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**STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION  
AND DIFFERENT VARIETIES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

**ACTITUDES DEL ALUMNADO ANTE EL APRENDIZAJE DE LA  
PRONUNCIACIÓN DE LA LENGUA INGLESA Y SUS  
VARIETADES EN LA CLASE DE INGLÉS**

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*In the last decades English has gained undeniable relevance and status to the extent that it has become essential both in the professional and personal spheres in many parts of the world. However, its pronunciation is still regarded as the “Cinderella” among the areas of language due to its neglect in the foreign language classroom. This study sought to investigate 55 secondary school students’ attitudes in the Basque Autonomous Community (Spain) towards English pronunciation, General American English (AE), Standard Southern British English (BE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as well as Native and Non-Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs and NNESTs). Additionally, students’ responses were statistically compared in terms of gender. Data was collected through a*

*questionnaire, the verbal-guise technique (VGT) and three open-ended questions. Results suggested that, although students believed in the importance of pronunciation instruction, English instructors should address its relevance more specifically. Native English varieties were prioritized, as well as NESTs. Statistically significant gender differences were also found. Conclusions and pedagogical implications are provided.*

**Key words:** *pronunciation, attitudes, English as a Lingua Franca, varieties of English, native and non-native teachers.*

*Durante las últimas décadas, la lengua inglesa ha ganado cierta relevancia posicionándose como una lengua esencial tanto en el ámbito profesional como en el personal a escala internacional. Sin embargo, su pronunciación todavía se considera la “Cenicienta” de las destrezas lingüísticas debido a su abandono en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio investiga las percepciones de 55 estudiantes de secundaria en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco (CAPV) hacia la pronunciación del inglés, el inglés estadounidense, el británico y el inglés como lengua franca, y hacia los profesores nativos y no nativos de inglés. Asimismo, este estudio analiza las diferencias de género de los estudiantes en sus actitudes. Los datos se recogieron mediante un cuestionario, la técnica verbal-guise y tres preguntas abiertas. Los resultados sugieren que, aunque se confiere importancia a la enseñanza de la pronunciación, su relevancia debe abordarse más específicamente en la clase de inglés. También indican preferencia hacia las variedades nativas del inglés, así como hacia los profesores nativos. Los resultados también muestran diferencias de género estadísticamente significativas. Se facilitan conclusiones e implicaciones pedagógicas.*

**Palabras clave:** *pronunciación, actitudes, inglés como lengua franca, variedades del inglés, profesores nativos y no nativos.*

## **1. Introduction**

The globalisation of the English language has fostered the establishment of a new global context in which non-native English speakers think of English as an international means for communicating with people from other cultures and backgrounds. For that reason, English has gradually gained ground in our daily lives and having a certain degree of fluency in the

language has become a necessity in many diverse settings. Thus, English is no longer employed as a means of interaction only in English speaking countries, but also between those in which it is not an official language. As a result, it has become a *lingua franca*.

In this process pronunciation comes to the fore, as successful language learning is connected to pronunciation inasmuch as the latter is essential for intelligible and comprehensible speech (Huensch & Thompson, 2017). Nevertheless, English phonetics tends to be neglected in the English classroom and has many times been referred to as the “Cinderella” of language teaching (Underhill, 2013). As regards linguistic research, pronunciation has not been studied in such depth as other fields, which may be due to the fact that it is more difficult to study as many variables play a part in its learning process (Çakır & Baytar, 2014). Throughout the history of second language learning, there have been diverse methods and approaches that contrast in the significance they have bestowed to pronunciation teaching and learning. Grammar and vocabulary have traditionally been comprehended by most language instructors, whereas the study of the branch of phonetics only flourished more recently: to be precise, shortly before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996). It is for that reason that this study investigates, on the one hand, Basque students’ attitudes towards English pronunciation and its learning in the English classroom and, on the other, their perceptions of different English varieties, namely AE, BE and ELF, as well as their attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs.

## 2. Literature Review

The global spread of English has led to the emergence of new English varieties, such as World Englishes, English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ELF. In order to account for the use of English around the globe, Braj Kachru developed his theory of the Three Concentric Circles (Kachru, 1985). The Inner Circle (IC) comprises those countries where English is spoken as a native language, the Outer Circle (OC) those in which it is spoken as an institutionalized variety due to colonisation –essentially by the IC countries–, and the Expanding Circle (EC) embraces those countries where the influence of English has achieved an international status and its usage is that of a foreign language.

## **2.1. English as a Lingua Franca**

Due to the tremendous impact of globalisation on the use of English both inside and outside the EC (Galloway & Rose, 2015), ELF is becoming the main means of communication in situations where language interaction is required between people who do not share a native language. Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey (2011) add that ELF differs from English and, thus, Native English Speakers (NESs) would also need to learn it if they wished to use it –, even if it would be much easier for them. EFL, unlike ELF, usually implies learning English with either the American or British English varieties as a reference (Tsou & Chen, 2014). Additionally, the ultimate goal of EFL speakers, according to Jenkins et al. (2011: 284), would be to achieve a native-like proficiency in the language, whereas ELF speakers are not “evaluated against a benchmark”. In the same vein, the “ELF perspective sees non-native Englishes as different rather than deficient” (Jenkins et al., 2011: 284), unlike EFL. Being native-like proficiency the aim of EFL teaching and learning, this paradigm diminishes non-native Englishes or Englishes that vary from the “norm”, i.e. non-standard varieties. As Mansfield & Poppi (2012) highlight, ELF speakers seek intelligibility as their main purpose; on the contrary, correctness is encouraged in EFL teaching (Tsou & Chen, 2014). Jenkins et al. (2011) insist on the fact that ELF sustains language contact and evolution theories, such as code-switching as a pragmatic resource, while EFL interprets these as gaps in speakers’ English knowledge. After having revised the differences of EFL and ELF, it is transparent that speakers of English are regarded differently in each theory. In ELF, they are not deemed incompetent or unsuccessful speakers, but preferably:

highly skilled communicators who make use of their multilingual resources in ways not available to monolingual NESs, and who are found to prioritize successful communication over narrow notions of “correctness”<sup>1</sup> in ways that NSEs, with their stronger attachment to their native English, may find more challenging. (Jenkins et al., 2011: 284).

