views or training on language) as well as in which way grammatical errors or different standards/accents are specifically taken into account in grading. This section was fundamental in depicting the current state of the international Italian university from the perspective of NNS professors.
3. Certifications: The last section was aimed at gathering opinions on the validity of current international certifications and towards some features of a possible certification of ELF. Participants were asked to comment on

[47] For specific figures on the different fields of teaching, refer to Section 4.2.2.1.

the utility of certain aspects of an ELF certification, which were explained in a down-to-earth way[48] because most EMI professors are not aware of the current test structures or familiar with some linguistic terms. For this reason, the ELF features were broken down into five components relating to the four skills, plus a special focus on communication strategies, given their importance in ELF interaction. Finally, participants were asked to express their preference for either a traditional or ELF certification for their students.

Similarly, in the teacher interviews participants were given the space to communicate their personal opinions towards these topics, as well as to add meaningful considerations or to frame the discussion from different angles. Some of the professors who previously asked to be provided with a context for the interview, came 'prepared' and actually had notes on their students or their own linguistic conduct, which was extremely useful for this study and is assessed in detail in the following results section.

The interviews, like the teacher interviews, were held in English[49] and carried out online over a four-week period in March. Their average duration was 25 minutes, with the shortest lasting 13 minutes and the longest 40 minutes – they were designed to be a little shorter than the teacher counterpart, which was the case for most of them.

They were held, as for the other interviews, on three online platforms of the participant's choice: Skype was the most used (11 participants), the rest was done on Meet (4) and Zoom (2). The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, converted into audio-only and transcribed by the researcher. Finally, the results were summarized in a spreadsheet, focusing on the salient pieces of information and comments.

[48] Professors were presented with realistic examples of different features, with comments that related them to their experience or opinions (explored in the previous section), leaving room for a back-and-forth with the aim to mutually understand each other. It is important to state that all of them asked clarifying questions, thus successfully negotiating meaning and accommodating to their interlocutor, i.e. using ELF. For a complete list of the features, see the outline of the interviews in Appendix 2 – Interviews.

[49] Both the interviewer and the interviewees were NNSs and all but one shared the same L1, i.e. Italian. The reason for doing the interview in English was to have results comparable to the test takers' questionnaire and to remain faithful to the participants' own words without losing meaning in translation. Of course, all participants could have chosen Italian, were they more comfortable that way. It is significant that none of them did, especially since they teach in English but are not language scholars. It could mean that academia has become truly international, with professors having to constantly communicate in English with colleagues and students, while writing and reading papers in English, *de facto* using ELF in their everyday life.

4.2.2 Analysis of results

4.2.2.1 Participants' background in teaching in English

As stated in the chapter above, participants came from five different Italian universities, namely the University of Bologna (6 teachers), University of Venezia (6), University of Padova (3), University of Trento (1), and LUISS[50] (1). Of the six teachers from the University of Bologna, three were from a specific program of the campus in Forlì. In the table below there can be found the subjects of teaching for the 17 professors, linked to the academic fields as presented in the test takers' questionnaire.

University	Subject taught	Field of teaching
UniPd[51]	Psychometrics	Social Sciences
UniVe[52]	International Economics	Social Sciences
UniVe	History of International Relations	Social Sciences
UniBo[53] (Forlì)	International Relations	Social Sciences
UniPd	Clinical Psychology	Social Sciences
UniTn[54]	Comparative Constitutional Law	Applied Sciences
UniVe	History of Latin America	Humanities
UniVe	Economics	Social Sciences
UniBo	Engineering (Computer Science)	Applied Sciences
UniPd	Developmental Psychology	Social Sciences
LUISS[55]	Comparative Public Law	Applied Sciences
UniVe	Economics	Social Sciences
UniBo (Forlì)	Business	Social Sciences
UniVe	International Politics	Social Sciences
UniBo (Forlì)	Economics	Social Sciences
UniBo	Philosophy of Law	Applied Sciences
UniBo	Constitutional Law	Applied Sciences

Table 11 – University EMI professors' subjects and fields of teaching

As can be seen from Table 11, participants were contacted from a variety of university departments – Psychology, International Relations, Economics, Law, and Engineering –

[50] An independent, private university.
[51] University of Padova
[52] University of Venezia Ca' Foscari
[53] University of Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum
[54] University of Trento
[55] Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli

to ensure a representation of different perspectives. Two of the university programs (one in Venice and one in Forlì) were specifically designed for international students, thus usually having half of the students who were not Italian, and taught subjects related to international relations. A description of this type of program was gracefully stated by a professor who taught a Summer School for European Integration in the Balkans: 'a rotation of people coming from different countries teaching to students that very rarely were mother tongue English'[56]. The rest of the professors taught in different departments where courses were held in English and therefore attracted international students (either for mobility periods or properly enrolled), while having a higher number of Italian students. The professors' academic fields mirrored the fields of study of the test takers' questionnaire[57]: if the language students are not considered, as the professors were specifically not language teachers, the largest three fields in both set of results were Social Sciences, Applied Sciences, and Humanities. The proportions can be seen in the following graphs.

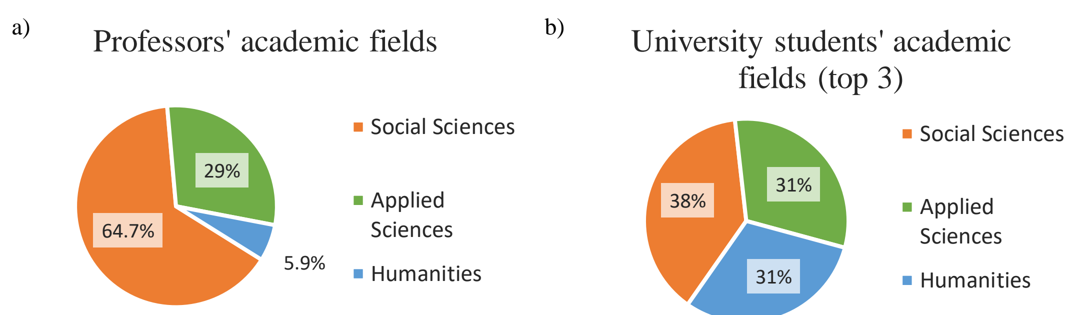


Figure 24 – Percentages of professors' academic fields (a) and students' top 3 academic fields, minus Languages (b)

For the students only the three largest academic fields were considered (minus Languages for the reasons explained above). While the proportions are more balanced in the questionnaire results, the professors' academic fields respect the order, although they are unbalanced in favour of the Social Sciences. This disproportion can be explained by the larger number of questionnaire respondents (here a total of 200 are represented), while the self-selection of professors was more difficult to control for, given the very small number of participants.

[56] Extract from the professors' interviews.

[57] See Chapter 3.3.2.4

Concerning their background in teaching courses in English, their experience varied a lot, both in terms of years of teaching, courses taught and experiences abroad. All participants were NNSs with Italian as their L1, except for one professor who was a NN English speaker from another European country and another who was bilingual (English and Italian). While all participants taught at Italian universities, most of them had prior experiences abroad studying and/or teaching. Out of 17 professors, 9 disclosed that they spent at least one year abroad; of those, 5 lived in the US for a period of time, 3 in the UK (one of those also lived in the US), and 3 in an European country[58] (one of those also lived in the US).

