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## English Pronunciation Standard Preferences among Students of Polish Universities — Self-reports

**Abstract:** For many years now the debate as to the English pronunciation model to be selected for training both in academia and for schools in Poland has proved unresolvable. When pronunciation instruction is executed, anything that conspicuously departs from spelling pronunciation is accepted. It appears that teachers implicitly and largely unconsciously follow the idea of the somewhat impoverished instructional model of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) put forward by Jenkins (2000). Until recently, no reasonable, well-argued-for alternative was available, whereas now the model suggested in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015): *Native English as Lingua Franca* (NELF) fulfils the needs of both students in English departments as well as ordinary users of English.

This paper reports on the preferences as to the desirable standard in pronunciation instruction among students in academia — but not among those of English language departments — as learners of English as a Foreign Language for whom language proficiency may be an important professional asset in their future careers. To investigate the above, a research survey of the quantitative-qualitative type was implemented in the form of a questionnaire. The focus is not so much on the numerical favourites as on the reasons behind a stated preference. The respondents seem to aspire to realistic but nonetheless high goals.

**Keywords:** pronunciation model, learners' aspirations, ELF, NELF

### 1. Introduction

An ongoing debate as to the need for English pronunciation model to be selected for training both at academia and for school in Poland cannot be resolved. At academia, a general preference for the British or the American pronunciation is declared and the instruction is carried out accordingly, with more or less consistency. Whenever pronunciation instruction is executed, it is mainly applied to those words which conspicuously fall short of spelling pronunciation. As a result what is heard is mostly a

very rough approximation instead of what would normally be expected. It appears that at Poland's three level school system English teachers follow implicitly and largely unconsciously the idea of instructional model known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) of Jenkins (2000). This model appears to be gaining in popularity also among university trainers. Until recently, no reasonable, well-argued-for alternative was available. The standard English as a Foreign Language approach simply advocated the use of native speaker quality pronunciation. Recently, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) developed an idea she calls *Native English as Lingua Franca* as a model that fulfils a wider range of needs — from those of the English language academics, including English Philology departments, to those of the ordinary language user. As such it seems to be more versatile and more desirable than the ELF of Jenkins.

While each group of English students (school, general academia, English masters) considers and desires standards in pronunciation instruction, this paper concentrates and reports on the findings among the group of higher education students. The subjects for the investigations were selected among students at several different universities, some of them state-owned, others private enterprises. What unites them all is the fact that they are reading degrees other than English studies, or, in fact, any neo-philological courses.

### 1.1. What goals count as realistic in pronunciation instruction

It is generally agreed that teaching and learning pronunciation requires a model, “a clear, unambiguous reference point” (Rogerson-Revell 2011: 8) for the learner to refer to, one that learners and teachers feel comfortable with and which facilitates communication. Against this model, pronunciation appropriacy and accuracy is measured.

Apart from the model, clearly specified goals need to be defined. Minimally it is assumed that learners ought to aspire to achieve the status of highly intelligible, easily comprehensible bilingual speakers (Derwing 2010). The goals are substantially dependent on the particular contexts in which communication in English is to take place. For instance, most teachers agree that they, as professionals, need a substantially higher level of competence than an average student, also because they themselves necessarily need to provide a consistent, clear model to be followed and imitated, as well as they should have at the very least a substantial receptive competence in the standard variety or varieties. On the other hand, understanding someone who makes frequent pronunciation errors, who twists words and/or speaks unclearly requires substantial effort on the part of the listener. As such, it becomes uncomfortable in the sense that it may cause irritation and confusion in any recipient, native or non-native (Rogerson-Revell 2011).

It has been long observed that for the majority of English learners achieving the traditional EFL goal of (near -) native-like pronunciation is simply unattainable. Coupled with the fact that much of exchanges in English take place between the

Non-Native Speakers, the concept known as ELF — English as a Lingua Franca, with its pronunciation component of LFC — Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins 2000) was created. Essentially, the LFC contains only those features of the phonological system of English that are absolutely vital for communication, therefore those which remain outside the LFC are inessential and even detrimental to intelligibility. Additionally, favouring ‘native-speakerism’ borders on propagating linguistic imperialism, is parochial and harmful for those who wish to maintain their national identity (Walker 2010).

On the other end, continually valid proposals to follow an established native standard in pronunciation instruction are still advocated, even if realistically complete native-like quality of pronunciation is beyond most learners’ reach. That is why alternative ideas were developed to prioritize some elements of pronunciation over others, making the goals more within reach (Wells 2008: 109):

- (1) Priorities in pronunciation instruction
  - concentrating on the matters that most impede intelligibility, while encouraging fluency and confidence;
  - not neglecting the need to interact with NSs;
  - exploiting the findings of contrastive analysis to pinpoint likely areas of difficulty.