Furthermore, even if the World Englishes and ELF paradigms do share interest in the development or evolution of English in different Englishes whose speakers have maintained a certain identity and have not abided by the rules of the standard varieties, these two differ in certain elements (Jenkins et al., 2011). In short, the former is concerned with the study of Englishes within separate territories, yet ELF sees English as “plurilinguistic” and more hybrid, intercultural and flexible (Jenkins et al., 2011: 284).

Since non-native English speakers (NNEs) are more likely to encounter other speakers of English who are not native, given that they constitute the vast majority of English speakers, the final objective of NNEs would be successful or intelligible communication (Sung, 2016). Therefore, “learners should be given a basis for understanding both native and non-native varieties, so that they can then fine-tune those varieties which are relevant for them” (Sung, 2016: 192). This is rarely the case today, and it should be an objective that the ELT community ought to strive for.

In the research performed by Jenkins (2000, 2002) on non-native speaker interactions, two phenomena were investigated: intelligibility problems due to mispronunciations and the use of phonological accommodation. She found that several phonological features originated successful communication, which she registered as the *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC) (most consonant sounds except from /θ/ and /ð/, initial consonant clusters, vowel length distinctions and nuclear stress), whereas some others that did not contribute to intelligibility or impeded it were recorded as the “non-core” (θ/ and /ð/ consonant sounds, weak forms, elisions, assimilations and word stress). On the subject of accommodation, she found out that speakers replaced “as much phonological L1 transfer as possible for those pronunciations which they considered to have the greatest potential to threaten this understanding” when intelligibility was crucial (Jenkins, 2002: 94). However, she argued that speakers would be unable to adjust those phonological features if they do not occur in their L1s, and that specific pronunciation instruction is necessary “to add to their phonological repertoires those features which are most important for intelligible pronunciation” (Jenkins, 2002: 96).

In Tsou & Chen’s (2014) study, EFL and ELF college students’ perceptions towards Englishes were measured. EFL students were regarded as those receiving English lessons only as a subject in their undergraduate degrees and, ELF students as the ones for whom English was a “medium of instruction and communication in their classroom and campus environment, and, more importantly, a common language among speakers of different mother tongues” (Tsou & Chen, 2014: 370). Besides, the EFL group shared the same background and L1 whereas the ELF group did not. Sixty-seven percent of the ELF group considered the rules of standard varieties to be more important than their owns’ in order to establish a common base for meaning negotiation, whereas slightly fewer participants

of the EFL group agreed to the statement (58%) and some (23%) did not give their opinion. Furthermore, 44% of the ELF students acknowledged a desire to modify their speech so that it resembled their interlocutor's and communication is facilitated. Communication is therefore one of the main concerns of these students, and they do accept it explicitly, affirming that intelligibility is more important than grammar correctness (82% of the ELF group and 84% of the EFL group).

The LFC wishes to promote communication or information transmission as a target for English learning. Nonetheless, ELF instruction is not so straightforward a task to perform. Deterding (2010) maintains that it may seem like a “soft” option to teaching English for its simplified or reduced façade, whereas it involves a great amount of work. To start with, even if acquiring ELF pronunciation is more realistic and achievable, most materials provided for language teaching hitherto are based on the IC varieties within the Kachruvian circles model and promote a native-like pronunciation as their main objective for English teaching and learning. Moreover, teaching accommodation skills involves a substantially greater effort than teaching BE or AE on the one hand, because obtaining such material is far more difficult and, on the other hand, for the reason that as the word *accommodation* itself suggests, adjusting to specific needs on a specific context involves considerably more work than teaching BE or AE in the same manner to diverse groups of students all around the globe. On the contrary, the goal of acquiring a native-like pronunciation is almost unachievable, whereas learning ELF involves readapting those goals to succeed in effective communication –and, not to resemble a native speaker of the language–. Thus, it is an attainable and real objective which may motivate students to continue learning the language.

## **2.2. Attitudes towards English Pronunciation**

The concepts of intelligibility and attitudes are inextricably linked. Attitudes have a substantial role in language learning in general and the learning of pronunciation in particular, for they can determine success or failure (Dörnyei, Csizer & Nemeth, 2006). However, as Galloway & Rose (2015) assert, attitudes can vary over time, as proven by the evolution undergone by attitudes towards prestige accents in recent times, since many speakers have adopted a stand in which native-like pronunciation is

no longer regarded as prestigious as in the past. According to Galloway & Rose (2015), there are several factors that affect attitudes towards a variety, namely stereotypes, familiarity with certain Englishes, competence, the notion of standardisation, and person specific attitudes such as physical appearance, race or vocal qualities.

