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## The representation of EFL teachers' views on the role of English as a *Lingua Franca*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The increasing number of non-native speakers of English in the world is at the base of recent claims for the need to emphasize the role of English as a *lingua franca* in the EFL classrooms. This paper investigates Catalan English teachers' views on this matter by means of a questionnaire that focused on aspects like preference of native or non-native language teachers, cultural knowledge of EFL teachers, and target variety of English. The results indicate that teachers are still strongly influenced by the supremacy of the native speaker and the vision of English as a language which is mostly restricted to native English-speaking communities, with some significant differences found among different groups of teachers.

**Keywords:** English *lingua franca*, English as an international language, EFL teachers, non-native teachers, teachers' beliefs

### Resumen

El creciente número de hablantes no nativos de inglés en el mundo constituye la base a partir de la cual se han hecho recientes afirmaciones alrededor de la necesidad de enfatizar el papel del inglés como *lingua franca* en las clases de inglés. Este artículo investiga la visión de los profesores catalanes de inglés al respecto mediante un cuestionario centrado en aspectos como la preferencia de profesores nativos o no nativos, el conocimiento cultural idóneo para el profesorado de inglés, y la variedad de inglés escogida. Los resultados indican que el profesorado está influido por la supremacía del hablante nativo y una visión del inglés todavía restringida a las comunidades de hablantes nativos, con algunas diferencias significativas encontradas entre distintos grupos de profesores.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reports on a small set of results from a broader study. Additional data from the same study can be obtained in Llurda and Huguet (2003) and Llurda (in press). The research was partly funded by the *Dirección General de Investigación del Ministerio de Educación y Cultura* (SEJ2004-06273-C02-02/EDUC).

**Palabras clave:** Inglés *lingua franca*, Inglés como lengua internacional, profesores de inglés, creencias del profesorado, profesores no nativos.

## Introduction

The world is increasingly becoming a globalised entity in which what happens at one end has a direct effect on every other corner. Never before has the world been so small in terms of speed of communication and circulation of people, goods and ideas. In *The lexus and the olive tree*, Thomas L. Friedman (1999) argues that globalization is not just a passing trend, but a permanent state by which a global market and a global village are being created in a way that affects nation states, corporations, and individuals alike. This is the point where human communication patterns experience a change, by which individuals of all countries in the world are turning to English as the medium to reach farther and faster. In other words, English has become a global commodity that surpasses the geographical and cultural limits of English speaking countries.

Two decades ago, Kachru (1983, 1990) distinguished between countries according to whether they belonged to the 'inner circle', the 'outer circle' or the 'expanding circle' of English. Nowadays, English has become such an international language that it is almost irrelevant to consider whether a person is a citizen of a country which belongs to one circle or another, as English is an essential element of the life of any educated person in the world, irrespective of the official status of this language within that particular country, and therefore irrespective of whether a speaker of English lives in the 'inner circle', the 'outer circle' or the 'expanding circle'. As Modiano (1999) indicates, Kachru's concentric circles have now lost their original sense, and they must be transcended through a redefinition in terms of each speaker's ability to use an internationally intelligible variety of English. Thus, we are likely to encounter English native speakers who do not belong to the central circle of competent speakers of international English, whereas other native speakers, as well as many non-native speakers of English, will meet the necessary conditions to be considered competent in such an international variety.

All the above serves as an explanation to the essential question of why so many people around the world are willing to spend their time and money on learning a particular foreign language, *i.e.*, English, even though this is not by any means the language with the highest number of native speakers in the world. It

is obvious that if we look into the causes of this phenomenon, we need to turn our attention to several factors, such as the worldwide spread of the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the economical, scientific, technological and military hegemony of the United States of America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, despite the obvious fact that the sequential global power of the United Kingdom and the United States account for the current supremacy of English, it is precisely the international dimension of English rather than the local dimension related to these two individual countries that is the appeal for the increasing numbers of potential learners to the language. This aspect is very important in this paper, as my main argument is that many English language teachers and learners are confusing the causes with the consequences in stating their reasons for learning English. In short, the real explanation for the fact that so many people want or need to learn English is not to be found in the causes of the current situation of global supremacy of English (namely, the sequential military and economic power of the UK and the US), but rather in the consequence of such expansion, most visible in the fact that English is the *lingua franca* used in all kind of transactions and interactions among people from such diverse countries of origin as Japan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Germany, Finland, or Brazil, just to mention a few in which English is not an official language, and which therefore would fall within Kachru's 'expanding circle' category. In other words, people from all over the world turn to English because it is now a required language in their own countries, which in turn is a direct consequence of the global need to use English in almost any interaction among speakers of different languages.