## 1.2. The concept of ELF and LFC

The following is a summary of the main features of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), as specified by Jenkins (2009: 12):

### (2) Lingua Franca Core features:

1. Consonant sounds except voiced/voiceless *th* and dark *l*
2. Vowel length contrasts (e.g. the difference between the vowels in ‘pitch’ and ‘peach’)
3. Restrictions on consonant deletion (in particular, not omitting sounds at the beginning and in the middle of words)
4. Nuclear (or tonic) stress production/placement.

The core specifies that consonant contrasts, save the ‘th’s, but including the velar nasal and the glottal fricative, are important to master, likewise the quantity contrast among vowels, but not the exact quality. Consonantal clusters are important only word-initially and medially, and accent-wise it is the nuclear tone that matters, not word-stress. Accommodation also emerged as crucial to ELF pronunciation.

The non-core features, those can be ‘safely’ ignored or downright prohibited, are summarised in (3) (Jenkins 2009: 13):

### (3) The non-core ELF features:

- Vowel quality except for the vowel sound in RP ‘fur’
- Consonants in (NS English) clusters separated by the addition of vowels (e.g. Japanese English ‘product’ as *peroducuto*), as well as vowels added to consonants at the ends of words (e.g. Korean English ‘luggage’ as *luggagi*)

- Features of connected speech such as elision, assimilation, weak forms
- Consonant sounds *th* (e.g. German English ‘think’ as *sink*), and dark *l* (e.g. in French English, the ‘l’ in ‘hotel’ pronounced by raising the tip rather than the back of the tongue)
- Word stress placement
- Pitch direction.

Walker (2010) further comments on those non-core features dividing them into those with no impact on intelligibility and those with a negative impact. Thus, weak forms<sup>1</sup>, connected speech phenomena (such as vowel reductions, elisions and assimilations) are considered to negatively impact communication and should be avoided by speakers. In contrast, intonation patterns, rhythm (stress-timing) and word stress are believed to be simply superfluous and unnecessarily complicating the performing and teaching load. In LFC, then, “weak forms would not be taught (but learners must know them in order to understand), lexical stress would be important while rhythm, intonation, and phonostylistics not at all” (Dziubalska-Kończak 2013: 464).

There are certain controversies connected with Jenkins’ proposal. Among those is the fact that this variety is to be used in NNSs’ interactions only, thus potentially confusing language learners, who have to switch to something different when interacting with NSs (Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015). Thus, a standard model can be applied in instruction, but only the LFC essential properties are selected from it for training. Such partial imitation of a model is highly illogical and potentially confusing for the learners. Thus, there is an implicit conflict between production and perception abilities of the learners, who are supposed to perceive and understand certain elements of the phonological structure without being able or even without attempting to produce them (Dziubalska-Kończak 2005).

As Dziubalska-Kończak (2013) points out, typologically, a possibility of finding one common core for learners from various linguistic backgrounds is plainly non-existent. In the words of Scheuer (2008: 116): “establishing a *common* core of acceptable EIL pronunciation is virtually impossible”, if only because of many speaker-related variables. Therefore, the proposed system must be seen as artificial, since an arbitrary selection is made from among the structural features of a natural language. Additionally, users are to switch from some of the LFC features to others depending on the interaction situation they find themselves in (Jenkins 2009). Such an approach puts rather heavy demands on speakers, who have to constantly monitor their pronunciation quality and repertoire.

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkins (2000: 148) calls them the “irritating habit of NSs of English”. She then goes on to say: “learners will still need to work on weak forms [...] *receptively* in the classroom” (Jenkins 2000: 148, underlining mine).

### 1.3. NELF as an alternative

Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015: 24 ff) introduced an attractive alternative to both ELF and EFL which she termed NELF (Native English as a Lingua Franca). She understands it to be a compromise between the two previous approaches. This concept treats native English as a valuable and effective tool of linguistic communication, largely ignoring issues of historical, cultural or social superiority. When one is willing to allow all ideological considerations give way to pragmatic arguments, adopting the ready-to-use native variety as a training model and goal is an obvious choice.

Arguing the case for regular pronunciation teaching, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) warns that speaking in a way which puts too much strain on the listeners is likely to make them irritated or annoyed, and ultimately discouraged from further contact with the speaker — that is true regardless of the fact whether the listener is a Native Speaker or a Non-native Speaker. She therefore seems to be inclined towards the minimal goal defined as comfortable intelligibility which would allow learners to use English in a variety of situation and for a full spectrum of purposes, without discriminating whether the interaction is taking place between non-native speakers only or native speakers are participants too. Therefore, any native model can be regarded as most universal and therefore most suited to the various needs of users of English (Dziubalska-Kolaczyk 2005). A native accent has wide intelligibility, phonodidactic materials and dictionaries are readily available, the gap between what is required for comprehension and what for production is eliminated — all that makes the native standard a natural and reasonable model.