As regards the literature concerning attitudes towards pronunciation, Gilakjani (2016) indicates that a positive attitude towards a language does seem to contribute to learning its pronunciation. Similarly, Gao & Hanna (2016) support the fact that positive attitudes result in better outcomes in pronunciation learning, due to the fact that motivation is stronger. In his paper, Gilakjani mentions a study concerning learner attitudes towards the teaching of English pronunciation, in which students at university level regarded pronunciation highly relevant a skill and expressed the need for its instruction (Madden and Moore, 1997 in Gilakjani, 2016). According to Çakır & Baytar (2014), EFL learners have a desire for learning English pronunciation and they also reckon it plays a key role in communication and intelligibility. In their study on perceptions towards learning English pronunciation, Almaqrn & Alshabeb (2017) found that just over half of the students had positive attitudes towards the learning of pronunciation (52%), although a greater proportion of the sample (82%) pursued achieving a native-like proficiency in spoken English. In a study by Chan (2016) on attitudes towards native English accents (UK, US and Australia) and Hong Kong English, a preference for the IC varieties was also found. These studies seem to indicate that EFL students have an interest in learning English pronunciation, while there is a general and strong preference for speaking the English language with a native-like accent.

### **2.3. Native versus Non-Native English Speaker Teachers**

Many scholars reckon that NESTs and NNESTs complement themselves since the strengths of one group are the weaknesses of the other, and vice versa (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002, 2005). Concerning the positive aspects of NNESTs, Medgyes (1994 in Ma, 2012: 2) postulates that they can

- (a) provide a good learner model for imitation;
- (b) teach learning strategies more effectively;
- (c) supply learners with more information about the English language;
- (d) anticipate and prevent language difficulties better;



(e) be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners; (f) make use of the learners' mother tongue.

Chang (2016) adds that NNESTs are good language learning models because of their experience as learners of English: they can anticipate learning problems. As to the positive aspects of NESTs, the most remarkable features they stand out for are their proficiency in English, experience as English users, relaxed teaching environment with authentic input and speaking as one of the main activities in the classroom (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Ma, 2012). Among NNESTs' weaknesses, the most noticeable one is their inferior competence in English, along with their exam-oriented teaching, as compared to the more relaxed environment created by NESTs. NESTs, on the other hand, tend to be less qualified in terms of lesson preparation, and may not be skilled enough to describe their native language's features such as grammatical rules (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Ma, 2012). Besides, NESTs often do not share their students' mother tongue and culture which has been proven to hinder language teaching and learning on many occasions (Chang, 2016).

In consequence of these strong suits and weaknesses, English students hold certain attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs. Generally, they prefer NESTs for pronunciation teaching and activities related to oral skills, but NNESTs as regards grammar skills and teaching strategies (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Rámila Díaz, 2015). As stated by Alseweed (2012), students have positive attitudes towards both groups, although they would rather be instructed by NESTs, probably because of the "perceived superiority" of the native speakers (Reis, 2012 in Berger, 2014: 38). With these results in mind, this study intends to investigate students' attitudes towards English pronunciation and its use in the English classroom, NESTs and NNESTs and BE, AE and ELF by triangulating the data obtained, a procedure not habitual in previous studies.

## **2.4. Gender**

The issue of gender has raised interest in the literature on attitudes towards varieties of English (Lasagabaster, 2003). Dewaele & McCloskey's (2015) study on attitudes towards foreign accents, as a case in point, reveals that gender had an impact on learners' attitudes towards their own foreign



accent: women learners of EFL were more reluctant than their male counterparts to accept their own foreign accent. However, Siebert's (2003) study revealed men's concern on acquiring an impeccable pronunciation. What is more, in this study male EFL teachers were in agreement with the belief of remaining silent until one is able to speak in a correct manner. The author suggests that "female teachers value communicative attempts by students more highly than do male teachers" (Siebert, 2003: 31), although it may imply anxiety towards correct or perfect pronunciation to a certain extent. Moreover, Xia (2013) points out that women are more inclined to using standard forms of language than men. For instance, men would use the phrase "*Are you comin'?*" whereas women would more likely employ the next standardised form: "*Are you coming?*"

Eshghinejad (2016) analysed EFL undergraduate students' attitudes towards learning English in Kashan, Iran. In this study, it was revealed that female students had more positive attitudes than male learners towards learning English and that the difference in gender was statistically significant. Likewise, in his study on attitudes towards IC varieties (two from the UK and two from the US) and EC varieties (two Japanese ELF speakers' productions), McKenzie (2008) found that female participants rated IC varieties higher than their male counterparts. Even if the IC productions were carefully selected in that "previous native speaker attitude research has demonstrated that together they constitute examples of the most and the least favourably evaluated speech varieties in the UK and in the US", they obtained the highest ratings by the female group (McKenzie, 2008: 71). These findings contrast with McKenzie, Kitikanan & Boriboon's (2015) research on Thai university students' attitudes towards UK, US, Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Indian English. The results indicate that UK, US and Thai English were ranked higher than the others and that there was a general reluctance towards the Japanese, Chinese and Indian varieties, "perhaps suggesting some degree of prejudice against these groups more broadly ... and indeed there is some historical evidence of negative stereotyping of Chinese and South Asians more broadly within Thai society" (McKenzie, et al., 2015: 545). Females rated Thai English significantly higher than males, who may contemplate English learning as a female activity, as pointed out by the authors. Because the recordings were produced by female speakers, the authors also argue that female participants may show high levels of solidarity and empathise with Thai females.

This brief revision of the chief aspects of gender and pronunciation in the literature has shown that there are remarkable differences in males' and females' attitudes towards EFL pronunciation. Besides, it has been ascertained that there are contrasting attitudes towards ELF varieties within the female group as well. Accordingly, gender is a variable considered in this study and included as a research question, because these differences may not emerge in different contexts (*Asia versus Europe*).

### **3. The Study**

As an attitudinal study, it aims to (1) assess the attitudes of Basque learners of English towards the importance of pronunciation as well as to (2) measure students' attitudes towards the nativeness factor concerning English teachers in the English classroom. The study also seeks to (3) measure the participants' attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF. Additionally, (4) the differences in attitudes between females and males are also analysed.

