

## ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF): CROATIAN L1 STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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The current paper presents the results of a research which aimed at establishing the attitude of Croatian L1 students towards the role of English as a global international language. In particular, the focus is to examine whether their perspectives reflect the notion of *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) by means of a three-part questionnaire designed to investigate: (a) students' attitudes towards the role of ELF as a contact language among non-native speakers; (b) their attitudes to English pronunciation; and (c) students' perspectives on the lexico-grammatical features of ELF. The research was conducted on a sample of 320 undergraduate university students from the Faculty of Economics and Tourism «Dr Mijo Mirković» of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, including full-time first- and second-year students (median age 20). The participants largely recognize English as a global language that has far surpassed the needs of a single cultural and linguistic circle, and acknowledge the role of ELF as a useful tool in establishing efficient intercultural communication with other non-native speakers of English. Overall, students are quite pragmatically oriented and liberal towards non-native English accents, while gender and self-assessed English proficiency play a significant role in determining what exactly constitutes the ability to efficiently communicate in ELF contexts. The third part of the survey revealed interesting insights into the participants' view on ELF lexico-grammar, where a rather weak correlation between students' evaluation of *accuracy* (i.e. objective knowledge) and *intelligibility* (i.e. subjective comprehension) of the eight distinct features of ELF indicates a quite articulate perspective that deviations from the Standard English norm do not necessarily represent a serious impediment to establishing successful ELF communication. The current findings support the idea that domestic students already see themselves as users of ELF, with important practical implications for ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching. Such results can help us better understand the various student profiles and their needs in foreign language acquisition, as well as to deepen our understanding of the relationship between students' proficiency in English and their views on what is “required”, “proper” or generally defined as desirable in language production. The author discusses potentials of implementing strategies to reflect such insights into English language teaching.

**Keywords:** English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Croatian L1 students' attitudes towards ELF, English pronunciation, ELF lexico-grammar, ESL teaching, EFL teaching.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as it is used in applied linguistics, contact linguistics and sociolinguistics nowadays, derives from the historical context and cultural foundations that enabled

the growth and transformation of English into an international language, its spread far beyond the Anglo-American cultural and linguistic circle(s), its diffusion and distribution across the world, and its consequential evolution into a medium enabling communication across the global cultural and linguistic barriers. English has long been identified as a global linguistic phenomenon, the world's single truly international language whose non-native users by far outnumber the native speakers (Crystal, 1997). Prior to Crystal establishing the term 'Global English', Kachru (1985) identified the three major concentric circles that have defined its spread beyond the domination of mother-tongue varieties, with the Inner Circle referring to English being used as the first language ('norm-providing'), the Outer Circle marking its spread as a 'second language' in non-native settings, usually throughout the former British and American colonies ('norm-developing', i.e. in the process of developing their own varieties, the "New Englishes"), and the Expanding Circle, including the territories where English is taught and learnt as a 'foreign' language, enjoying the role of a useful medium of international communication and unburdened by a history of colonization (often referred to as 'norm-dependent', i.e. not given the right to its own variety-development). International communication thereafter becomes a common global phenomenon where English often functions as an intermediary among its non-native speakers, enabling communication across the cultural and linguistic borders between, within, and across the three circles. Though Kachru's model has long been the most influential, some authors argue its inadequacy in describing the most important function of English today, namely that of a contact language or *lingua franca* between non-native speakers of English (Jenkins, 2007; Bruthiaux, 2003; Mollin, 2006a, 2006b). English is thus increasingly being investigated in the context of international exchange between the norm-developing and norm-dependent varieties, where it is no longer taught and learnt with the primary goal of enabling contact with the Inner Circle. On the contrary, since only one out of every four users of English is a native speaker (Crystal, 2003, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), the idea of following the linguistic conventions of mother-tongue varieties becomes an important question with multiple facets, i.e. not only linguistic, but political, cultural, and historical as well.