NELF advocates the acceptance of a moderately or slightly accented speech which does not negatively influence comprehensibility. Learners are exposed to a variety of accents and models with the aim of expanding receptive intelligibility, yet they try to imitate the native accent for their own production. It can therefore be claimed that NELF best suits the purpose of achieving comfortable intelligibility understood as pronunciation which puts little or no strain on the listener in a variety of situations.

It needs to be observed that the overwhelming majority of English teachers, who themselves are non-native speakers with some degree of foreign accent, intuitively adopt and practice NELF in pronunciation instruction. Thus they assume the native model as reference point and ultimate goal, but do not require their learners to acquire all minute phonetic details, concentrating on selected features instead. The features that are prioritized, though, ought to be practised and faithfully imitated.

On the general level, NELF proponents adhere to the following principles in pronunciation teaching:

## (4) NEFL principles (Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015: 28):

- Preparing foreign learners to communicate with both native and non-native speakers
- A native model of pronunciation
- Goal: comfortable intelligibility in contacts with both native and non-native speakers
- Selected native accent features allowed; with pronunciation priorities established for L1 speakers in intelligibility research
- Exposure to native and non-native varieties for comprehension; but imitation/approximation of native models for production
- Acquiring accommodation skills is of some importance
- Native linguistic norms of correctness
- Including both native and non-native sociocultural norms; native and non-native cultural elements in instructional materials.

Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015: 25) herself takes the stand that “NELF pronunciation priorities should be established in a non-arbitrary fashion on the basis of empirical evidence as to which phonetic features learners of a given L1 background should acquire in order to be comfortably intelligible to other speakers of English.” She (2015: 130 ff.) further tries to establish a list of such priorities for Polish learners of English. Taking into account two criteria, namely intelligibility and accentedness, the following features rank high in terms of negatively affecting both aspects of Polish-accented English and thus ought to be considered pronunciation-learning priorities for Poles:

## (5) Phonetic features of Polish English relevant for intelligibility and accentedness

- spelling pronunciation and mispronunciation of individual words
- mispronunciation of interdental fricatives
- no distinction between [i:] and [ɪ]
- incorrect placement of word stress
- devoicing of word-final obstruents
- no distinction between long and short vowels
- stop insertion after angma.

What appears particularly interesting in this respect is that Jenkins herself has allowed users of English to try beyond the level of intelligibility: “it is important not to patronize those learners who wish to work towards the goal of a NS accent by telling them they have no need to do so” (Jenkins 2000: 101).

The subsequent sections attempt to investigate and report on the actual aspirations and preferences of the general, non-professional public of ordinary NN Speakers of English, this time selected from students of various universities in Poland, all with at least the B1–B2 level of expertise in general English.

## 2. The Study

The study represents a type of small scale research, whose results may not have universal validity, but which is seen as one of many insightful contributions to the issues signalled above.

Its main aim was to investigate Polish users of English's attitudes and preferences towards NELF and ELF pronunciation features and standards in communicating via English. In order to meet this primary aim, several specific questions were addressed:

### (6) Research questions

1. Do the participants want to sound like very proficient speakers of English?
2. What is their perception of the usefulness and effectiveness of native or non-native pronunciation standards for the purpose of international communication?
3. What are the reasons given for the particular choices?
4. How do they evaluate their own performance in various contact situations?

Investigating those issues stems from the popular conviction that the beliefs and attitudes learners have about their learning process, as well as their experiences and expectations turn out to be of paramount importance. Therefore, the study reported on in this paper hopes to contribute to this line of inquiry.

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 87 learners of English who are students in various institutions of higher education in the south of Poland. They were generally randomly picked up from among undergraduates at several different universities, some of them state-owned, others private enterprises. All of them are currently reading degrees other than English studies, or, in fact, any neo-philological courses. Thus, a random group of students from the Silesian University of Technology, Silesian University of Medical Sciences as well as University College of Social Sciences were surveyed to state their opinions. The hope of the researcher was that a good portion of them will have participated in international student exchanges, also at the earlier stages of their education, or have studied abroad for some period of time, or at least have personally experienced contact situations with native and/or non-native users of English, e.g. when travelling abroad or meeting foreigners in Poland. This prediction turned out to be true.

They were all at the ages between 20 to 24 (mean: 22.89), with nearly even distribution in terms of gender (47 females and 40 males). They have had language classes at their universities as part of their regular degree programs.



What is seen as a special value of such survey sample is that they are not (potential) professionals using English, nor are they students' of English departments<sup>2</sup> — they simply belong to a large population of ordinary users of English as a foreign language. Admittedly, a good number of them may potentially or actually plan to use English in the future professional life, this, however, makes them even more valuable respondents in the study.