Let's now turn our attention to English language learning in Spain. The first aspect that strikes any observer is the sharp contrast between the widely acknowledged consensus among politicians, businesspeople and media regarding the need to speak fluent English in order to succeed in professional life, and the low level of English competence and fluency of the majority of Spaniards, including those who have attended English lessons for several years in primary and secondary education, as shown by the most recent Eurobarometer on Europeans and languages (European Commission, 2005). However, another aspect that needs further consideration in the Spanish context, and one which is particularly relevant in our present discussion, involves the attitudes and perceptions of students and teachers of English towards this language, and whether they reflect the current role of English as the only truly international language. The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent Spanish teachers of English are still anchored in an old vision of the English-speaking world, mainly restricted to the countries within Kachru's 'inner circle' (Kachru, 1983), namely, the UK, Ireland,

the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as if the reason why they decided to learn English was the desire to interact with people living in 'inner circle' countries, rather than the need to speak the *lingua franca* of the world.

### **What non-native English teachers can contribute to the teaching of English as an international language**

Since Smith's (1983) seminal publication on English as an international language, some big advances have been made in understanding the implications of the increasingly fundamental role of English at the international level. Widdowson (1994) contributed the idea that English is no longer exclusively owned by native speakers of the language. Current users of the language, native speakers and non-native speakers alike, can be rightfully granted ownership and right of use and adaptation of the language to their own communicative and expressive needs, by reproducing a pattern of appropriation of the language that already happened when North-Americans claimed the language to be their own, and asserted their right to manipulate it and adapt it to their own needs (Menken, 1921). Modiano, (1999), as already mentioned above, took this claim one step further by denying the status of 'competent speakers of English as an international language' to both native speakers and non-native speakers who could not be understood outside their own variety, and conversely allocating internationally intelligible speakers to the central circle of competent speakers, irrespective of their place of birth and their mother tongue. The conceptual revolution expressed in these works was taken a few steps further by Seidlhofer (2000, 2001) with her work on English as a *lingua franca* and her *Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE)*, and by Jenkins' (2000) analysis of the phonology of English as an international language, as well as the implications of such an analysis for the teaching of the language in EFL contexts. The assumption is that a new variety of English is emerging among speakers of different languages, and although this variety is still at a very preliminary stage of evolution, one needs to consider its description in order to legitimize its existence independently from any given variety of English as a native language. The impetus of English as a *lingua franca* in Europe has prompted the coinage of the term *Euro-English* to describe the particular version of this variety that may be establishing itself in international interactions among European speakers of different non-English speaking countries (Jenkins *et al.*, 2001).

Following this line of argument, I have elsewhere highlighted the ideal marriage between non-native speaking teachers of English and the development of

an international variety of this language, which is by definition not connected to any given native community of speakers (Llurda, 2004). One of the main claims in that paper was the defense of the specific value of non-native teachers in the teaching of English as an international language, and the emphasis on the benefits that could be obtained by such teachers in terms of added prestige and self-esteem if they embraced the idea that they are not teaching the language of an alien community (one to which they, as non-native teachers, do not belong), but rather that they are teaching a variety of English which they can rightfully call their own. It must be noted, though, that Llurda and Huguet's (2003) results had already shown that non-native teachers may not be totally supportive of non-native discourses like those developed in Widdowson (1994), Modiano (1999), and Llurda (2004). Additionally, in a study focusing on Greek teachers' beliefs regarding their preferred models for the teaching of English pronunciation, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) found that they held a 'strong norm-bound perspective' (p. 481), thus highlighting the existing divide between theoretical claims about the right of NNS teachers to claim ownership of English and the practical evidence that NNS teachers do not enthusiastically support those ideas.