Substantial evidence supports the idea that contemporary *Englishes* have indeed permeated the global communications arena, where the question of ownership is no longer a matter of native speakers' privilege or, as Widdowson put it, "how English develops internationally is no business of native speakers of English" (Widdowson, 1994). In 1999, Graddol writes of "the decline of the native speaker" and the rising numbers of people who will learn English as a Foreign Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wondering: "... [But] will they continue to look towards the native speaker for authoritative norms of usage?" (Graddol, 1999: 68). Davies talks of "the idealized native speaker" corresponding with the Standard Language, an idealization in itself (Davies, 2013), and it is sometimes argued unjust to compare non-native learners of English to this idealized, "omniscient" native speaker who uses normative standard language (Ranta, 2009). A number of prominent linguists have investigated and described varieties of English which have emerged as a result of English becoming the language of globalization *par excellence*, referred to – within various frameworks and in different contexts – as 'Global English' (Crystal, 1997; Görlach, 2002; Gnutzmann, 1999), 'World Englishes' (Jenkins, 2009a; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Melchers & Shaw, 2003; McArthur, 1998), 'English as an International Language' (EIL) (Alsagoff et al., 2012; Nunn, 2011), or 'English as a world language' (Mair, 2003) as general cover terms for uses of English covering the three-circle model. Since nowadays most international interactions in English take place among its non-native users, English has also been extensively investigated as a *lingua franca*, or "a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture" (Firth, 1996: 240). The current study is set within the theoretical framework of the study of 'English as a Lingua Franca' (ELF) (Jenkins, 2006, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004, 2005), with a substantial body of research accumulated so far, where the divide between native, norm-providing varieties and non-native models remains one of the central issues to this day. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) thus refers to using English primarily for practical communicative purposes of establishing contacts with other non-native speakers (NNSs), rather than the norm-providing circle of English. Jennifer Jenkins defines ELF as "English as it is used as a contact language among speakers from different first languages" (Jenkins, 2009a: 143), while Seidlhofer provides a functional definition of ELF