## 2.2. The instrument and the procedure

To investigate the matters specified in the research questions, a survey type of quantitative-qualitative research was implemented. The data were collected by means of a specially-designed and anonymous questionnaire. The tool was very specific in the sense that the questions it contained were intended to offer insights into various aspects relating to respondents' views and experiences with spoken language comprehensibility combined with self-reflection concerning their own pronunciation attainment and preferences. Because the respondents were phonetically untrained, the non-technical descriptions have been used instead of proper subject terminology. No mention of, e.g. assimilation, elision, vowel reduction or weak forms is present, let alone terms like ELF or NELF, and that was a deliberate strategy of the researcher. They know and understand, however, what the term 'native speaker' means and who is referred to in this manner.

The questionnaire was worded in Polish, distributed in a paper format and filled in by a specific group of participants, as defined above. It consisted of 12 questions, 10 of them closed-type and 2 open-type questions. Only one question used the Likert scale for evaluation. Some of the items were rather extended in terms of the number of options they allowed respondents to choose from. The survey was designed to allow the interviewer to gather both factual and attitudinal information.

To analyze the collected data, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical procedures was employed. Some of the quantitative data was tabulated for easier reference. The qualitative portion was analyzed after the reduction of collected data, following the order of theme construction, displaying data and theory building or drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman 1994). The reduction of the data collected was executed through (1) simplifying the collected data, (2) selecting and focusing on the relevant data and (3) eliminating the redundancies in the data through a certain degree of re-wording. The steps allowed the author to arrange the answers thematically and in consequence to obtain a fuller picture of the respondents' opinions.

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<sup>2</sup> There are many studies exploring issues similar to those investigated in this paper, but they most frequently examine participants who are 'advanced' users of English, which really means students of language departments (e.g. Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Bielak 2015) or even English majors (e.g. Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk & Porzuczek 2015; Wach 2011).



### 2.3. The findings

The focus in this paper is primarily on what transpires from the collected data, therefore no division in this section is made into the presentation of the findings and their analysis in terms of relevance and informative value.

The first four questions investigated the respondents' personal experiences in encounters with native and non-native English speech. The questions started with the following opening: *Have you had the chance to...* and complemented with defining the actual type of encounter: *talk to a native speaker of English (in any of its varieties), talk to a foreigner but in English; listen to a native speaker of English, listen to a foreigner speaking in English?* The questions aimed at identifying the actual experiences of respondents to see if they form a valid group for subsequent investigations. The data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The respondents' experiences with English native and non-native speech (N = 87)

	talking to a native speaker of English		talking to a foreigner but in English		listen to a native speaker of English		listen to a foreigner speaking in English	
Face to face	35	40%	68	78%	37	43%	65	75%
Online (including games)	32	37%	35	40%	30	34%	49	56%
Other media	—	—	—	—	37	43%	35	40%
In my country	24	28%	40	46%	—	—	—	—
Abroad (exchange/holiday)	22	25%	35	40%	—	—	—	—

The answers testify to a variety of encounters with spoken English (by both native and international community) that the participants had. Thus the statements and opinions ventured by them can be taken as reliable since they come from first-hand experience. The questions were designed in the manner to distinguish between actual speaking and listening only. The aim was to implicitly make the participants' aware that these are distinct situations which call for different immediate skills, as well as to produce more relevant responses in the further part of the survey as it accustoms participants to reflective thinking from the very start. What also transpires from the answers is the fundamental — and growing — role of online and traditional media in maximizing encounters with spoken English.

The following questions concerned the evaluation of the success and ease of communication with the different groups of speakers: native and non-native. The first question was about who it was easier for them to understand, globally but

in reference to pronunciation: the native speaker, the foreigner speaking English or other Poles speaking in English. The second was about the effectiveness of communication in these three groups, but supplemented with some information related to reasons of their choices. The responses are believed to reflect what the participants think and thus reveal factual preferences (see Table 2 — the numbers represent raw scores).

Table 2: Comprehension and communication ease

N = 87		Ease of understanding		Ease of communication	
Native speaker	13	I understand more	9	I understand more	9
		I benefit more	13	I benefit more	13
				They understand me more	11
A non-native speaker	22	I understand more	22	I understand more	17
		I benefit more	16	I benefit more	16
				They understand me better	21
Another Pole speaking in English	52	I understand more	52	I understand more	52
		I benefit more	34	I benefit more	34
				They understand me better	45

The numbers displayed in the table do not always equal the N = 87, that is the number of respondents taking part in the study. That is because when expressing the opinions on the relative ease of communication or lack thereof only the participants who opted for a particular exchange type were taken into account. Nonetheless, they clearly demonstrate a prevailing preference of the respondents to communicate with non-native, Polish speakers of English. That is predominantly because, as they claim, comprehension is easier and communication is more efficient, both in terms of its reciprocal dimension as well as the ability to communicate the indented message. The relatively low position in this ranking occupied by native speaker exchanges may stem from the ELF-condemned reverence to NSs, for now it is impossible to determine. These reasons stand in sharp contrast to the preferences expressed in a similar study but with a different group of respondents (Buczek-Zawiła 2017), secondary school students, who actually overwhelmingly favoured communication with native speakers, mostly underscoring the benefits such encounters produced for them. What needs to be emphasized here is that it is the stated reason for the preference in communication that is significant, not the

simple calculations. These answers also testify a highly pragmatic and utilitarian attitude the respondents have to their communication effectiveness.