For the academic year 2019-2020, the majority of participants (15) taught Master's courses, with 6 of them also teaching a Bachelor's course and one a PhD course, while the remaining 2 only taught Bachelor's courses in English. This information influenced the answers regarding the classroom's use of English, as it is reasonable to assume that undergraduate and postgraduate students have a different experience in using English, or even to be interactive in class at all, as was the case presented in some of the interviews; additionally, the Italian university system usually requires an entrance level of B1 for Bachelor's degrees and B2 for Master's or PhDs, although it might be higher for some particular programs. The participants also had different experiences in their years of teaching, as summarized in the charts below.

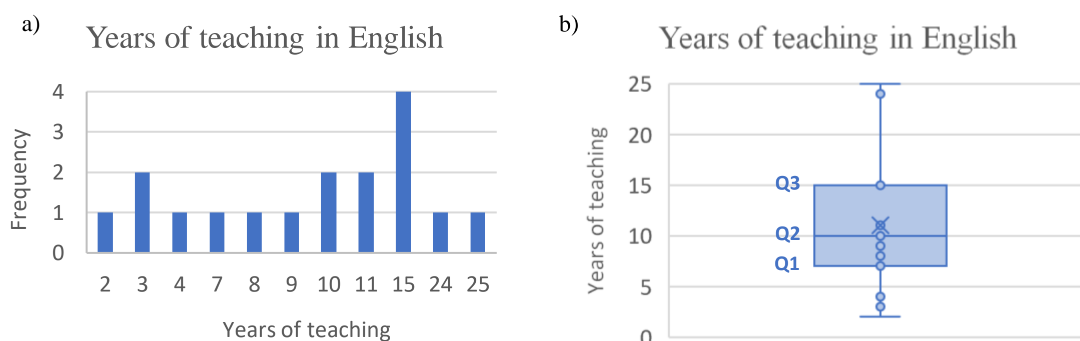


Figure 25 – EMI professors' years of teaching in English, given with frequency (a) and quartiles (b)

Figure 25 a) shows a histogram with the frequency per year of teaching and it can be easily seen that most of the participants taught for around 10-15 years, with the mode set at 15 (four professors). The box plot in Figure 25 b) shows that 50% of the data fall

[58] Countries, for those who wanted to specify it, such as Germany, France, Bosnia, and Sweden.

between 7 and 15 years (IQR = 8), with the median at 10 years and the mean at 11. For the purpose of this analysis, while half of the professors have been teaching in English for about a decade, it is important to keep in mind that some have an experience of just two or three years, while others as long as 25 years. Professors with a longer experience might have an overview of how teaching in English for a NNS has changed in past decade(s), while younger teachers with less experience in teaching in English might have a 'fresher' perspective and be more open to new methods; of course, one does not imply the other. The variety of the data serves to attain a degree of representability that, while by no means being exhaustive, could at least present different perspectives.

4.2.2.2 Course linguistic requirements: levels and students' use of English

The next section of the interview focused on the linguistic requirements for the course and the students' interactions in English. First of all, participants were asked about the presence of international students in their classes, so to have a clear overview of how much the course was truly international, as opposed to a class where both the students and the teacher shared the same L1. The answers were varied, as it mainly depended on the type of program the course was part of, as explained in 4.2.2.1. To summarize the data, 10 participants stated that they had around 50% international students in their courses (with the exception of one, who had 95%), while the rest had a few students in their classes, usually around 20%. All courses had European students in the Erasmus+ program and 6 of them included students from all over the world. However, some international students were directly enrolled in the programs, thus not on mobility periods, and two participants regularly have NSs in their classes. In general, all students communicate in English with each other and their teacher, although students who share the same L1 tend to use that when speaking with each other, a fact that mostly refers to the Italian students. Nonetheless, three professors said that they heard groups of students use their shared L1 among each other (e.g. Russian or Chinese), while one professor said that they try to speak in a shared language other than English if that language is available to all participants in the conversation; this professor spoke

Italian, English, Spanish and Russian, and said they tried to adapt to their interlocutor ('I try to use a language if I *can*'[59]).

To understand the students' linguistic behaviour, I asked professors how the students were required to use English when it concerns their course. All the students (Italian and non-Italian) were required to use English during classes and for the exams; a list of the different exam types follows.

Exam type	Frequency
Written exam	11
Oral exam	5
Oral presentation	5
Final essay/paper	3
Group work	1

Table 12 – University courses' exam types with frequency.

As visible from Table 12, the majority of students were required to do a written exam or write a paper, while some professors only required an oral exam. Of the 17 participants, 7 designed courses that required both an oral presentation and a written exam, while one also included group work. Overall, students were asked to exercise the four skills for the courses: reading the course materials, listening to the professors, interacting in class or doing an oral presentation, writing a paper, essay or final exam. Not all students were found to be interactive in class, especially the undergraduate students; the non-Italian professor noticed that Italian students are not prone to interaction in front of the entire class and feel more comfortable in speaking one-on-one or over e-mail. While for all classroom interaction and exams English was required, not all professors agreed on using English for individual interactions. When asked about e-mail exchanges and office hours, the perspective seems to vary. The majority of professors (11) stated that their students need to use English for all communication with them, including e-mails and office hours; if during office hours there are only Italian students, then it is considered acceptable to switch to Italian. The rest of the professors preferred that Italian students write in Italian, or do not care whether they do; two professors believe that communication with Italian students should always be in Italian, if there are no

[59] Extract from the professors' interviews, italics mine.

international students involved. The same participant that stated they often try to speak a shared language with their students, whether it be English or not, considered it 'silly' not to use the best tool for communication at their disposal, in this case Italian for Italian NSs. The main perspectives can thus be summarized in two general attitudes: English should be used by all participants in the course at all times (with the exception of office hours) and English should be only used for interaction in the course, but not for one-on-one communication. The first view entails that English is the only shared language – the only *lingua franca* among all participants – making it unfair for Italian students to be able to use their L1 when personally interacting with the professor (at least in the written form), because the same is not possible for the international students; furthermore, English is the language of the course and thus all communication should follow that format. The second view assumes that language is a tool of communication and therefore, if a more comprehensible language is available to all participants, it should be used or at least accepted. It is significant that the only non-Italian professor required Italian students to always speak Italian during office hours, making it peculiar from this researcher's point of view, as it is a shared language, but not a common L1. The reasons could be varied, for example that the students might feel more comfortable in speaking their L1, or that it is a language that causes less misunderstanding; nonetheless, ELF was only used with other international students.

The following part of the interview focused on the required level for students to attend the course and whether their language was part of the assessment. Regarding the entrance level, in all cases it was a choice of the university or the particular program. In Italy, the entrance level for a Bachelor's program is B1 and for a Master's program is B2; about half of the interviewee stated that they did not know the level required to join the program and the other half stated that students need a B2 level (or higher) to access the course. Whether the participants knew the level required or not, all agreed that the actual level required was to be experienced on the field, i.e. the level that enabled students to follow the course and understand the professor. Out of 17 professors, three believed students' self-selection to work better than any certification score, considering that they do not know or check which certification is presented by the students. The two opposing views emerging from the data show that professors perceive their students to either not demonstrate the required level in practice, or to have a much higher level than that required. Of course, the two views could well co-exist, as different universities and

programs may appeal to students who are proficient users of English[60], while other types of programs might be offered in English but mainly attract local students, whom might not necessarily be fluent in English as much as they should, according to the standard CEFR levels. The professors that specified the perceived level of the students came from different fields, with three Social Sciences professors stating that students demonstrate a lower level than that required for the course (B2), and four that the students were good at speaking English, reaching or passing the appropriate level. Similarly, five Applied Sciences professors were pleased by their students' level of English, while the one from the Humanities field considered their students to have a much lower level. All professors taught a Master's level course. A quick summary of results can be seen in Table 13.