#### **3.1. Research Questions**

Bearing in mind the aims of the study, it addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the students' attitudes towards the importance of English pronunciation?
- RQ2: What are the students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs?
- RQ3: What are the student attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF?
- RQ4: Is there any significant difference between males and females in any of the above?

#### **3.2. Participants**

The participants in the study consisted of 55 students (26 females and 29 males) from a school in the Basque Autonomous Community in northern Spain. They were attending a private secondary school located on the outskirts of the town. The students were aged 16-19 and they were either

in their fourth grade of compulsory secondary school (15-16 years old) or in their first year of optional secondary school or *Bachillerato* (16-17 years old). Most of our participants were consecutive bilinguals (they had Spanish as L1 and learnt Basque as L2 at school). It has to be noted that Basque and Spanish have almost the same phonological representation, as there are only minor phonological differences between both languages which are often not captured by Basque L2 speakers and therefore their bilingualism was not considered to affect their language attitudes towards pronunciation. Besides, 43.6% of them had carried out stays in English-speaking countries in order to improve their English and, of those who had not, the vast majority of them (90.3%) stated that they would have liked to. In any case, the “stay abroad” variable was not considered in this study. A fourth of the sample (25.5%, 14 out of 55) possessed an official certificate in English, eight of whom (14.5% of the sample) had a B2 certificate and only one (1.8%) a C1 certificate according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The rest of the certificate holders’ qualifications (9.1%) belonged to lower levels: A2 and B1. Therefore, merely 16.3% of the sample were certified at the B2 or C1 level. As for their previous experience with English teachers, 38.9% affirmed having been taught by a NEST at some point and, of those who were not, 75% would have liked to. Finally, the vast majority of the participants had studied English as an extracurricular activity for 5 years on average. When the experiment was conducted, however, only 60% of the students were attending extracurricular English lessons (2 hours a week).

### 3.3. Instruments

Personal information about the sample’s background was obtained through a questionnaire survey: their age, gender, native language(s), English certificates, languages employed in different contexts or situations, stays in English speaking countries, extracurricular private English classes, and the number of NEST teachers they had had until the moment of the study. This information was used to provide the sample’s background and context above.

A six-point Likert scale questionnaire elicited students’ perceptions concerning English pronunciation, NESTs and NNESTs and ELF, in

which 1 expressed strong disagreement and 6 strong agreement. The questionnaire was made up of 29 items and also elicited students' anxiety levels as regards English pronunciation learning, but due to space constraints reference will only be made to those directly addressing the research questions. Some items had to be eliminated from the final three scales so that a satisfactory Cronbach Alpha value could be achieved, which is why scale 1 had more items than the other two scales, but this should have no impact on the results, as this is the usual procedure when analysing results obtained through a questionnaire, as explained below. Cronbach Alpha coefficients were calculated in order to assess internal consistency in each of the scales. The results are displayed in Table 1. The first scale, attitudes towards pronunciation, was made up of 9 items and its reliability coefficient was satisfactory (.852). In the case of the third and fourth scales, attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs and attitudes towards ELF, although they initially consisted of 6 items each, their Cronbach Alpha coefficients were significantly weak (-.309 and .035), which is why two items were removed from the two scales in order to achieve an acceptable internal consistency of .510 and .503. As it is reasonably difficult to obtain a decent Cronbach Alpha coefficient with small scales, the mean inter-item correlation value was performed, which is a straightforward measure of internal consistency according to Clark & Watson (1995). The result was the following:  $\mu = .200$  for the NESTs and NNESTs attitudes scale and  $\mu = .201$  for the ELF attitudes scale. Clark & Watson (1995) recommend a mean within the range of .15 to .20 for scales that assess broad constructs as in this case, and between .40 to .50 for scales analysing narrower concepts. Thus, it was assumed that all of the scales for the general pronunciation questionnaire were reliable and statistical analyses could be performed in order to answer the research questions posed above. All of the items were randomised and there was a balance between positive and negative (reverse coded) items. The reverse coded items were rescored so as to be analysed (while positive items were scored from 1 to 6, the reverse coded were from 6 to 1). Therefore, reverse coded items' analysis should be understood as if they were positive statements.

The verbal-guise technique (VGT) was employed to elicit students' attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF. As Chan (2016) observes, although the matched-guise technique is one of the most employed procedure when measuring language attitudes, the recordings lack authenticity because

<b>Attitudes towards pronunciation <math>a = .852</math> (9 items)</b>	
Item 9	Learning English pronunciation is a waste of time. (reverse coded)
Item 10	If an English pronunciation course were offered in the future, I would not like to take it. (reverse coded)
Item 11	I think that learning English pronunciation is boring. (reverse coded)
Item 12	If my English teacher set an optional assignment on pronunciation, I would certainly submit it.
Item 13	I would like to learn English pronunciation even if I were not required to do so.
Item 14	I would be willing to make an effort to learn English pronunciation.
Item 15	I would have liked it if my teacher had focused on pronunciation in English classes.
Item 16	I find the difference between Spanish and English sounds very interesting.
Item 17	I very much enjoy learning English pronunciation.
<b>Attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs <math>a = .510</math> (4 items)</b>	
Item 18	My English pronunciation would be better with a native teacher.
Item 19	A native teacher would assess my English pronunciation better than a non-native teacher.
Item 21	A native teacher would focus more on pronunciation.
Item 22	If we want to improve our English pronunciation it is important that the teacher be a native speaker.
<b>Attitudes towards ELF <math>a = .503</math> (4 items)</b>	
Item 26	When I speak English, I feel a world citizen.
Item 27	It is not important to understand different English accents like the Indian, Japanese or Middle East. (reverse coded)
Item 28	One needs to know about the American or British cultures in order to know English.
Item 29	It is enough to know the American or British English accents. (reverse coded)