The following item placed participants in the role of raters and evaluators. They were asked to rate the relative ease or difficulty of comprehension of various users of English, both international and native, on a 5 point Likert scale, where 1 stood for easy comprehension and 5 for considerable difficulties (see Table 3). The participants were asked to relate only to those foreign users of English they have had any experience with or those they felt able to judge. Significantly, Polish speakers of English were excluded here.

Table 3: Ease or difficulty of NSs and NNSs comprehension

<b>The Speakers</b>	<b>Average score</b>	<b>SD</b>
Non-Europeans (- USA)	3.69	0.75
Non-Europeans = USA	3.20	1.19
British	2.84	0.76
Germans	3.26	1.14
French	3.00	1.04
Dutch	2.88	0.99
Spanish	2.80	1.05
Swedish	2.56	0.72
Italians	3.28	1.13
Russians	3.23	0.92
Ukrainians	2.62	1.08
European — other	2.90	1.07

The data in Table 3 reveal that there are no substantial differences in the level of difficulty in the English produced by speakers from varied linguistic backgrounds. It is mostly defined as a level that is generally comprehensible, though with some degree of problem. British-produced English appears slightly easier to understand for them than the American, which may be the spin-off result of the fact that it is the British variety of English that they are mostly exposed to in their formal classroom training. The materials and the teachers largely conform to this variety. On the other hand, the wider availability and popularity of American English in the form of various media and online materials should have ensured less difficulty in understanding. The results obtained in this question, when correlated with the reported preference for Pole-to-Pole interaction in English, suggest a comfortable accommodation on the part of the respondents to the language directed at them.

The investigation into respondents' awareness of the specific reasons for the comprehension difficulties was attempted in the following questions, where they were asked to refer to a list of features which could contribute to their listening comprehension problems.

Table 4: Factors in comprehension problems

<b>Pronunciation element</b>	<b>Native speakers</b>	<b>Non-native speakers</b>
The speed of delivery	78%	43%
Using simplified forms ( <i>d'you, they've</i> etc)	34%	15%
Unclear vowel (a?, e?, ae?)	25%	47%
Unclear consonants (something in between /b/ and /v/)	16%	43%
Word-stresses in different places	31%	25%
Linking words ('the red one' sounding like 1 word)	28%	17%
Too many different vowels	60%	42%
No distinction between voiced and voiceless sound at the end of words	20%	60%
Saying /p t k/ with an additional puff of air	27%	20%
Spelling pronunciation	0%	43%

The data gathered above demonstrate rather well that the participants are fairly able to identify the causes of potential or actual problems in comprehension, both those related to native as well as non-native speakers. The question concerned the receptive side of communication, nonetheless it provides some valuable information. First of all, it indicates that indeed perhaps some accommodation on the part of native speakers is called for in terms of the speed of delivery, identified by respondents as the single most serious factor influencing comprehension. Such a step is advocated both in the ELF and NELF approaches. Secondly, vowel reductions, expressed here under the labels "unclear quality" and (to some extent) "using simplified forms", turn out not to be a major problem in the respondents' views. It is, on the other hand, a highly overrated factor by ELFers. A similar point can be argued for certain other features of connected speech, such as word linking and word stress. These appear relatively unproblematic, especially in comparison to other elements. Providing a clear approximation of consonant quality clearly seems to prevent comprehension problems. The effect of aspiration (or lack thereof), a feature forcefully insisted upon by the ELFers, cannot be in any meaningful way blamed for causing particular comprehension difficulty. Vowels turn out to be of some importance, mostly in terms of their number and also quality. Admittedly, vowel length was not mentioned, so no

evaluation of the role of this parameter is possible. Still, the overall observation is that it cannot be unequivocally determined whether more problems are experienced with native speaker English than with non-native speech.

The following question examined the participants' perception of their own pronunciation skills. They were asked to evaluate the quality of their English pronunciation. They were given six options to choose from (see Table 5).

Table 5: Self-evaluation of the participants' English pronunciation (N = 87)

<i>How do you evaluate the quality of your pronunciation in English?</i>		
Approaching the level of the native-speaker	—	—
Fully comprehensible	9	10%
Comprehensible, but sometimes I am asked to repeat	21	25%
Comprehensible, but I make some mistakes and twist some words	34	38%
Probably comprehensible because I make mistakes and twist words	19	22%
Not really comprehensible, I tend to follow spelling pronunciation	4	5%

Again, the participants demonstrated careful reflective thinking. None of them overestimated their oral production skills stating that they approximate the native speaker competence level, and only 10 per cent (9 respondents) expressed no reservations as to the comprehensibility of their performance. A negligible portion of subjects stated that their pronunciation is very poor, with spelling inconsistencies identified as the main culprit. The overwhelming majority evaluated the quality of oral performance as acceptable, though not free of certain lapses. The answers can be interpreted as showing realistic judgment and full awareness of the participants' self-perceived deficiencies.