Academic fields	Lower level	Appropriate/higher level
Social Sciences	3	4
Applied Sciences		5
Humanities	1	

Table 13 – English level demonstrated by students per academic field (frequency)

Not all participants specified the perceived level of their students because not all of them were familiar with certifications or descriptors of the CEFR levels. Out of those who did, data seem to indicate that students with a higher level than expected exceed the lower-level users. The professors who thought their students to be proficient in English identified different causes, such as: the course level (advanced) attracted 'good' students in all regards; the presence of students with a language background in their studies; or international students with an excellent level of English, as opposed to Italian students that demonstrated a much lower level. Another participant said that the course was offered both in Italian and in English, so only the proficient and motivated students attended the course in English. Notably, one participant who sustained the opposing view believed the students to have an acceptable level in reading and writing, but to be unable to communicate properly when speaking or doing a presentation. Generally, these findings could indicate that, once the students enter a Master's program, they have acquired enough experience with the language to use it appropriately for academic purposes – be it through courses held at university, mobility periods or interaction with

[60] As ascertained in the interviews, certain international Master's programs tend to attract former language students or international students.

international professors and students. On the contrary, the students who have not acquired the necessary skills, might lack more in the oral and aural component of the language than in the written or academic part, to the point that in oral presentations some students were reported to be competent, but unable to express themselves, thus obtaining a low grade. Of course, mistakes were found not only in speaking, as some participants, when reflecting upon the grammatical mistakes of their students' writings, found them lacking basic structural or grammatical coherence. Either way, the sample is too narrow to make any claim regarding the trend or motivations for these results.

Subsequently, participants were asked to consider their treatment of grammatical mistakes in their students' work, with a reference (but not limited) to written production. All participants said that they did not take into account the mistakes when grading the students' work, however they had different attitudes towards such mistakes. Two groups emerged from the interviews: the 'humble' and the 'policing' professors[61]. The 'humble' category believed that their purpose was only to assess the knowledge of their subject and not the language, also recognizing that their own level of English was imperfect and sometimes they did too make mistakes. The 'policing' category, while still not grading students based on their English level, believed that the students had to be wary of making elementary mistakes, sometimes correcting them or giving errors some minor weight in the final assessment. Of course, the two categories are an extremization that aims at discerning different attitudes; it also seemed that professors in the 'policing' category were more confident that their level of English was high enough to correct mistakes, while the 'humble' professors generally perceived themselves to have a lower level of English[62]. Some participants' instances were found to be in between the two attitudes and were marked as a third, mixed category. The proportion was skewed towards the 'humble' and mixed categories[63], thus constituting a significant majority. By way of example, the different attitudes are here summarized.

[61] Thus named for the purpose of identifying separate categories.

[62] Their perceived level of proficiency generally matched the researcher's impression. However, while some interviewee had a strong Italian accent, dropped the third person -s or sometimes used inappropriate vocabulary, I was still able to understand them. We worked together to repair any communication breakdown, to negotiate different meanings and used all the communication strategies available in human interaction – we used ELF.

[63] 7 'humble' professors, 3 'policing' professors and 7 in-between professors.

The ‘humble’ professors stated:

> ‘I always remind myself that I'm not an English teacher. My task is not to judge their English, my task is to judge their understanding on the topic and their ability to tell what they understood.’[64]

> ‘I’m not there to teach them English, I would not be the best person to teach them.’

> ‘The minimal standard is decency and readability. I would never penalize them for unclear sentences, just ask the student for clarification. [...] They would never be judged for the quality of their English. [...] I am not William Shakespeare [...] I don't ask too much otherwise they would question my authority.’

The mixed category:

> ‘[I] correct them a little bit if they speak very bad, I tend to make some corrections, but my evaluation does not include their knowledge of English, I'm not an English teacher and I would say that my English is not sufficiently good.’

One professor stated that they try to be fair and not take into account the language when grading, but if the level is low it indirectly affects their grade.
The ‘policing’ professors:

> ‘The first few years of teaching, purely linguistic mistakes didn't count (style, grammar…) but over the years I changed my perspective […] because I took several structured courses for professors who teach in English, provided by [the university] itself. I learned that what I was doing was basically wrong, because I was allowed [...] it was a mistake not to pay attention to linguistic mistakes [...] it was correct to give some weight to the use of language. [...] if the sentence is very badly constructed or in a way that really makes understanding the meaning difficult, then that is an example of language which isn’t used appropriately.’

Another professor lowered the mark of a student who entirely discarded the third person -s in the whole essay (deemed 'unforgivable'); while another stated that some grammatical mistakes were taken into consideration, especially in the written text (inappropriate use of language or grammatical mistakes).

Overall, professors mainly agreed that the standard to be considered was not a native standard, but a minimal threshold of comprehensibility; if the students’ level allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic, then it was generally regarded as acceptable, even if the ‘policing’ professors tended to correct the mistakes. The attitude is exemplified by one professors’ answer to the expected level of English for their students: ‘If I can understand what they say, I believe that that is the level that I want. [...] To be able to communicate’.

[64] This and all subsequent quotes are extract from the professor interviews.

Although different attitudes towards the treatment of written grammar mistakes and expected language levels can be found in this sample of EMI professors, generally all participants agreed that the main focus should be on the discipline taught, implying that students should master English well enough to vehiculate their message in a clear and precise way.

An additional reflection upon pronunciation and ELF was mentioned by a participant, who kindly took the time to 'prepare' for the interview by thinking about this topic in relation to his experience as an EMI professor. As it may offer a deeper insight into the complex and ever-changing role of ELF, his insights are presented in this dissertation. This participant identified two distinct problems when speaking ELF, all concerning pronunciation and accents: one with NSs of English, the other with non-Italian NNSs. While NSs had no difficulty in understanding him, because they expect a NNS to communicate differently, he had some problems understanding them, especially if they had 'local American accents'. He ascribed the problem to his non familiarity with local accents, but, reflecting on the matter together, realized that he seldom encountered the same problem with other NN accents. To his understanding, ELF is clearer, different and shared amongst NNSs, while NSs 'think that *their* English is the actual English'[65], implying that they do not make the effort to adapt to their interlocutor. The other problem presented was of the opposite nature, stating that he had some miscommunication issues with other NNSs, who claimed that they could not understand the professor's accent. These NNSs were PhD students usually coming from Asian countries, thus with a significant cultural and linguistic distance from the Italian professor. He believed that they had learnt English with a different accent and they did not expect him to vary that much from their norm; on the contrary, he had no difficulty in understanding them, asserting that 'I try to understand what the person is actually saying, adopting a more explorative approach to the pronunciation, to the meaning of the discourse [...] I focus on the meaning, I don't care about the use of words'. This peculiar account is in line with the shared opinion that English does not belong solely to NSs, whomever they might be, but everyone who speaks it; this attitude towards English emerged from the themes of the questionnaire open question in 3.3.2.6 and embodies refers to the debate of the ownership of English (Widdowson, 1994). At the same time, the professor reasoned on his experience with both NSs and NNSs,

[65] Italics mine.

highlighting a crucial point of ELF, i.e. English used as a *lingua franca* entails that all participants of the interaction should make an effort to understand each other, be it through the use of communication strategies, negotiation, repairing or intercultural awareness. This claim sums up the attitudes of all participants, who, even if they were not specifically asked to account for their ELF interactions, indeed maintained that communication and mutual understanding was the focal point of their courses.