as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7). In such intercultural contexts, native speakers are either excluded altogether, or represent a minority, and their English is thus “less likely to constitute the linguistic reference norm” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7). In other words, rather than following the linguistic conventions of Standard English or emulating the native speakers’ forms, ELF users are said to adopt and develop ways of using English which enable mutual intelligibility and successful communication primarily with other NNSs of English. Therefore, intelligibility or “getting the message over” becomes an important facet of ELF communication, where “what counts as *understanding* for a cross-dialect group of native speakers is equivalent to *intelligibility* for a native speaker–non-native speaker interaction” (Davies, 2003). Such pragmatic understanding of English used as a *lingua franca* allows for viewing deviations from the Standard English norm not as ‘errors’, but as “divergent forms or features” of ELF (Björkman, 2008: 36). In other words, though deviations from the native varieties of English might be considered the consequence of imperfect learning, it might also be argued that ELF users consciously choose to disregard the standard linguistic norm by refusing to use forms they consider communicatively redundant, and instead seek to enhance their overall intelligibility and communicative effectiveness in intercultural settings. In addition, since ELF is in itself a multilingual phenomenon, oftentimes arising from intercultural interactions among bilingual and multilingual interlocutors, ELF speakers often use particular hybrid variants which are strongly influenced by their mother tongues or L1 proficiency, and there are certain indications that innovative or hybrid forms shared by speakers of different first languages are diffusing into common ELF usage (e.g. MacKenzie, 2015). Since there can be a great deal of variability in ELF interactions, Seidlhofer argues that ELF should be “functionally not formally defined; it is not a variety of English but a variable way of using it” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 77). The debate on ELF has often come to very different conclusions among those who view it as an emerging variety of English with its own common features and characteristics (Seidlhofer 2004, 2001a; Jenkins 2007, 2006, 2000; Mauranen, 2003) and those who conceptualise it more as a register (e.g. Mollin 2006b; House, 2002) in the Hallidayan sense of a variety “according to use”, rather than “according to users” (Halliday et al., 1964: 77). In understanding ELF as a register on a functional level, or language used for a specific function rather than by a specific group of speakers, its features are seen not as fixed, but as “a direct result of the communication purpose: getting meaning across from one non-native speaker to the other” (Mollin, 2006b: 51). Other authors also advocate the position that ELF should not be standardized (e.g. Kanik, 2013). Regardless of the various conceptualizations, the debate on ELF, its spread, scope and status has been rather prolific, with an accumulating body of research leading to a better understanding of its nature as a prerequisite for taking informed decisions in language policy and language teaching (McKay, 2002). Certain studies into the nature of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) investigate ELF as a well established variety of English, from the phonology of English as an International Language (Jenkins, 2000), through morphosyntax (Seidlhofer, 2004) and syntax (Ranta, 2009), to pragmatics (House, 1999; Björkman, 2011a), and even the possible emergence of potential new varieties, such as Euro-English (Forche, 2012; Stanojević & Josipović Smojver, 2011; Mollin, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2001b). Others have examined the various aspects of ELF, such as its role as a contact communication tool in academic and other settings (e.g. Björkman, 2011b; Nickerson, 2009, 2005; Mauranen & Metsä-Ketelä, 2006; House, 2002), its impact on conference interpreters and their profession (e.g. Albl-Mikasa, 2010), or in the context of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) as a particular subvariety (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; Pullin Stark, 2009). Numerous other studies have extensively investigated the English teachers’, practitioners’ and learners’ beliefs and attitudes towards ELF in the expanding circle contexts, often regarding the divide between native and non-native pronunciation models (e.g. Ren et al., 2016; Jindapitak, 2015; Bissett & Ma, 2015) or the lexico-grammatical features of ELF (e.g. Ren et al., 2016; Soruç, 2015; Krajiňáková, 2015; Ranta, 2004). The current paper is an attempt to further contribute to the understanding of ELF by investigating what its users – non-native speakers of English – actually say or do with the language, how they use it and in which contexts, how they perceive its role, the English-teaching models and other NNSs, or which aspects of language production they perceive to be crucial in establishing efficient ELF communication. By addressing such questions, the current research aims to

provide an insight into Croatian L1 students' views on the various aspects of ELF by investigating their perceptions of those features that might be crucial for achieving international intelligibility.

In particular, the current study aims to explore whether Croatian L1 students' perceptions of and attitudes towards English as a global international language reflect the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The author looks at how gender, English language proficiency, and other factors determine the way the participants view the role of ELF as a contact language among NNSs, the English pronunciation models, and the lexico-grammatical deviations from Standard English. The main research hypothesis is that the students' perspectives would reflect the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), thus indicating they are indeed contemporary users of ELF. If so, then this might help us get a better understanding of the various student profiles' needs in English language acquisition, with important practical implications for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching.

## 2. The Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The current paper presents the results of a research which aimed to establish the attitude of Croatian L1 students towards English as a global international language. In particular, the paper is aimed at exploring whether Croatian L1 students' perspectives on the English language reflect the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), assuming the respondents have never been introduced to such a concept theoretically. The three-part questionnaire devised by the author investigates three particular aspects: a) students' general attitudes towards the role of ELF as a contact language among non-native speakers (NNSs), b) their attitudes to English pronunciation (native vs. non-native accents), and c) students' perspectives on the lexico-grammatical features of ELF. The author looks at how gender, year of study, self-assessed proficiency in English, and the usual collocutors determine the way in which the participants view their own language production, English pronunciation and teaching models, non-native speakers and foreign accents, and the lexico-grammatical deviations from the Standard English norm.

In particular, the current study is aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. Do Croatian L1 students acknowledge the role of English as a contact language among non-native speakers (NNSs)?
2. Do Croatian L1 students exhibit more traditional or more liberal views on English pronunciation?
3. How does Croatian L1 students' *objective knowledge* correlate with their *subjective comprehension* of ELF lexico-grammar?