The respondents' assumed awareness of what they perceive as inadequacies and deficiencies in their oral production is further corroborated in their answers referring to their aspirations and ambitions in the area of pronunciation. The options provided to choose from this time were not the simple dichotomy native — non-native speaker quality. Instead, the seven options contained some justification for a given statement.

Table 6: Participants' aspirations in the field of pronunciation skills

<i>What are your ambitions and aspiration when it comes to quality of your pronunciation?</i>		
To talk like a native speaker because we should	—	—
To talk nearly like a native speaker because it helps when communicating	4	5%
To talk like a native speaker because it sounds nice	11	12%
To be comfortably intelligible	63	72%

To be intelligible, with some mistakes in more difficult words	5	6%
To be intelligible, though without certain sounds or characteristic features, as long as communication is successful	—	—
I do not really care about this, I can sound Polish	4	5%

The wording of the possible responses was such as to disclose not only the participants' preferences and ambitions, but also to receive some insight into what underlies their choices. On the whole, the aspirations are rather average. Admittedly, they may have been heavily influenced by the kind of experiences they had when learning English. In contrast to the younger respondents of the Buczek-Zawiła (2017)'s study, they had longer learning time and by now perhaps realize that certain (high) level of expertise is unattainable for them, just as it is for many other EFL learners. It is nonetheless significant that not a single person was ready to contend themselves with what was a primarily ELF objective, specified in a descriptive way: a speech which is comprehensible but without certain characteristic elements or sounds. Also, native English was selected as a desirable target on the grounds of two reasons: because it is an asset in communication and because it is aesthetically appealing. Nobody chose the option defining native speaker quality as a performance norm and of supreme value. These results appear to be highly significant as they defy the concern of Jenkins that too much attention and significance is given to native speakers as "owners of English". This aspect is largely ignored by younger people as simply insignificant and perhaps exaggerated. If they aspire to the goal of native quality of pronunciation at all it is because of pragmatism and aesthetic value.

To further substantiate the evidence of the last two questions, the respondents were asked to reflect on some specific features of their pronunciation. Later, in the open-format question, they were asked to personalize the list of pronunciation features they would like to work on with improvement in mind. They were advised that the list of features shown earlier may inform their answers but it could also be ignored. The following two tables present the results.

Table 7: Reflecting on one's own pronunciation

Pronunciation feature	Number of responses	Percentage
I don't have a problem with distinguishing or producing sounds like /ptk/ and /bdg/	87	100%
In words like banana or America I pronounce the last sound as an /a/	68	78%
I use shortened forms of some verbs, e.g. they've, we're, D'you, she'll	64	74%

When speaking I mark the difference between short and long vowel, e.g. 'sheep' and 'ship'.	49	57%
I link the words in speech, I don't make unnecessary pauses	47	54%
I normally stress the last but one syllable as in Polish	46	53%
I do not change the tone of voice, not even in questions	46	53%
I can hear the difference between the 'th' sounds and other consonants but I don't use them	45	52%
I say the -ng sound only before /k/ and in the middle of words (finger, bank)	42	48%
I say words like 'bed' and 'bad' with different vowel sound	42	60%
I learn how to stress words and apply the rules most of the time, stressing the right syllable	41	47%
My sz, ż, cz, dż sound like in Polish	40	46%
I say the words separately, not linking them	40	46%
Words like 'bed' and 'bad' are said with roughly the same vowel sound	35	40%
I can and do say the sound which is spelled as -ng, also at the end of words	31	36%
I articulate the vowels clearly, mostly according to their spelling	30	35%
My sz, ż, cz, dż sound a bit softer less harsh than in Polish	28	32%
I do not articulate all the vowels in the same manner, sometimes I ignore the spelling	26	30%
I can and do say the 'th' sounds as in think or they	24	27%
I often shorten some vowels, even skipping some, especially not stressed ones when unaccented, e.g. in short, not main words (e.g. of, at, from, have)	20	35%
I don't hear any difference between the 'th' sounds and /f/ or /v/	18	20%
I don't use shortened verb forms but I can hear them	15	17%
In terms of length 'sheep' and 'ship' are identical to me. I do not produce this length.	10	11%

When reflecting on the selected features of their own pronunciation, the participants were advised that they do not have to deal with every statement, instead, they were asked to provide feedback on the elements particularly relevant for them. Their reflections reveal that not only are they aware of what they do when they speak, but they can also rather honestly admit that there are some elements they do not handle skillfully enough. Bearing in mind the fact that questionnaires can be dangerous



tools in that respondents may sometimes answer intentionally, the fair confessions of respondents can be taken to significantly contribute to the overall validity of their answers.