4.2.2.3 Certification: possible features of an ELF certification

Before presenting the different features of an ELF certification to the interviewees, I asked them whether they believed current international certifications to reflect the students' ability to use English in their academic life. Differently from the high school teachers, EMI professors were not familiar with certifications – a fact confirmed by the previous question about the entrance level for the course. Given that they do not personally check students' certifications and they are not required to be acquainted with the different type of tests, the majority of respondents did not make any claims in this regard. Those who commented on the matter (12) touched upon different themes, as follows:

- Having a certification does not necessarily reflect your ability to use English
    - Some people have great scores and yet fail to communicate in real-life situations
    - Only focus on grammar/academic writing, not on speaking skills
    - Could just entail good test-passing skills
- It depends on the kind of certification you obtain, as not all have the same validity
    - Significant difference between students who have and international certification (reliable) and students who passed an exam at CLA[66] (not reliable at all)

In general, only 5 professors answered a conditional 'yes', immediately presenting one of the above motivations to account for students who should have at least a B2, but do not seem to reach it at all. The issues presented in the first point also emerged from

[66] 'Centri Linguistici di Ateneo' are Italian university language centers. They offer language courses and language exams, sometimes giving the possibility of obtaining an international certification through the center.

the high school teacher interviews and the test taker questionnaire, with some additional observations specifically regarding the university setting, as in point 2. In general, even though participants were not familiar with current international certifications (if not from personal experience that might be dated), the majority observed their students' abilities and came to the conclusion that these certifications do not always constitute a reliable indicator of real-life abilities, especially oral skills. One respondent put this perspective in context, reflecting upon the needs of today's pluralistic society:

> 'Formal certifications maybe may provide a reliable indicator of proficiency [...] nevertheless I'm quite aware that using language in a way that makes a person understandable or a kind of use that is profitable in a variety of situations is a different story. [...]There's not necessarily a match between what is [...] demonstrated by the certification and on the other hand, the use of language in a variety of contexts.'

With this in mind, the next section presents the attitudes towards different aspects of a possible ELF certification.

In total, five possible features were presented to the interviewees referring to the four skills and a separate category for communication strategies. Participants were presented with these features and given practical examples or clarifications, when needed. The features were: inclusion of NNS accents and different varieties of English in the listening part; assessment of speaking also based on the use of communication strategies; ability to speak with international phonological features, not necessarily adhering to a native standard; authentic international texts in the reading-comprehension part; writing focused on comprehensibility and not a perfect grammatical correctness.

For comparability of results, the answers were coded into a five-point Likert scale based on the respondents' attitudes towards the different topics. The classification is both based on the concepts they expressed and the general tone, hesitation or certainty with which they expressed themselves, including para-verbal language. It is important to note that EMI professors might have had some experience with certifications but are not language experts. Therefore, as all of them were presented with a possible ELF certification and its features for the first time, many of them insisted that they would need some time to reflect on it or would need to know more. The data are summarized in Table 14 with frequencies, including whether they preferred an ELF certification or not, and then explained feature by feature.

Features of an ELF certification	Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Uncertain	Rather agree	Strongly agree
NNS accents/varieties (Listening)		1	2	2	12
Communication strategies (Speaking)			5	3	9
International phonological features (Speaking)		3	3	3	8
Authentic international texts (Reading-comprehension)	1	2	3	3	8
Writing focused on comprehensibility (Writing)		2	6	3	6
Acceptance/preference of an ELF certification		2	4	6	5

Table 14 – Summary of professors' evaluation of possible features of an ELF certification (frequency)

As clear from the table above, the inclusion of NNS accents was considered a positive and desirable feature by the majority of respondents. Different themes emerged in favour of this inclusion:

- diversity is the reality
    - everybody has got an accent, both NSs and NNSs
    - need to understand everybody
    - EMI professors/students are usually NNSs
    - academic life has a majority of NNSs (conferences, papers, etc.)
- influence on communication in NNS contexts
    - it would help expectations and to eradicate prejudices
    - students would be more flexible in different situations

Some of themes had already been found in the questionnaire and interviews, for example the need to understand everybody, as NNSs constitute the majority of English speakers. Considering the university context, and unless students specifically want to study or work in an anglophone country, most of the people with whom the students would interact are bound to be NNSs, with their own accent and peculiarity, thus making it essential to be able to understand them better. On an additional note, it emerged that even professors might benefit from this, since they have students from all over the world and are usually not trained to understand different accents.

Participants who rather agreed with this feature brought up issues of the added difficulty of including NNS accents and the fact that it depends on the students' goal (whether they want to study or work internationally). The question of whom this

certification would be appropriate for is of paramount importance for the purpose of this study and was already a theme in the high school teachers' interviews, which maintained that it would be beneficial for the test takers' career or for university students.

On another tone were the 'uncertain' and 'rather disagree' participants' answers, which question whether this feature would be important:

- students should focus on a British or American standard
    - British English is the most difficult accent and students should be exposed to it
    - a standard NN accent does not exist
- learn English as well as possible and adapt to different accents as you encounter them

The participants who questioned its utility were focused on the fact that there are many NN accents and it would be impossible to get acquainted with all of them, whereas it might be more useful to learn English the 'proper' way and then familiarize with different accents through personal experience. The same doubts were raised in the other parts of the study, confirming their pervasiveness in language experts as well as in non-specialists.

The second feature, the grading of the speaking part including the ability to use communication strategies, was fairly accepted by participants; none disagreed with the concept, 9 were found to strongly agree with it, 3 to rather agree and 5 were ambivalent. Given that most of the participants tended to agree with this feature, the themes that emerged from all the interviews are presented together:

- need to communicate
    - comprehensibility is the most important goal
    - soft skills should be trained
- take into account intercultural differences
    - ELF can be used to be aware of sensitive cultural differences
- useful for academic life in general or the future
    - also useful for teachers
- useful, but difficult to assess

Participants identified effective communication as the main goal of using ELF, with a need for comprehensibility. One professor maintained that it would be extremely

important to let the students understand that comprehensibility is more important than expressing yourself in the most correct way, especially when speaking; some students fail to communicate effectively because, when they realize they have made an error, they go back and rephrase everything. Just as it emerged from the teachers' interviews (see 4.1.2.4), intelligibility is paramount in communication, making it acceptable to make mistakes that do not hinder mutual comprehension. Professors also reflected on their own production, highlighting that communication strategies were part of their experience and were extremely important when speaking to other NNSs. They said: 'I had to learn some ways that make what I mean more explicit' and 'if the need is communicating, you need to manage the fact that the first time you tried to express yourself they didn't get it, then you need to make your point another way, making it simpler'. The fact that they are themselves users of ELF made them contextualize the different features, realizing whether they were useful or not without being language experts. For this reason, the majority sustained the importance of teaching communication strategies, which would prove beneficial for the future of the students, although one professor thought it impossible to teach them, seeing them as subjective traits of character. Another expressed doubts about how they would be assessed, which would concern test grading scales. Teaching communication strategies was found important not just for students, but also for professors, who have to communicate with NNSs too and would benefit from such a training. Just as the significance of intercultural awareness was identified in the test takers' questionnaire (see Table 6), three respondents stated that 'there are different country-specific ways to communicate' and that a shared contact language between speakers with different L1s is bound to cause misunderstanding, whereas ELF education could promote intercultural awareness by making students aware of sensitive cultural differences.