Table 1. Reliability: Cronbach Alpha coefficients.

one single speaker provides the entire set of recordings. In the VGT, however, several speakers are recorded in their authentic accents, which is an attempt to overcome the lack of authenticity issue. The three speakers recited the same passage, a fragment of a short story entitled *Comma Gets a Cure*, ethnically neutral and considered appropriate for the participants' aptitude. Three recordings –one per variety– were obtained from the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) and were accompanied by a semantic-differential scale containing eleven pairs of bipolar adjectives, where both dimensions of status and solidarity were included. Traits such as *educated*, *attractive* or *self-confident* usually pertain to the dimension of “status” or “superiority”, often attributed to the standard varieties from the US and the UK (McKenzie, 2008). Whereas the standard varieties are frequently judged positively in terms of “status” with adjectives such as *intelligent*, *educated* and *respectable*, non-standard varieties tend to be judged very positively in terms of “solidarity”, i.e. traits such as *friendly*, *trustworthy* and *funny* (Mirshahidi, 2017). The recordings were played once and, after each, participants were given some time to complete the corresponding semantic-differential scale. Finally, three open-ended questions complemented the results from the VGT. The experiment was completed in class and their responses were recorded in answer sheets, which were statistically analysed by means of SPSS.

### **3.4. Procedure**

The experiment was conducted in Spanish, one of the participants' native languages, in order to avoid any confusion. It was carried out in their own classrooms and the complete group participated all at once. First, they completed the personal questionnaire survey; afterwards, they were told that, in the second part of the experiment –the general pronunciation questionnaire–, they were required to express their genuine attitudes towards learning pronunciation. Next, the verbal guises were played and, after each recording, participants were given some time to complete the corresponding semantic differential scale. The ELF recording was played first, followed by the AE and BE samples. At the end of the experiment, respondents were asked to express their attitudes towards the speakers in the recordings via three open questions. All students participating in the study were thanked for their collaboration.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Pronunciation Questionnaire

The first research question examined students' attitudes towards the significance of English pronunciation. Table 2 displays the items referred to in this paper. An average mean for each of the scales was calculated by adding the means of each item and dividing the result by the number of items in each scale. The mean value for the entire scale of attitudes towards the importance of pronunciation ( $M = 3.85$ ) showed a balanced outlook that slightly favoured positive attitudes. Whereas pronunciation learning was considered relevant, (item 1,  $M = 4.96$ ), participants did not identify it as a pleasant activity (item 4,  $M = 3.09$ ).

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Item 1	Learning English pronunciation is a waste of time. (reverse coded)	4.96	1.12
Item 2	I would be willing to make an effort to learn English pronunciation.	4.36	1.14
Item 3	If an English pronunciation course were offered in the future, I would not like to take it. (reverse coded)	4.05	1.35
Item 4	I very much enjoy learning English pronunciation.	3.09	1.33

Table 2. Means and standard deviations in descending order for attitudes towards English pronunciation.

Furthermore, students expressed their desire to make an effort in order to learn English pronunciation (item 2,  $M = 4.36$ ) and to enrol in future pronunciation courses (item 3,  $M = 4.05$ ). We also addressed the effect that gender (RQ4) could have on the students' perceptions towards the importance of English pronunciation. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scales' total scores for males and females (Table 5). Levene's test for equality of variances was violated so equal variances were not assumed ( $p < .05$ ). The independent-samples t-test confirmed that the differences between males ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) and



females ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) were statistically significant,  $t(43.254) = -2.124$ ,  $p = .039$  (two-tailed), and the magnitude of the differences in the means was moderate (Cohen's  $d = .058$ ). At this stage it is worth noting that, according to Cohen (1988: 284-287), a .01 value implies a small effect, .06 a moderate effect and .14 a large effect. Therefore, the total mean scores for males and females revealed that the female participants had more positive attitudes towards the importance of English pronunciation.

The second research question concentrated on NESTs and NNESTs (Table 3). Students were asked about NESTs' and NNESTs' abilities for English pronunciation teaching. Participants seemed to believe on NESTs' better capacity for pronunciation instruction (item 5,  $M = 4.21$ ) and assessment (item 6,  $M = 4.18$ ). Nevertheless, NESTs were not contemplated as a compulsory factor for students to enhance their English pronunciation (item 8,  $M = 3.16$ ). Still, NESTs would, in students' views, prioritize pronunciation to a greater degree than NNESTs (item 7,  $M = 4.00$ ). As concerns gender differences, the independent-samples t-test (Table 5) showed that there were no statistical differences for the total scores, even though the mean scores were higher for females ( $M = 4.25$ ) than males ( $M = 4.09$ ).

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Item 5	My English pronunciation would be better with a native teacher.	4.21	1.34
Item 6	A native teacher would assess my English pronunciation better than a non-native teacher.	4.18	1.41
Item 7	A native teacher would focus more on pronunciation.	4.00	.90
Item 8	If we want to improve our English pronunciation it is important that the teacher be a native speaker.	3.16	1.34

Table 3. Means and standard deviations in descending order for attitudes towards NESTs.

The third research question was focused on the three varieties BE, AE, and ELF, also analysed in the VGT and open-ended questions (Table 4). The participants gave their opinions on the pertinence they attributed to each variety and their cultural value.