When trying to diagnose the quality of respondents' speech from the data listed in Table 7, we can see the relationship between these reflections and the self-evaluation performed earlier. They do not attribute over-positive evaluation to their performance, do not judge themselves to speak better than they do — at least superficially. The correlations will naturally be different for each of the participants separately. Suffice it to say for the moment that it appears they were on the whole right in their self-evaluations and are conscious of the particular elements present in their English pronunciations.

This is also corroborated from their reports on the possible areas of improvement, as listed in Table 8. Their suggestions or recommendations are divided into four major groups: relating to vowels sounds, relating to other individual sounds, connected speech phenomena and other. Some of the responses concentrate more on what they would like to do in class, they are nonetheless included as they allow us to see what it is that they feel they need to work on. Some of the responses are modified to reflect their general ideas, others are quoted directly.

Table 8: Suggestions for improvement

In relation to vowels	In relation to other individual sounds	Connected speech phenomena	Other
Different distinctions between vowels (a? e? ae?)	The <i>ng</i> sound at the end of words and in the middle	More fluency and intonation practice	To always link new vocabulary to new pronunciation
The truly short vowels	"Nobody told me about anything special about [p, t, k]"	More rhythm	More spelling to sound relationships ("words are spelled very similarly but said differently")
Long and short vowels	The 'TH's'	Stressing words, especially related ones, with a stress shift	To sound „softer" than in Polish
Vowel reduction	"I and other people have voiceless sounds at the end of words — is it a problem? If yes, I want to improve it"	Simplifying forms when talking (D'you, t'go), contracted forms of verbs	To sound less Polish; To lose accent
The vowel in <i>bird</i> or <i>world</i>	The hissing sounds, especially in combinations with other	Not to say words separately	The speed of delivery

Again, the ideas voiced by the participants testify to their rather well-developed awareness and sensitivity to issues related to pronunciation. They have previously expressed some degree of satisfaction with the quality of their oral skills, they still are able to note areas where they can develop and improve. It needs to be added, though, that many of the comments were very personal in character, so that only about half of the suggestions can be somehow generalized.

The last question of the survey was whether they accept and/or judge as sensible the proposal that they need to develop much higher, nearly native-like standards of pronunciation for the comprehension, but can or should satisfy themselves with much lower performance level. Here the reactions were rather evenly divided, with nearly the same number of respondents supporting and negating this idea. As a result, the following data were obtained.

Table 9: Different standards for comprehension and production — respondents' views

<i>Do you agree that it makes sense to develop native-like pronunciation standards for comprehension but considerably lower ones for production as you don't need to be that proficient?</i>					
YES	45	51%	NO	42	49%
"I always understand more, it's easier"			"double standards do not work"; „I believe there should be only one standard to work on"		
"non-native performance makes me easier to be understood by others"			"If I try to understand more I am exposed to model that sticks in my mind and can be imitated, so one feeds the other"		
„It is always more difficult to say things nicely than to hear them, that means I don't need to study that hard"			"If I am expected to understand native speech why am I not supposed to produce it? Isn't it that one is the model for the other?"		
"Native speakers may not always be understood by those with a weaker command of English"			"I don't want to think that I need to be good at something but not so good for something else, especially that they are two sides of a coin"		
"better comprehension means that I understand the message, my own words can be repeated or clarified"			"a native speaker talks clearly, unlike foreigners, so if I speak like NS I am better at communication"		
"native speaker will understand me anyway, if I can understand them, then communication is easier"			"both are equally important", "it is important to understand and to be understood"		
"for learning it makes sense, it makes it easier, in real life — I have doubts"			"no comprehension means no production"		

As it becomes transparent, the respondents do not unanimously treat the ELF idea of pronunciation competence level dichotomy as a serious offer. They fail to see much logic in it, mainly because they see communication as a reciprocal,

two-sided process, so that good perception and comprehension skills should ultimately lead to equally good production. Additionally, they are opposed to what they term ‘double standards’, instead they perceive the benefits good reception can offer in terms of providing a model to follow and emulate. The respondents who expressed some understanding towards this idea stressed mainly the learning process facilitation effect such split requirements may have. Also, the pragmatic reasons expressed as “ease of communication” may have a bearing here. The comment that succinctly summarizes the whole concept is *“for learning it makes sense, it makes it easier, in real life — I have doubts”*.

#### 2.4. Discussion

It needs to be emphasized again that although the participants were familiar with basic phonetic distinctions to a certain extent, only the most basic of those featured in the questions or responses (vowel, consonant, voicing, intonation, accent). No specific terms like ELF or NELF were used, however, the elements of both approaches were embedded implicitly in the forms the questions and answer options took.