Another issue that may spring from considering the teaching of English as an international language has to do with the teacher's approach to cultural issues. The inclusion of cultural elements in language education is generally accepted as necessary and convenient, although the concept of 'culture' is so wide that it is often problematic to exactly determine what teachers should understand by that. McKay (2000) has brought the discussion to the problematic issue of how culture can be integrated into a class of English as an international language. She describes three basic approaches to culture in a language classroom, namely, one in which attention is on the target culture, another in which the learners own culture is emphasised, and, the one she recommends, in which culture is dealt with from an international perspective. Given the above discussion on the international dimension of communication in English, it appears as a fundamental premise in English language teaching that learners and teachers engage in an exchange of their respective knowledge and experiences in intercultural communication, and that they aim at developing their own intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

### **Goals of the study**

The first goal in this paper is to show what visions and perceptions Catalan teachers of English have regarding the dichotomy between English as a lingua

franca vs. English as a native language (Seidllhofer, 2000). At the base of this study lies the assumption that non-native teachers would do well in embracing English as an international language, as their professional status would be reinforced and they would prepare their students for the current uses of English, which stretch far beyond interactions with members of the native speaker community (Llurda, 2004). Therefore, this goal also encompasses an analysis of teachers' perceptions regarding their own status as non-native teachers and the advantages that this condition offers for language teaching in an EFL context.

A second goal consists in finding differences among Catalan teachers that can help explain the above visions and perceptions and identify the variables that may determine such views. The following two independent variables were identified for such purpose:

- a) Educational level of teaching: primary vs. secondary school teachers.
- b) Length of stay in English-speaking countries: teachers with stays abroad of over three months vs. teachers with a total combined length of stays abroad of up to three months.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were 101 NNS English language teachers working in the city of Lleida (NE Spain). Thirty-eight of the participants were primary school teachers (27 working in public schools, and 11 in private institutions), and 63 were secondary school teachers (48 in public schools, and 15 in private ones). Eighty-nine of the teachers were female, and twelve were male, a fairly good representation of gender distribution in Catalan schools. Ages ranged from 21 to 55; the mean age was 35.8. Seventy-five respondents claimed their language to be Catalan, 23 Spanish, and 3 said they were completely balanced Catalan and Spanish bilinguals. The 101 participants in the study accounted for 88% of the active teachers in Lleida at the time of the data collection.

### ***Instruments***

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire, administered individually to the 101 participants, dealing with aspects that ranged from teachers' perceptions of their own language proficiency to educational ideology, and issues related to the status of English as an international language. Only the questions

referred to the perceptions regarding English as an international language are reported here (see Appendix).

## Results

### *Question A*

Question A was oriented towards finding respondents' preferences regarding the native/non-native dichotomy. They were given a hypothetical situation in which they had to imagine themselves being in charge of a language school and they had to choose the composition of their staff members: whether the number of natives and non-natives should be balanced, or whether there should be a majority of one group over the other.

Looking at the global responses given by the 101 respondents, a majority was in favour of a balanced composition of natives and non-natives (58.5%), followed by those who would hire more NSs than NNSs (31.9%). Only 9.6% said they would prefer to have more NNSs working in their school. However, if we pay closer attention to the different options chosen by primary and secondary school teachers, we can find a significant difference in the preferences of those two groups. As Table 1 indicates, primary teachers evenly divided their preferences between "hiring more NSs" and "hiring as many NSs as NNSs", with a marginal 5.9% of respondents opting for the "hiring more NNSs" option. Secondary teachers, in contrast, generally opted for the balanced "hiring as many NSs as NNSs", and 12.1% chose what may be labelled as the more critically aware option of "hiring more NNSs".

**Table 1:** The preference of NSs or NNSs as language teachers

	More NSs	Same	More NNSs
PRIMARY	47.1%	47.1%	5.9%
SECONDARY	22.4%	65.6%	12.1%

$\text{Chi}^2 = 6.213$  ( $df = 2$ ;  $p < .05$ )

### *Question B*

In question B, participants were asked whether they thought that having learned English as a second language provided them with a special advantage to teach EFL over NSs. An affirmative answer to that question could be clearly associated with a higher appreciation of their own NNS condition. Conversely, a negative answer would indicate lack of self-esteem as NNS teachers, and would

hint towards the existence of a feeling of inferiority regarding their NS colleagues. A total of 63.4% teachers answered ‘yes’ to this question, so only around one-third of the total population of non-native teachers of English in the public schools of Lleida denied having any advantage as language teachers derived from having learned English as a second/foreign language themselves.