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Item 9	It is not important to understand different English accents like the Indian, Japanese or Middle East. (reverse coded)	3.74	1.27
Item 10	It is enough to know the American or British English accents. (reverse coded)	3.41	1.41

Table 4. Means and standard deviations in descending order for attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF.

Being able to comprehend different ELF accents was considered relevant (item 9,  $M = 3.74$ ), as well as the fact that knowing diverse accents other than the British and the American is essential (item 10,  $M = 3.41$ ). No statistical differences were found among males and females as to their attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF (Table 5), yet females' mean scores were, again, slightly higher than those of their male counterparts.

	<b>Males <i>M (SD)</i></b>	<b>Females <i>M (SD)</i></b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sign.</b>
<b>Attitudes towards English pronunciation</b>	3.60 (.68)	4.11 (1.02)	-2.124	.039
<b>Attitudes towards NESTs</b>	4.09 (.40)	4.25 (.47)	-1.279	-.206
<b>Attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF</b>	3.45 (.50)	3.64 (.56)	-1.276	.208

Table 5. Independent-samples t-test for each scale. Independent variable: gender.

#### 4.2. Verbal-guise Technique

The total average mean scores for each scale were also calculated by adding the means of each item and dividing the end result by the number of items in each scale. The value assigned to each trait goes from 1 to 6, where 1 expresses the most negative connotation and 6 the most positive one.

The British variety was ranked highest ( $M = 4.42$ ) with the American ( $M = 4.28$ ) in second place and ELF ( $M = 3.90$ ) in third. BE was perceived highly *self-confident* ( $M = 5.27$ ), *polite* ( $M = 5.18$ ), *respectable* ( $M = 5.11$ ), *intelligent* ( $M = 5.00$ ) and *educated* ( $M = 4.94$ ). Traits such as *attractive* ( $M = 3.31$ ) and *funny* ( $M = 2.66$ ) obtained drastically lower values. The second highest mean ratings corresponded to AE, which was contemplated as *self-confident* ( $M = 4.94$ ), *polite* ( $M = 4.74$ ), *educated* ( $M = 4.69$ ), *intelligent* ( $M = 4.59$ ) and *respectable* ( $M = 4.46$ ). Values for *attractive* ( $M = 3.74$ ) and *funny* ( $M = 2.81$ ) were, again, considerably lower. The arrangement of the traits followed a similar order for ELF as compared to the former ones. Participants rated *polite* ( $M = 4.31$ ) the highest of all, followed by *intelligent* ( $M = 4.16$ ), *educated* ( $M = 4.14$ ) and *respectable* ( $M = 4.09$ ). Lower were the rankings for *self-confident* ( $M = 3.74$ ) and especially for *attractive* ( $M = 3.22$ ) and *funny* ( $M = 3.11$ ).

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare scores on students' attitudes towards ELF, AE and BE. There was a significant effect for attitudes (large effect size; multivariate partial eta squared = .226), which implied that there was a difference in attitudes among ELF, AE and BE. The pairwise comparison results revealed that the differences between ELF and AE ( $p = .018$ ) and among ELF and BE ( $p = .002$ ) were significant, although not those between AE and BE ( $p = .936$ ).

### 4.3. Open-ended Questions

The three questions are examined separately in the following lines.

*Which variety did you like the most: the 1st, 2nd or 3rd? Why?*

Participants reported a marked inclination for BE, which was preferred by more than half of the group of students (56.6%). Their second choice was AE (26.4%) and ELF was their last (15.1%). Students' responses were qualitatively analysed according to common themes. *Attractiveness* (14<sup>2</sup>), *self-confidence* (14), *intelligibility* (14) and *good pronunciation* (11) were the most repeated ones to justify participants' preference for BE. Those who had a preference for AE held that the speaker was *friendly* (5),

*self-confident* (4), *pleasant* (4), and had *good pronunciation* (5). Furthermore, some even commented on the fact that he seemed *young* or *youthful* (3) which felt appealing and closer to them. ELF was deemed mainly *friendly* (5) and *pleasant* (4). Features such as *youthful* (1) and *funny* (1) were also pointed out: “he made the story sound funny and sounded cheerful” (student 5).

*Which variety did you like the least: the 1st, 2nd or 3rd? Why?*

The least preferred variety was ELF (43.4%), followed by AE (28.3%) and BE (26.4%), suggesting a well-defined negative judgement towards ELF. ELF was disliked because the speaker seemed *insecure* (12), *not intelligible* (8), had *poor pronunciation* (5) and was *unattractive* (4) to the students. AE was chiefly disapproved for sounding *unpleasant* (4) and *unattractive* (4), and sometimes *unintelligible* (5). Additionally, some regarded the speaker as *unfriendly* (3). BE was predominantly not accepted for sounding *boring* (7) and *unattractive* (7).

*Would you like your English to sound like any of the varieties you listened to? Which one? Why?*

There seemed to be an overall tendency towards BE (51.9%) rather than AE (23.1%) and ELF (11.5%), yet again the two standard varieties were favoured. In general, among the participants who selected BE, *good pronunciation* (10) and *intelligibility* (11) were listed by many and *self-confidence* (6) and *attractiveness* (5) by some. The AE speaker was particularly popular for his *good pronunciation* (6) and *self-confidence* (5). Moreover, it was deemed as *attractive* (3) and *intelligible* (2). Lastly, *pleasantness* (2), *friendliness* (2) and *intelligibility* (2) were equally highlighted by the participants who aimed to sound like ELF.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The study reported in this article examined secondary-education Basque students' attitudes towards the importance of English pronunciation, NESTs and NNESTs and BE, AE and ELF.