The findings obtained in the present study clearly indicate that the studied population express a clear preference for rather high standards of pronunciation defined by them as comfortable intelligibility, in any interaction context. Since, as illustrated in Table 1, they have had ample opportunities to communicate with native and non-native speakers in a variety of contexts and encounters, their opinions should be treated as meaningful. This finding corroborates the outcomes of other research studies of this type, even if those investigated mostly the views of English-language-oriented professionals (c.f. footnote 2). Although only 15 participants (17%) expressed their ambition to be able to speak English with native-like quality, the ideal defined as ‘comfortable intelligibility’ and selected by the overwhelming majority of the surveyed (63 participants — 72%), places their aspirations in the higher rather than lower values of the scale. They are not altogether indifferent to how they sound in English and they seem to perceive the close relationship between the quality of oral production (theirs and their interlocutors’) and the ease and precision of comprehension. In relation to Research Question 1, it can therefore be reasonably claimed that the participants want to sound like very proficient speakers of English.

Taken as a whole, the participants voiced positive opinions about the relevance of good quality pronunciation, both with native and international communication participants. They generally seem convinced that sounding like a native speaker may have certain advantages, most notably that of guaranteeing good intelligibility. That does not undermine the validity of functional intelligibility in certain international exchanges, yet they feel they aspire to more. Their perception of the usefulness and effectiveness of native or non-native pronunciation standards for the purpose of international communication (Research Question 2) is thus largely

influenced by their own experiences as well as the self-evaluation of the English pronunciation performed in the course of the study.

When reporting on their experiences with comprehending the message or communicating their own, they signalled the learning potential of the exchange. They realistically judged rather low potential in that matter from their fellow Polish interlocutors, whereas they still demonstrated a clear preference for Polish-accented quality of the message received, pointing to ease of understanding as the major reason. The strong preference for interacting in English with fellow Poles is both surprising and not so. One can suspect that the kinds of deviations or non-standard elements in their pronunciation will be the same or very similar to what the respondents do. Many of them will result from L1 influence. When the L1 is shared, many of the mispronunciations must be of repetitive or recurring character. What is more significant here is the honesty with which the participants admit that they opt for the comfort and the facilitative effect of what is familiar (Research Question 3).

Moreover, they were largely able to identify the problem areas that could contribute to the problems with native and non-native intelligibility (Research Question 4: How do they evaluate their own performance in various contact situations?). As such, they identified slightly different elements as pertaining to exchanges with native and non-native speakers. Incidentally, no opinions were solicited as to the effect of clear mispronouncing of certain commonly used words (e.g. ‘foreign’, ‘mountain’, etc.), something that is widely reported to be the major dissatisfaction area when native speakers make their judgments. Except for the speed of delivery elaborated on earlier, the vocalic inventory of English was identified as the single most significant aspect here (“too many vowels”). That is a problem mentioned in many discussions on these matters.

The concept of split standards for reception and production produced an even distribution of opinions. This idea, earnestly advocated by ELF proponents, states openly that one does not need to learn the same features and achieve the same level of proficiency when listening to speech and when producing it. The often cited examples are weak forms and certain segmental contrasts, e.g. the [l] or the [r]. Some respondents do not really understand why this should be. Many respondents were unable to provide a meaningful comment to support their choice in favour or against it. Many comments read “intuitively”, “I don’t really know what to say here”, “I think so, but I am not certain”. As to their own performance, implicitly understood as taking place in various interactional settings, they appear to possess rather good pronunciation skills, as evidenced by the list of features they identified as present in their production. Likewise, the non-standard forms are numerous and indicate the factual validity of their self-evaluations. When this is coupled with the elements identified for future development, a clear picture is painted of a definite preference for very high proficiency and quality of oral production.

It ought to be emphasized that the concept of native-like pronunciation was only used to provide a clear conceptual reference — no mention has been made

during material collection as to the apparent superiority or ownership of English. In that context it is significant that while delineating their aspirations in the field of pronunciation they state their choices primarily because good pronunciation facilitates successful communication, it may also be aesthetically appealing, but the normative value escapes them. This, reasonably, could be seen as dismissing Jenkins' fear of native-speakerism as an imposed normative standard.

### 3. Concluding remarks

What seems to transpire from the discussion is that the participants, who are still learners, indirectly opt for the concept of NELF as defined by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015), both in terms of what they can produce now and what they want to be able to produce as a result of further training. Also, they are able to perceive the distinction between the system and the realization. It is with the (sound) system that we are concerned with in pronunciation training rather than with details of realization (Wells 2008; Altman & Kabak 2011). The respondents, being young people, who have ample opportunities to use English internationally, for personal or, potentially in the future, professional reasons, display a mature attitude towards their oral skills. It can therefore be legitimately claimed that most of the responses obtained in this study indeed reflect the true beliefs of participants, yet some degree of intentionality and wishful thinking has to be allowed for in a survey format investigations.

The suggestion for further study, and at the same time the limitation of the present one, would be to investigate the actual performance of the participants in relation to their self-evaluations. It would allow the researcher to correlate the aspirations more directly to the actual potential of a Polish speaker of English.

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