It is rather interesting, though, to look at the distribution of responses by group, whereby it was found that, in the case of primary teachers, the two possible options appeared almost balanced, whereas secondary teachers opted more clearly for the affirmative answer (Table 2).

**Table 2:** The advantage of being a NNS teacher

	Yes	No
PRIMARY	47.4%	52.6%
SECONDARY	73.0%	27.0%

Chi<sup>2</sup> = 6.717 (df = 1; p < .01)

### Question C

One of the goals of this study was to obtain a picture of Catalan NNS teachers’ attitude towards NS and NNS teachers. In question C, they had to say whether, in the hypothetical situation of having to undertake further English language classes to improve their language proficiency, they would prefer to have a NS or a NNS teacher. They were presented with four different options, resulting from the combination of the native/non-native factor with another relevant factor in the discussion of the value of NNS teachers, namely whether the teacher knew the learner’s L1 or not. One further element that was considered in the formulation of the question was that the option ‘NNS who could speak the learner’s L1’, could be interpreted in two different ways, either as a NNS whose mother tongue was the same as the learner’s, or a NNS whose L1 was different but also knew the learner’s L1 as a second language. The later option was preferred in order to avoid any bias caused by a personal identification of respondents with the other type of teacher, namely, non-natives with the same L1 as their students. The distribution of responses to this question can be appreciated in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Length of stays vs. NS/NNS preference

	NNS w. L1	NS w. L1	NNS no L1	NS no L1
Up to 3 months	3.7%	48.1%	0%	48.1%
More than 3 months	2.6%	81.6%	0%	15.8

Chi<sup>2</sup> = 8.319 (df = 2; p < .05)

### Question D

In the light of recent discussions on the teaching of cultural aspects in the English language classroom, teachers were asked to rate from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) the need to have different types of cultural knowledge, namely British (conventional target culture), Catalan/Spanish (students' culture as suggested by McKay, 2000), European (as a reflection of the increasing role of English as European lingua franca), and Commonwealth (reflecting other countries in which English is an official language). Results, reported in Table 4, indicate a general preference for the conventional approach to culture in the English classroom, shown by a statistically significant preference for the 'British culture' option, followed at a distance by a higher appreciation of their local culture over Commonwealth and European culture. The differences found between the two groups of teachers with short vs. long experience in English-speaking countries are presented in Table 5. There, we can see a significant difference between both groups with regard to their appreciation of the need to know the culture of all the countries (excluding the UK) that have English as their official language. The difference is relevant because it shows a greater degree of idealisation of the UK as the only country that deserves consideration among teachers who have not been extensively exposed to life in an English-speaking world. This result becomes more striking if we consider that a vast majority of the teachers with long stays in English-speaking countries, who give a higher value to Commonwealth culture, had actually spent all their time abroad in England.

**Table 4:** Need of culture knowledge

1) British:	4.1
2) Catalan/Spanish:	3.3
3) EU:	3
4) Commonwealth:	3.1

NOVA:  $F(3, 388) = 23.044, p < .01$

**Table 5:** The need of culture knowledge by the language teacher

	British	Local	EU	Commonwealth*
Up to 3 months	3.9	43.1	2.9	2.8
More than 3 months	4.2	3.4	3	3.4

\* ANOVA:  $F(1, 93) = 9.697; p < .01$

### Question E

Teachers were asked to choose which variety of English they would like their students to use. Three options were given: 'British English (RP)', 'American

English', and 'English for international communication'. Results show that almost 90% of the respondents preferred International English, and about 10% chose British English. However, when we look separately at the opinions of teachers with long and short stays abroad, we can see that almost all teachers who had stayed over 3 months abroad preferred the international variety, while one of 5 teachers with shorter stays preferred national varieties, mainly British, but also American English (Table 7).