*RQ1: What are the students' attitudes towards the importance of English pronunciation?*

The first research question addressed students' attitudes towards pronunciation. The results from the general pronunciation questionnaire indicated that participants held moderately positive attitudes towards English pronunciation and recognized not only the value in learning it, but also their willingness to study it. These findings go in line with Çakır & Baytar's (2014) investigation in which learners aspired to learn English pronunciation and acknowledged that it is essential for communication. However, some of the responses displayed mixed feelings towards the pleasure in learning English pronunciation which was deemed, on the one hand, "not boring" but, on the other, not quite enjoyable. This is comparable to Almaqrn & Alshabeb's (2017) findings supporting that just over half of the participants held positive attitudes towards learning English pronunciation. On another note, in spite of the fact that the Basque students acknowledged its usefulness, they were not as disposed to commit to additional assignments in order to enhance their English pronunciation and only half of the students would have appreciated if the English instructor had focused more on pronunciation. This may indicate that there is a need for raising students' awareness of how important pronunciation is and address it more specifically in the English classroom.

At this stage it has to be noted that the fourth research question will be addressed when referring to each of the other three research questions individually. Consequently, in addition, males' and females' responses were statistically compared and the results revealed that the latter had significantly more positive attitudes towards English pronunciation than the former. Females gave great importance to learning English pronunciation, which was not unexpected given that they found satisfaction in learning it. Our results therefore concur with those obtained in Asian contexts (Eshghinejad, 2016) and would point to a global trend, although studies undertaken in diverse settings are sorely needed in order to confirm this trend and draw more definitive conclusions. These findings imply the necessity to concentrate on male students' needs and work on the importance of English pronunciation more specifically in the EFL classroom.

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*RQ2: What are the students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs?*

As regards the second research question on Basque students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, results from the questionnaire revealed that NESTs were preferred to NNESTs. Participants perceived NESTs as superior in terms of pronunciation teaching and assessment and reckoned they would be able to work more on pronunciation with a NEST as their English instructor. Even so, participants were doubtful about the fact that NESTs are almost a compulsory factor if they are to improve their pronunciation. This trend seems to coincide with the one observed by Ma (2012), who found that NESTs gave special attention to speaking activities in their lessons. Moreover, the overall preference for NESTs is consistent with findings from Lasagabaster & Sierra (2005) and Rámila Díaz (2015), who observed that NESTs were generally preferred for pronunciation teaching and activities related to oral skills. By and large, Basque students' attitudes support the link between pronunciation teaching and NESTs, even though they acknowledge NNESTs' efficiency as teachers. Therefore, balancing the weight of pronunciation activities and grammar and vocabulary activities, and increasing the presence of non-native speakers (e.g. in listening activities) in the English classroom may encourage more positive attitudes towards NNESTs.

*RQ3: What are the students' attitudes towards BE, AE and ELF?*

The triangulation of the data by means of the three instruments used in the study indicated that there was a preference for the two standard varieties and, especially for BE. The latter was rated highest on the status dimension traits and results from the open-ended questions corroborated those findings in that it was participants' first choice and the one they would prefer to emulate. Moreover, students mentioned attributes such as *attractive* and *self-confident* to describe BE in the open-ended questions, which belong to the status dimension and support the results from the VGT. Students' second choice, AE, was rated highest on the status dimension as well. The open-ended questions support these results in that, as in the case of BE, status dimension traits were cited as rationale for their selection, e.g. *attractive*, *self-confident*. Accordingly, these findings are directly in line with previous literature holding that those traits pertaining to the status or superiority dimension are often attributed to standard UK or US varieties in Asian contexts (Chan, 2016; McKenzie, 2008; Tsou & Chen, 2014).

Strikingly, although similar to Chan's (2016) findings in Hong Kong, the two standard varieties were also rated higher than ELF on those traits pertaining to the solidarity dimension. Even though results from the VGT were inconclusive as to whether status or solidarity dimension traits prevailed, the open-ended questions however revealed that ELF was frequently attributed solidarity dimension traits such as *friendly* and *pleasant*, which is in line with previous research (McKenzie, 2008; Mirshahidi, 2017). These results indicate the need to triangulate data in order to obtain fine-grained results. Despite the fact that the two Inner Circle varieties were Basque students' preference, BE and AE were not perceived as the exclusive alternatives in order to learn English. Moreover, students believed that it is primary to be able to comprehend non-native accents, which confirms that students did consider English a global language, despite their preference for the standard varieties. Consequently, textbooks should come to terms with students' views and abandon the widespread practice of teaching English as a language stemming and being indivisible from the Inner Circle, as other authors similarly suggest (Chan, 2016; Sung, 2016; Tsou & Chen, 2014).

## **6. Pedagogical Implications**

After having discussed and compared the findings to prior research, this section provides several pedagogical implications.

The rapid spread of English due to globalisation and its role as a *lingua franca* have increased the presence of English in today's way of life, making communication the main purpose of English interactions. In spite of English pronunciation's vital role in spoken interplay, it is still avoided in the English classroom. The grounds for its neglect seem to be that teachers often lack proper preparation for pronunciation instruction. Hence, teacher training should be the foundation for an appropriate approach to pronunciation teaching. Teacher training programs shall address English pronunciation and its pedagogy as part of the curricula and provide English teachers with the required skills to incorporate pronunciation instruction to their lessons both in theoretical and practical activities. However, pronunciation instruction should be adapted to each context so that students' needs are satisfied. As Jenkins (2002) suggests, there are several sounds that promote intelligibility, which she grouped together as the



*Lingua Franca Core*. Learners should be trained in those features which are the most demanding for them and that promote intelligibility in order to enhance their communicative competence. These should include segmental as well as suprasegmental aspects of English, as they are both necessary for a complete approach to pronunciation learning since lack of intelligibility can be attributed to both aspects of the language (Moghaddam, Nasiri, Zarea & Sepehrinia, 2012). Therefore, English instructors should be aware of their students' needs and train them in order to improve their pronunciation in those specific features that hinder their intelligibility. English instructors would need to assess their students' pronunciation skills to work on those specific errors or difficulties that prevent them from communicating successfully. Assessing students' pronunciation proficiency can be performed by making them read several sentences containing those sounds which promote intelligibility and are the most difficult for English learners in that context, for instance. This activity would help teachers evaluate students' pronunciation skills related to reading. For testing students' spoken production, a simple oral activity as a discussion or conversation in groups would prove useful. By these means, students would receive appropriate training tailored to their requirements as English learners in their specific context.