Concerning the possible use of international phonological features, participants were found to generally agree with it (11), while a few were ambivalent (3) or disagreed with it (3). Of the participants that found it useful, the main themes were:

- communication means making yourself understood, not adhering to a native standard
    - it is perfectly fine to retain an accent
- a 'clean' accent would facilitate comprehension
- ELF would be useful for both NSs and NNSs

The professors that agreed with this feature posit that, if effective communication is the goal, it is not the case that a standard pronunciation (mainly referred to British English) is the most comprehensible one. From the interviews emerged that ‘we all try to imitate the UK or US accent, but it does not necessarily make us more understandable, so probably creating a more neutral way to express oneself is a good strategy’, while at the same time it is considered ridiculous when NNSs try to emulate NSs, when the focus should be on learning ‘ways to make yourself understood’. This was related to their own experience of NNSs retaining an accent, which some of them considered completely normal, ‘there's nothing to be afraid of’. Two teachers believed that a ‘clean’ pronunciation (i.e. more international) would make any accent more understandable, thus facilitating communication internationally. On this note, as in the perspective of communication there is not a ‘superior’ accent, three professors believed that this certification could then also apply to NSs, as they too would have to learn communication strategies, international features and to ‘be more flexible’. This issue was related to the many anecdotes recounted by every professor about the difficulties they had with specific native accents, especially with NSs making close to no efforts in understanding them when they had communication breakdowns, not reported here as not extremely relevant to the dissertation. Just as high school teachers and test takers, the fact that NNSs are the majority of English speakers and the gradual imposition of English as a *lingua franca*, professors too sustain that NSs should be included in ELF teaching and testing, as it is not solely focused on language knowledge.

Other professors (3) were either uncertain with regards to this feature, expressing that they would need to better understand how it would work, or ambivalent, stating that it would be useless to try to sound like a NS, but ‘we should at least try’. The conception behind these stances was that English has its own ‘correct sounds’ and rules.

On this line, the three professors who were against this feature maintained that a standard of ELF does not exist, there are multiple Englishes and thus speakers need a common (native) standard of reference, either British English or American English. The use of different local Englishes would hinder comprehension. This issue should be taken into consideration when determining which phonological features can be accepted if retained. Overall, though, the point of ELF would be to facilitate comprehension, ideally training NNSs to be more receptive to a variety of linguistic and cultural components, while expressing themselves in a way that makes one more understandable

to *all* speakers of English, not just NSs. Nonetheless, the concerns exposed in these interviews should be addressed in a clear manner when proposing an ELF certification.

The use of authentic international texts was accepted by the majority of interviewees (11), while 3 were ambivalent and 3 disagreed with it. The main reasons for supporting the inclusion of authentic international texts related to the need to expose students to occurrences they are likely to find in their academic and everyday life. Some professors identified ELF texts in papers written by NNSs, others with texts from the EU or other international institutions, technical blogs and university websites. As it had already emerged from the teacher's interviews, a professor stated that students should be exposed to English used in different texts, in order to distinguish styles and registers. It is peculiar that three professors had an opposite perception of the quality of English found on university websites: one stated that the administrative and technical university staff is under-prepared to deal with international students, and would need help in improving the university website English; another sustained that there is no need for authentic international texts such as university websites, as they are already comparable to native standard English; a third professor instead said that some university websites are written in an incomprehensible English and that 'I don't think we should make sure that students are skilled to understand English that is too bad'. The last stance was in support of not presenting authentic international texts. Professors who were against the exposition to international texts believed that once a student can understand well NS texts ('the most difficult English'), then they would be able to understand everything else, as NNS texts were considered to be easier to read.

The last feature, i.e. the writing focused on comprehensibility rather than a perfect grammatical correctness, was the least accepted by professors, with only 9 expressing agreement, 6 were uncertain and 3 disagreeing with it. The professors who expressed doubts about not having a strict adherence to grammatical correctness in written production adopted a NS perspective, stating that any mistake in writing should not be tolerated. One maintained that they could agree for their English not to be idiomatic, but not allow grammatical mistakes. It was thus considered important to correct mistakes at early stages, so that they do not fossilize in the future.

The same point was made by professors who were ambivalent in how to treat writing, allowing that this kind of assessment should be reserved to independent users, as an ELF certification would be. One participant claimed that 'there should be some level of grammatical structure, but it doesn't have to be perfect' and another that 'it's

important to deliver a message', although for papers and dissertations it was generally agreed upon that they should feature a polished English. A balanced attitude was exemplified by one participant, who believed that it would be important to give the students tools to structure papers and presentations, perhaps leaving them free to focus on the efficacy of the message rather than a perfect grammatical correctness; at the same time, language should always be improved.

Professors who agreed with focusing writing on comprehensibility still maintained that basic grammar rules should be followed but put content over form, as most of them already do when assessing their students' work. By way of example:

> 'It's hard to trace the line between what is acceptable and what is not […] it would be hard to make a list [...] little things are definitely acceptable, as long as the message is clear and allows me, as a teacher, to understand that you're using the language of the discipline appropriately, so the micro-language is ok, it's used correctly, and the overall message is acceptable and understandable.'

The same principles applied to speaking can be applied to writing too, allowing a simplification and clarification of the writing, as long as the message is there.

It is important to remember that the EMI professors related the different features to the needs of their students and for their classes, not in absolute terms. Thus, these data could help identify strong and weak points of using English in the international university, which might inform test developers about test construct, taking into account the needs of university students or teachers.

Finally, professors were asked whether they would accept or prefer an ELF certification. 11 participants would accept it or prefer it, 4 would need to know more or are ambivalent, 2 are against it. Regardless of their position, 7 professors stated that it would be a matter that university language experts should consider, as they are not concerned with certifications. The professors that were ambivalent about an ELF certification did not want to give a definite answer without considering all the factors, with one professor expressing doubts as to its possible reputation and validity, issues that were also raised by high school teachers. Out of the professors who would accept an ELF certification, 5 would actually prefer it to other certifications. The main motivation for this would be that it would represent better the student's ability to either communicate effectively or to adapt to an international environment. Although one posited that in the long run, a traditional certification would offer more opportunities, as it would hold a more prestigious position. Nonetheless, an ELF certification was

thought to be more practical, granting an understanding of the language but putting the focus on communication. As exemplified by a participant:

> ‘It seems to me that it gives all the skills that are really required in an international university [...] it enhances the ability of the students of communicating effectively and it is the most important thing.’

4.3 Other stakeholders

Other stakeholders were identified with high school headmasters. From the high school teacher interviews it emerged that English teachers are usually those who choose which certification to propose to students, but headmasters need to approve of it and can be considered important stakeholders if a new certification were to be proposed to the school, as could be the case for an ELF certification.

They were interviewed through a short e-mail survey that aimed at collecting a high number of respondents. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 emergency, it proved extremely difficult to reach headmasters in particular. Despite the fact that more than 70 headmasters were contacted with an introductory e-mail requesting their participation, only 9 responded and were willing to participate in the survey. All those who answered expressed an extreme discomfort with the current situation as they were required to solve unprecedented situations. Given the circumstances and the low response rate, results are hereby briefly summarized but cannot be considered significant due to the scarce quantity of data gathered.

Participants were provided a short survey via e-mail, both in an Italian and English version to allow responses even from those who did not feel confident with their level of English and to facilitate responses in a chaotic and trying time.

The questions were as follows (here only in the English verison):

1. In which kind of school do you work? (e.g. state/private school, Lyceum/technical/vocational, etc.)
2. Does your school prepare the students for any English language certification? If so, which one(s)?
3. Why was this particular certification chosen? Who proposes new certifications at your school?
4. What do you think are some of the advantages or disadvantages of such certification?