The author's assumption is that domestic students predominantly use English in ELF contexts, i.e. primarily as a contact language with other NNSs, with whom they share neither a native language, nor a common national culture. In such communicative contexts, where English represents only an additional language enabling intercultural exchange, the English users' desire to be as accurate as possible – grammatically, lexically, or otherwise – might be diminished in favour of a more general need to simply communicate the message successfully. The author speculates that such stance might be reflected in the participants' attitudes towards the role of English today, as well as in their views on English pronunciation and ELF lexico-grammar. The main research hypothesis is that Croatian L1 students' attitudes would reflect the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), thus indicating they are indeed contemporary users of ELF, with articulate views on what constitutes international intelligibility in ELF contexts. Furthermore, the author hypothesizes that gender, year of study, self-assessed English proficiency, and the usual collocutors in English might play a significant role in shaping students' views on the different aspects of ELF. If that is the case, then this might help us better understand the various student profiles and their views on what is "required", "proper" or generally defined as desirable in language production, and help English language teachers in broadening the learning strategies they use in their classrooms.

### 3. Research Methodology

This chapter describes the selection of the focus group sample, the research instrument development, and data collection and analysis.

#### 3.1. Participants

The survey was conducted among 320 full-time undergraduate students studying Economics and Business Economics at the Faculty of Economics and Tourism «Dr Mijo Mirković» of the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, during the academic year 2017/18. The sample included 183 first- (57.2 %; median age 19), and 137 second-year undergraduate students (42.8 %; median age 20). The participants' overall median age was 20 (min. 18, max. 27), and up to 99.4 % reported Croatian as their mother tongue. The sample was not balanced in terms of gender, with 67.2 % female, and 32.8 % male respondents. The vast majority started learning English at elementary school level, either in the first three (72.2 %), or in the fourth grade (12.5 %), with additional 13.8 % reporting to have started learning the language in kindergarten, meaning the participants predominantly belong to an early phase of foreign language acquisition (98.5 %). In addition, almost a third of respondents (32.5 %) reported to be fluent in foreign languages other than English – predominantly German (14.37%), Italian (7.19%), or their combination (4.06 %). The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the sample

		Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	105	32.8
	Female	215	67.2
Year of study	1 <sup>st</sup> year undergraduate	183	57.2
	2 <sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate	137	42.8
Mother tongue	Croatian	318	99.4
	other*	2	0.6
When did you start learning English?	in kindergarten	44	13.8
	in elementary school (the first 3 grades)	231	72.2
	in elementary school (the 4 <sup>th</sup> grade)	40	12.5
	at a foreign language school (extracurricular program)**	3	0.9
	other	2	0.6
Foreign languages other than English	none	216	67.5
	German	46	14.4
	Italian	23	7.2
	German & Italian	13	4.1
	French	4	1.2
	Spanish	4	1.2
	other***	14	4.4
* Italian N=1 (0.3%), Russian N=1 (0.3%)			
** at the age of: 5 (N=1, 0.3%), 7 (N=1, 0.3%), 13 (N=1, 0.3%)			
*** Russian, Turkish, Czech, Japanese, Macedonian, Slovenian, or their combinations			

Source: Author.

As for the English language usage among the sample, over half (51.6 %) report non-native speakers of English to be their usual interlocutors, while a significant 41.6 % report they equally engage in intercultural communication with both native and non-native speakers. Only 6.9 % report native speakers as their usual interlocutors in English, which could be an important indicator that the respondents' needs in EFL acquisition might primarily be focused towards acquiring general communicative skills, rather than being overly perfectionist as far as grammar and other structural features of language are concerned. In addition, the sample was not balanced in terms of the reported frequency of English usage – the majority use it only occasionally (41.9 %), over a third use it frequently (35.3 %), and only one-fifth (22.5 %) report to use the language on a daily basis. Regarding the situations in which English is chosen as the language of preference, over half of the respondents expectedly reported to use it for online communication (51.6 %), 23.8 % reported academic contexts to be the second predominant setting, while 17.5 % use English primarily at work (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** English language usage among the sample