**Table 6:** Preference for English varieties

	British Eng.	American Eng.	International Eng.
Up to 3 months	17.8%	2.2%	80%
More than 3 months	3.8%	0%	96.2%

$$\chi^2 = 6.577 \text{ (df} = 2; p < .05)$$

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to show Catalan EFL teachers' representations regarding socio-cultural aspects which are fundamental in shaping their own identity as teachers of the current world *lingua franca*. The results above indicate that teachers' views are distant from current proposals on the implications for teaching of English as an international language (McKay, 2000; Llorca, 2004; Modiano, 2005), but are nonetheless consistent with those found in Sifakis and Sougari (2005). In fact, a lot of these teachers take a rather dated position, by mainly identifying English with the UK, disregarding not just the whole set of international communications carried out in English among citizens of any country in the world, but all the other 'inner circle' countries, in which English is the native language of the majority of the population, as well.

Additionally, we can appreciate some differences attributable to the two independent variables used in this study. On the one hand, we may observe that primary teachers hold a rather idealized image of NSs, preferring them to NNS teachers, as shown in questions A and B. Secondary teachers, however, appear to have a relatively higher appreciation for NNS teachers. Although it may initially appear as rather surprising that primary teachers are the ones who have a higher appreciation for native speaker norms, one can argue by way of explanation that primary teachers in Spain have generally had poorer language training experiences than secondary teachers, which would account for a lower confidence in their own language skills, and a higher appreciation of the native speaker norm, as the ultimate symbol of 'language quality'. Another explanation that may be contemplated is offered by Sifakis and Sougari (2005), who try to explain

Greek 'lower level' teachers' preference for a native speaker norm by way of their higher sense of responsibility for 'the younger learners' proper acquisition of the target language and pronunciation' (p. 481). Both explanations are possible. We clearly need to pursue more detailed studies in order to be able to determine which one can better account for the above results.

Questions C, D and E, illustrate the different views held by teachers depending on whether they have spent a long period in an English-speaking country (over three months, at least) or not. This particular variable deserves close attention, since it was initially pointed out by Medgyes (1994) as potentially capable of explaining differences of attitudes by NNS teachers. Medgyes thought that teachers with increased experience in English-speaking countries would be more enthusiastically supportive of native culture and native varieties in language teaching. Surprisingly, the results of the current study point in the opposite direction. NNS teachers with extended periods in English-speaking countries appear to have developed a higher critical awareness, as shown by their clear preference of a NS who can speak the student's L1 over one who can't (question C), and their higher appreciation for knowledge of commonwealth culture as a useful resource for English language teachers (question D), and finally by their overwhelming choice of International English as the target variety of English their students should aim for (question E).

This means that long stays abroad, in addition to having a beneficial effect on the language proficiency of learners, and possibly contributing to an increase in their self-confidence, incidentally give them more open views on issues like the ones studied in this paper regarding English as a *lingua franca*, and the implications for English language teaching of the international status of the language. One of such implications will necessarily be the choice of an intelligible non-native accent as their teaching model, thus forsaking once and forever EFL teachers' uncritical adherence to native accentedness.

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## Appendix

### QUESTIONS:

- A) If you were the director of a language school and were responsible for hiring the teachers, what would you prefer?
- a) to hire more NSs than NNSs
  - b) to hire as many NSs as NNSs
  - c) to hire more NNSs than NSs
- B) Do you think that having learned English as a second language provides you with a special advantage to teach EFL over NSs, as NSs haven't gone through the process of learning the language in adulthood?
- YES                      NO
- C) If you had to take English classes, what teacher would you prefer to have?
- a) A NNS from a different country (e.g., German, Greek...) who can speak Catalan and Spanish
  - b) A NS of English who can speak Catalan and Spanish
  - c) A NNS from a different country (e.g., German, Greek...) who cannot speak either Catalan or Spanish
  - d) A NS of English who cannot speak either Catalan or Spanish
- D) Rate from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) the need to have a good knowledge of the following, in order to teach English in Catalonia
- |                                |   |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| a) British culture             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b) Catalan and Spanish culture | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c) EU culture                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d) Commonwealth culture        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
- E) What English variety would you like your students to use?
- a) British English (RP).
  - b) American English.
  - c) I would like them to be able to speak English efficiently for international communication.

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