English Lingua Franca (ELF): the use of English in international contexts; it refers especially to the contact language between non-native speakers.

A **Certification of ELF** could include:

- Using authentic international texts (e.g. newspapers, blogs, university websites, etc.)

- Using both native and non-native accents in the listening part

Focusing on the use of communication strategies when speaking (e.g. repeating, paraphrasing, negotiating ambiguous meanings, repairing communication breakdowns, etc.)

Using non-native examiners

5. If this certification of ELF was developed by an ente certificatore, would you consider proposing it at your school? Why so or not so?

The 9 participants were headmaster in technical and vocational schools[67] (4) and *licei* (6); although one was headmaster to a cohort of high schools that included vocational, *liceo*, and technical schools – hence the double count – and one was a private high school[68] headmaster. Private high schools were included in the study because they represent a language teaching context and prepare students for certifications as much as state schools; moreover, had the respondents been higher, it could have allowed for a comparison of different attitudes.

Confirming the teacher data, four *licei* were proposing Cambridge certifications, i.e. PET, First, and CAE – with the exception of the *liceo* included in the cohort of schools and the private school. Three of those also offered the possibility of doing the IELTS certification to their students. The technical and vocational schools did the Cambridge certification up to the B2 level, with one school (technical + vocational) also proposing the Trinity Graded Examination in Spoken English (GESE).

Regarding the stakeholder proposing a certification at their school, 6 respondents said that it was either requested by families and students (2) or a responsibility of the English Department, although having to undergo approval by the headmaster (6); one did not answer the question. The reasons for choosing the particular certification were:

a. the selection of provided materials;

b. an efficient network center;

c. usefulness;

d. prestige attached to it and recognition of results;

e. more complete;

f. linked to textbook materials;

g. personal motivation and improvement.

[67] Here put together as two schools were in a cohort of technical and vocational schools. Moreover, as it emerged from the teachers' interviews, the huge gap in attitudes was between technical/vocational schools and *licei*.

[68] In Italian they are called *scuole paritarie*. Being private schools, the students' family has to pay a fee for each year of attendance. *Scuole paritarie* can be linked to specific needs, for example students who are becoming professional athletes and are in need of flexible hours. However, this kind of school often has a religious imprinting, such as was the case for this one: the respondent was the headmaster and also a priest.

All motivations referred to Cambridge certifications, except for the last one, which could have referred to certifications provided both by Cambridge and Trinity College.

Motivations a., b., e. and f. related to the merits of the certification board, valuing the provided services. Motivations c. and d. serve as confirmation of data gathered in the questionnaire and the two interview surveys, namely the prestige that comes with holding an internationally recognized certification. Motivation g., personal satisfaction, was again reported by high school teachers.

Additionally, prospected advantages were similar to those found in the teacher interviews and the test taker questionnaire, i.e. prestige and recognition of results (6), improvement of language skills, and personal satisfaction. Two further advantages concerned the test adherence to the language curriculum and the ‘for schools’ option for Cambridge certifications; these two results can be assimilated to appreciation of test construct. Two respondents found disadvantages, namely the difficulty of tasks compared to the students’ actual levels and a different recognition of results by universities. The first answer was given the headmaster of a cohort of three schools – vocational, technical and *liceo*; the second by the headmaster of a technical/vocational school that proposed both Cambridge and Trinity certifications. Regarding the recognition of results, it is perhaps inevitable that a certification that only tests for oral skills (GESE) would not be accepted as much as a certification that tests the four skills. Contextually, GESE was found to serve work-related attainments rather than academic ones by the two private school directors, interviewed in the second part of the study.

The last question was the most tentative, as explaining a certification of ELF in a few lines to someone who might have never encountered the concept, seems bound to cause misunderstandings and unreliable answers. Three respondents gave rather neutral answers, stating that they would be interested in it, provided that the certification has a recognized validity and it is accepted by the school English teachers; answers that were reminiscent of the EMI professor interviews, unsurprisingly occurring due to the non-expert status of the interviewees. Two respondents declared to be extremely interested, provided again that it is recognized by MIUR[69], one stating that the authentic materials would be an essential feature to make the exam more pertinent to real-life language and that they would gladly propose it at their school; significantly, the two enthusiastic respondents were heads of technical/vocational schools. Four respondents would not

[69] Italian Ministry of Instruction.

consider proposing it in their school. One explained that they were experiencing problems with the current certifications and would not undergo the process of evaluating another, perhaps less recognized certification; the other respondent, from the cohort of schools, said that they would not be interested as it seems too work oriented. The other two respondents argued against ELF at length. One said that, although she was aware of the impact of 'Globish' on English, she did not understand the need for such a certification, positing that the students need to interact with NSs and concluding with a curiously existential remark: 'Moreover I think one should always look up to a model, we all need models in our lives , how could ELF fulfil this inner human need?'. The other claimed that a traditional certification would imply the ability to speak with other NNSs and that an ELF certification would be useless.

Overall, the headmasters validated the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations presented by the other respondents, confirming the general trend for high schools to propose Cambridge certifications due to their adherence to coursebooks and curricula, as well as their recognized prestige. Out of 9 participants, 3 would take into consideration the proposed certification, 2 expressed genuine interest and 4 were either not interested or against it. From the negative feedback for an ELF certification it seems clear that some participants have a notion of ELF linked to a 'deficient' approach, as explored in the literature review. While the study did not hold to standards of reliability or representativity, it helped to complete the varied picture that emerged from the different quantitative and qualitative interviews.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Final remarks

It is evident from the literature that ELF is a complex phenomenon. Given its multifaceted and flexible nature, it cannot be considered as another variety of English, but it rather entails a re-conceptualization of views about language, with implications for classroom practices, curricula and coursebook designs, and testing.

The present study has focused on stakeholders' attitudes towards a possible ELF certification, trying to integrate test takers', high school teachers' and EMI professors' views about current certifications and their opinions on an ELF certification.

The first part of the study focused on gathering the attitudes and perceptions of test takers. The total number of participants of the questionnaire was quite large, with participants being mostly female, university students and Italian. This profile influenced some of the data, which offered an understanding of the Italian context specifically related to academia. Prospective test takers, who were mainly university students, found current certifications to partially represent their linguistic needs, with a focus on academic language. The results show that current international certifications are perceived to be fairly representative of the students' academic lives and less so for their real lives. In general, candidates took a test because they were required to do so, but a conspicuous minority, given the chance, took the test for personal advancement. Certifications were perceived to be useful and to contribute to test takers' future career advancement. At the same time, they were found to be excessively focused on grammar and academic writing, sometimes presenting non-authentic materials and topics. The need for a more realistic certification opens the path to an ELF certification that could bridge the gap in the current system.

English users recognize that NNSs constitute the majority of English speakers, with ELF interactions pervading their everyday lives, requiring them to adapt to a multitude of communication styles and cultural aspects of language. As such, prospective test takers identified the importance of communication strategies and intercultural communication. These features relate to oral interaction, where unfamiliar accents and speakers not making the effort to understand their interlocutor were found to be the major deterrent to effective communication. In this perspective, an ELF certification

was considered by about half of the participants to be more realistic, more inclusive and to attest to the actual ability to communicate in real life, rather than a mere knowledge of the language. Issues that arose from the questionnaire were the perceived stigma attached to ELF, at risk of being perceived as a simplistic version of English emptied of its cultural roots and relegated to low-level users.