Thus, pronunciation teaching should not aim at achieving a native-like proficiency or correctness, concepts often highlighted in language teaching. Learners should, on the contrary, be trained to be able to communicate by exploiting their multilingual resources.

English instructors should work towards intelligibility or effective communication since not only is it a realistic aim (Deterding, 2010) but it can also motivate students through their learning. Pronunciation should also be part of the assessment, given that each skill needs evaluation: spoken and written interaction and production, and listening and reading comprehension. Incorporating pronunciation into the evaluation criteria would make their relevance and presence equal, which could have a positive impact on students, as their commitment to pronunciation learning would be stronger.

On another note, participants to this study acknowledged the weight of pronunciation although not sufficiently to undertake any additional work to improve it. For that reason, English learners should be made aware of

the potential of pronunciation to enhance their English communicative abilities by addressing ELF and its communicative role in today's globalised society in the English classroom. Interestingly, male participants in this study were less concerned about English pronunciation. Thus, instructors should work on each context's individual differences so that their students conceive English as more than a foreign language and understand its usefulness in fields such as education, science, press, business, travel, or others that may be relevant to them.

Besides, participants in this piece of research acknowledged the relevance of non-native English varieties and the need to understand them. Conversely, they also showed a clear-cut inclination towards native varieties and, particularly, BE. This may be due to the lack of exposure to non-native varieties of English in ELT materials and the English classroom, in which native English models are usually provided and non-native varieties excluded. In view of the fact that non-native English varieties are having a higher presence in the media and that new technologies facilitate access to countless resources, it is no longer as challenging to find new materials dealing with or representing them as it formerly was. As a case in point, many webpages offer useful materials covering attitudes to English, ELF, language change and variation or ELF teaching resources and suggestions, such as Rose (2016), or Taylor & Francis Group (2019). Moreover, most English interactions today occur between non-native speakers of English, which is even a more solid reason for English learners to be able to understand non-native accents and include them in the English class, bearing in mind that intelligible speech should always be the chief target of pronunciation instruction. However, pronunciation can not be fully incorporated in the curricula unless textbooks include it in their contents. Therefore, textbooks need to embrace a wide range of realistic varieties (both native and non-native) so that students' requirements as English learners are satisfied. Textbooks should "take[s] into account the sociolinguistic reality of English across the globe, rather than settling for a skewed one in which only select groups of native speakers are represented" (Monfared & Khatib, 2018). In Yu (2018) it was also established that textbooks do not frequently represent ELF and are dominated by IC or native English varieties, most likely from the US or the UK. This author suggested overcoming this hindrance by adapting native English-dominated textbooks with new ELF-inclusive resources.

Finally, this study also revealed that there was a strong preference for NESTs over NNESTs. While NNESTs were not seen as ineffective teachers, NESTs were preferred for pronunciation teaching and assessment. Due to the absence or little exposure to non-native accents in English teaching, students are not familiar with them. This could prompt such negative attitudes or lack of confidence in NNESTs. This issue should also be overcome by a higher exposure to non-native accents. Students should realise that non-native speakers of English are not deficient English speakers, but “highly skilled communicators” (Jenkins et al., 2011: 284).

## **7. Limitations and further Research**

It must be acknowledged, however, that this study is not without its limitations, which at the same time highlight future areas of investigation. Firstly, the three voices in the VGT task were from male speakers, whose gender was deliberately (although randomly) selected on the one hand, in order to avoid fatigue for the participants and, on the other, to exclude the speakers’ gender as an additional variable in the experiment. Still, it would be interesting to explore whether there is any variation in participants’ responses when using female voices, as investigated in McKenzie et al. (2015). The latter found that, because the recordings were produced by female speakers, female participants may have shown high levels of solidarity as they may have empathised with the speakers because of their gender. In our study female students were more positive despite receiving male input, but this is a variable that deserves further attention. In the same line, this study sought to ensure the inclusion of different varieties while avoiding fatigue effects for the listeners. Therefore, a single speech sample per variety was chosen. Using more than one sample speech for each English variety would reinforce the obtained results in future research. Moreover, in future work, replicating the study using stimuli from spontaneous as opposed to read speech might result significant, as advised by Campbell-Kibler (2006: 75): “listener evaluations differ based on the reading/speaking distinction”.

More specifically to this context, investigating the attitudes of Spanish learners of English towards Spanish accented English would also be relevant to address in future studies. Future research should also examine English teachers’ perceptions towards BE, AE and ELF, NESTs and

NNESTs and pronunciation teaching and learning in the English classroom, as these may have an impact on their students' attitudes. Finally, it would be interesting to observe those attitudes longitudinally, considering that attitudes are non-static evaluations or tendencies (Lasagabaster, 2017; Galloway & Rose, 2015).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quotation marks by original author.

<sup>2</sup> The figure in brackets corresponds to the number of respondents who mentioned that certain feature.

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