These misconceptions were also deeply rooted in high school teachers of English, interviewed for the second part of the study. The interviews showed that there are some resistant convictions that language is monolithic, entailing that there is one correct variety and that other varieties should tend towards it, reiterating Kachru’s notions of an inner norm-providing circle opposed to the expanding norm-dependent circle, where ELF belongs (Kachru, 1985). These convictions, together with the idea that there should be one (native) English to be taught, are particularly rooted in the cultural landscape of the Italian school system, where a strict adherence to grammar has been enforced into students’ learning patterns, as recognized by teachers and professors. While many teachers agree that classroom practices would benefit from ELF-aware features, there is a general scepticism towards a possible ELF certification, especially in *licei linguistici*. The data highlighted that this kind of NS bias is strongly present in *licei* in general, where the British English standard is the norm and little space is accorded even to other native varieties. While this stance can be understood and even argued for, as those students might want to continue to study languages, it seems to stem from the assumption that ELF is devoid of culture and is just a simplified version of English, in what was called a ‘deficient’ or SLA approach (Jenkins, 2006). Some of the teachers coming from *licei linguistici* appear to aim at cultural and linguistic assimilation for their pupils, discarding a whole range of contextual needs. A limit of this part of the study was the extreme focus on *licei*, perhaps offering a biased view of teachers’ preference for native (British) standards; while the only vocational high school teachers interviewed advocated for the need for an ELF certification – a distinction that seems confirmed by the small high school headmasters survey.

This is the case for state high schools, while it is quite the opposite situation for private schools, although the data would benefit from a wider sample. Private school directors, who are also English teachers, identified a gap in the current system, and seemed much more open to new possibilities, recognizing the usefulness of a possible ELF certification. All teachers identified the need for different kinds of certification to co-exist, allowing students to choose between them. For the most part, teachers believed

that an ELF certification would advantage adults – university students or workers – while it would not be appropriate for high school students, considered too young to understand their future linguistic needs. Indeed, future research on attitudes towards an ELF certification should involve a variety of schools, giving voice to both teachers and students also from vocational and technical schools. Moreover, the study proves the necessity of involving teachers and language experts in ELF awareness, because without a radical change in teaching, education and testing cannot abide to the actual needs of today's NNSs.

This situation was partly mirrored in the interviews of the EMI professors, some of whom were highly sceptical towards an ELF certification for the same reasons as the rest of the participants, finding it hard to reconcile the contemporary needs of the international university with the acceptance of those same principle in teaching and testing; thus they epitomized the conflicting feelings about what kind of English should be accepted even though they recognized that they can communicate without adhering to native standard – what Jenkins identified as 'linguistic schizophrenia' (2009). The data also offered the point of view of professors, who seem eager to express their students' and their own linguistic needs, highlighting the need for a certification that reflects more closely the linguistic requirements of today's international university. Some participants expressed the necessity of such a training even for professors, who are not prepared to deal with the challenges of a growing multicultural classroom.

Further research on this aspect could include more universities from all over Italy and more academic fields, possibly devising a large-scale study or questionnaire informed by the topics that arose from these interviews, in order to gather data that could accurately represent the actual needs of students and teachers in an academic environment today, finding a market for an ELF certification.

The study showed the traditional monolithic views of language seem to still have a strong hold for test takers, teachers and professors, even more so in the Italian context, where language teaching is heavily centered on grammar and standards of correctness. This view appears to be deeply rooted into the language learner mindset and possibly difficult to eradicate. Because of the popular normative approach to grammar, it is perhaps unsurprising that native standards were deemed less important in oral interaction, a type of communication that entails online adjustments *per se*; although this feature was not generally accepted by language teachers.

Overall, the study showed that an ELF certification would cater to the needs of a share of prospective test takers that were until now unheard and unvoiced, whose opinions should not go unnoticed but inform the test construct. At the same time, the proposal of such a certification cannot exclude a constant awareness and sensitization over ELF-aware topics, that by right belong in the classroom but are still a long way from being implemented.

5.2 ...and for the future?

The only course of action that seems to be able to stimulate awareness of ELF in a meaningful way is primarily through teachers, who have the responsibility of educating learners; then policy makers, test and coursebooks designers, as well as possibly employers, parents, and test takers. From the high school data, it seems that vocational and technical schools would be more interested in an ELF certification than *licei*. Rather surprisingly, many participants believed that such a certification would be more suitable for a professional life, with a minority of EMI professors claiming that they (and their colleagues) would benefit from such a certification. Perhaps an ELF certification could be primarily targeted at these stakeholders; although it could have implications related to its recognition and prestige, were it to involve only workers and vocational school students. In fact, these predictable issues pertaining an ELF certification prominently emerged from the data, with participants questioning construct validity and perceived prestige. These potentially problematic areas have to be taken under serious consideration when developing and marketing an ELF test, with the aim of enhancing the added value of an ELF certification, thus filling a prestigious position.

Since ELF is still subject to misconceptions, it would be of capital importance for certification boards to face this issue without hesitation. As much as there is a bottom-up process of ELF awareness among stakeholders, there needs to be a top-down determination to help reach a more inclusive perspective.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Test takers questionnaire

English Lingua Franca Certification

We would like you to help us by answering the following questions concerning a possible certification of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

This survey is conducted as part of a thesis research for a Joint Master's degree in English and American Studies at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari. It is aimed at determining the attitudes of non-native English speakers towards a certification of ELF.

Completing the survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and we do not collect information such as your name, email address or IP address. Participation is completely voluntary.

We are interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answers sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation.

Thank you so much for your help!

* Required

I. English Language Certification 1/2

1) Have you ever taken an English language certification at B1-B2-C1 level? *

Please only indicate 'yes' if the level was B1 or higher.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No *Skip to question 12*

II. English Language Certification 2/2

Questions marked with * are obligatory

1) If yes, which one? *

If you have taken more than one, please refer to the most recent one.

Mark only one oval.

- IELTS
- TOEFL
- Trinity ISE
- Trinity GESE
- Ca' Foscari/Trinity co-certification
- Cambridge Preliminary (PET)
- Cambridge First (FCE)
- Cambridge Advanced (CAE)
- PTE
- Other

2) Why did you take an English language certification? *

Mark only one oval.

- University prerequisite
- Erasmus/other mobility program prerequisite
- To get a job in my country
- To get a job in another country
- Citizenship
- Personal motivation
- Added CV feature
- Other: ______

3) Why did you choose this certification instead of the others available to you? *

Please select all the relevant answers

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Cost
- [ ] Speed of results
- [ ] Convenient exam dates
- [ ] The tasks looked easier
- [ ] I preferred the testing methods used (computer-based, interactions with other students...)
- [ ] Exam duration (longer)
- [ ] Exam duration (shorter)
- [ ] It was specifically required by my university/employer/governement

Other: [ ] ______

4) In your opinion, is the material used in the exam close to authentic language use? *

Authentic language use: what you could actually encounter in real life.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Not authentic	Somewhat authentic	Very authentic	I don't know
a) Reading-comprehension tasks				
b) Writing tasks				
c) Listening tasks				
d) Speaking tasks				

5) If you like, please expand on why you think that some materials were or were not authentic.

Please, give your answer in English.

____
____
____
____
____

6) How well do you think that the certification score reflects your ability to use English: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very well
a) In my everyday life	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
b) In my academic/work life	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

7) Could you say why?

Please, give your answer in English.

____
____
____
____
____

8) Was it useful to obtain a language certification? *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Yes

⬭ No

⬭ I don't know

9) In your experience, what do you think were the downsides (if any) of doing a language certification in English? *

Please select all relevant answers

Check all that apply.

☐ Cost
☐ Time of preparation for the test
☐ Test anxiety
☐ Difficulty of the exam tasks
☐ Reliability of results
☐ I didn't find any downsides

Other: ☐ _______________________________

10) More in general, what do you think might be the upsides (if any) of doing a language certification in English? *

Please select all relevant answers

Check all that apply.

- [ ] International recognition of results
- [ ] University entrance
- [ ] Getting a new job
- [ ] Career advancement in my current job
- [ ] Access to Erasmus/other mobility programs
- [ ] Obtaining citizenship
- [ ] An added feature on my CV
- [ ] Ability to work with international clients/colleagues
- [ ] I don't think there are any upsides

Other: [ ] ______________________

III. English as a Lingua Franca

With the term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) we mean the use of English in international contexts: interaction between non-native speakers, colleagues/students of different nationalities, tourists, online conversations, etc.

1) What kind of interactions have you had in English in your life, beyond school or language courses? *

Please select all answers that apply to you.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Online interaction (social media, chats, forums...)
- [ ] Professional interaction (e-mails/conversations with colleagues, boss, clients...)
- [ ] Conversations in your country (with tourists, foreign students, professors...)
- [ ] Conversations in another country (holidays, study/work abroad...)
- [ ] Academic interaction (conferences, papers, workshops...)

Other: [ ] ______________________

2) Think of your experience of using English with non-native speakers (ELF). Which statement do you agree with the most? *

Mark only one oval.

- ( ) Your English should be as close to a native speaker's as possible to avoid misunderstanding
- ( ) You can communicate successfully despite using non-native features

3) What makes comprehension most difficult for you when someone speaks? *

Mark only one oval.

- ( ) English words I don't know
- ( ) Non-standard grammar
- ( ) Accents/pronunciation I am not familiar with
- ( ) If the speaker does not make any effort to help me understand
- ( ) I don't have any major problems in comprehension
- ( ) Other: ______________________

4) What communication strategies do you use when talking in English with a non-native speaker? *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Very frequently
a) Repetition	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
b) Slowing down	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
c) Using other words to better explain the concept	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
d) Avoiding complex words	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
e) Using gestures	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
f) Encouraging attitude (e.g. smiling)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

5) To be a successful communicator in English today, how important do you think these features are? *

1= Not at all important 2= Not very important 3= Somewhat important 4= Sometimes important 5= Very important

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
a) Native-like pronunciation	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
b) Grammatical accuracy	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
c) Fluency (talk at a normal speed with good intonation)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
d) Effective non-verbal language (gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice...)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
e) Communication strategies (repetition, paraphrasing...)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
f) Accommodation (making adjustments in how you speak based on your interlocutor's reactions)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭
g) Intercultural communication (taking into account the culture/s of the people speaking to you)	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭	⬭

IV. Certification of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

A possible ELF certification could include:
- Using authentic international texts and relevant topics
- Using conversations/lectures by both native and non-native speakers
- Focusing on the use of communication strategies when speaking
- Using non-native examiners

1) Thinking about a possible ELF certification, do you agree with the following statements? *

Mark only one oval per row.

	I disagree	I agree	I neither agree nor disagree
a) It should use as much realistic material as possible	◯	◯	◯
b) It should test skills that I actually use in my life	◯	◯	◯
c) It should also test a range of communication strategies	◯	◯	◯
d) The listening part should only present native English accents (American, English, Australian...)	◯	◯	◯
e) The listening part should also include non-native English accents (European, Asian, African...)	◯	◯	◯

2) Do you have any further comments?

Please, give your answer in English.

3) How well do you think that such a certification would reflect your ability to use English in your real life? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very well

4) Would you prefer to obtain a traditional certification of English or a certification of ELF, if both were equally recognized by your institution/employer/government? *

Mark only one oval.

- Certification of English
- Certification of ELF

5) Can you expand on your answer?

Please, give your answer in English.

V. Personal info

Finally, we kindly ask you to make one last effort.
All personal information will be used only for statistical purposes and remain completely anonymous.
Thank you.

1) Your age *

2) Your gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Other
- I don't want to specify

3) Your country of origin *

Mark only one oval.

4) Your mother tongue/first language *

Mark only one oval.

5) Are you living abroad at the moment? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

6) Do you intend to live abroad in the future? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

7) Are you a high school or university student? *

Mark only one oval.

- High school student
- University student (including post-grad studies)
- I am not a student

8) If you are a university student, what is your field of study?

Mark only one oval.

- Humanities (Arts, History, Literature, Philosophy, Theology...)
- Languages (Foreign Literature & Cultures, Translation, Linguistic Sciences...)
- Social sciences (Archaeology, Political Sciences, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Management...)
- Natural Sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Physics...)
- Formal Sciences (Computer science, Mathematics, Statistics...)
- Applied Sciences (Architecture, Business, Engineering, Technology, Medicine, Law...)
- Education (Pedagogy, teachers training programs...)

9) If you would be available for a brief follow-up interview, please leave your e-mail.

____

Thank you very much!

Your answers are essential to our research.

Appendix 2 – Interviews

High School English Teachers' Survey

Background:

1. Where do you teach?
2. Your years of teaching?
3. What is the age group of your pupils?
4. Do you have students of other nationalities or with different linguistic/cultural background in your classroom(s)? How many? Do they speak English?

Certifications:

5. Are you preparing your students for any language certification? Which one?
6. Who chose this particular certification? Why?
7. What do you think are the upsides/downsides of such certification?
8. Do you feel that international certifications influence your teaching? How?
9. Do you think that current international certifications accurately reflect the students' ability to use English in their real life? Why?

Certification of ELF: it could include NNS speakers/examiners, authentic international texts/topics, use of communication strategies...

10. Do you think such a test would be useful? Why?
11. Would you include some of these 'ELF features' in your courses?
12. How well do you think that a possible ELF certification would reflect the students' ability to use English in their real lives?
13. Would students benefit more from a traditional certification of English or ELF certification?
14. Do you have any comments or further questions?

University EMI Professors' Survey

Background:

1. What is your field of teaching?
2. Your years of teaching in English?
3. Do you teach BA or MA students?
4. Do you have students of other nationalities or with different linguistic/cultural background in your classroom(s)? How many? Do they communicate solely in English?

Course linguistic requirements:

5. What level of English do your students need to access your course?
6. In your class(es), how are students required to use English? (only writing, interaction, oral examinations, e-mails...)
7. Do you expect your students' work in English to conform to a standard? Which one? Do you take into account grammatical errors in your grading?

Certifications:

8. Do you think that current international certifications accurately reflect the students' ability to use English in their academic life?
9. Here are some features that a certification of ELF would have. Do you think they might be useful skills for your course or academic life in general?
   - Exposition to NNS lecturers -> ability to understand different accents, varieties (European, Asian...)
   - Acquisition of communication strategies: making yourself understood by your interlocutor, paraphrasing, negotiation of ambiguous meaning, repairing when communication breaks down...
   - Speaking with phonological features that don't necessarily adhere to a (British/American) standard, but that make you mutually intelligible to other non-native speakers
   - Use of authentic international texts in the reading section
   - Writing focused on comprehensibility (=getting the message across) rather than perfect grammatical correctness
10. If an ELF certification did guarantee that students acquire these skills, would you accept it or prefer it to a traditional certification of English for your students? Why?
11. Do you have any comments or further questions?