		Frequency	Percentage %
How often do you use English?	never	1	0.3
	occasionally	134	41.9
	frequently	113	35.3
	daily	72	22.5
In which situations do you usually use English?	for socialising	22	6.9
	at work	56	17.5
	at university	76	23.8
	on the Internet	165	51.6
	other	1	0.3
Who are your usual interlocutors in English?	native speakers of English	22	6.9
	non-native speakers of English	165	51.6
	both	133	41.6

Source: Author.

For the purposes of the current study, the participants' self-assessed English proficiency was taken as an important factor in establishing their views on the different aspects of ELF. The self-assessed levels of English language knowledge and English pronunciation proficiency among the sample are given in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Students' self-assessment on English language and pronunciation proficiency

		N	Percentage %	$\bar{x}$	SD
Assess your knowledge of English.	very poor	6	1.9		
	poor	32	10.0		
	good	140	43.8		
	very good	121	37.8		
	excellent	21	6.6		
	Total	320	100.0	3.37	.82
Assess your English	very poor	6	1.9		

pronunciation.	poor	33	10.3		
	good	150	46.9		
	very good	109	34.1		
	excellent	22	6.9		
	Total	320	100.0	3.34	.83

Source: Author.

Over two thirds of the respondents assess their general English language knowledge and pronunciation proficiency as either “good” (43.8 % and 46.9 %, respectively) or “very good” (37.8 % and 34.1 %, respectively). The arithmetic means for the self-assessed levels of general English language proficiency and pronunciation proficiency ( $m=3.37$ ,  $SD=0.82$ , and  $m=3.34$ ,  $SD=0.83$ , respectively) show that the participants provided fairly uniform answers, so it might be argued there is a tendency among the sample to identify these two aspects (see Table 3). For the purposes of statistical analysis, the scales of intensity for self-assessed levels of proficiency were categorized as follows: *1 poor* (for ‘very poor’ and ‘poor’), *2 good* (for ‘good’), and *3 excellent* (for ‘very good’ and ‘excellent’). The respondents’ self-assessed levels of proficiency will serve as one of the important parameters under consideration in investigating their attitudes to ELF.

### 3.2. Research Instrument

The current study utilized a survey research design to collect key data from the focus group in order to answer the main research questions. The research instrument used was a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to investigate whether the students’ attitudes towards English reflect the notion of ELF, as defined and described by previous studies. The three-part questionnaire was divided into sections: Part I looks into the participants’ general attitudes towards English in today’s society, and investigates their views on its role as a contact language among NNSs; Part II examines whether their views on English pronunciation are more traditional or more liberal, investigating the participants’ preferences in terms of native vs. non-native English accents; Part III was designed to investigate the students’ perspectives on ELF lexico-grammar, marked by the usual deviations from the Standard English norm. Regarding the scales used in the questionnaire, in Part I and II, the respondents were asked to express their agreement with each given statement using a five-point, Likert-type scale (*from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree*). Part I and II were designed without the attempt of creating a composite attitudinal scale. In Part III of the questionnaire, the students were asked to evaluate thirteen English sentences, each illustrating one of the usual ‘errors’ or deviations from the linguistic norm, in a two-fold manner: first, in terms of lexico-grammatical accuracy (indicating the participants’ *objective knowledge*), and second, in terms of intelligibility (i.e. *subjective comprehension*). The purpose of such a procedure was to examine how students’ knowledge of English concerning eight distinct features of ELF (such as omitting the 3<sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. present tense suffix *-s*, misuse of the relative pronouns *who/which*, extension of countability to uncountable nouns, etc.) correlates to their subjective comprehension of the thirteen items. Finally, the questionnaire was used to collect demographic data (age, gender, mother tongue, length of learning English, etc.) and other key characteristics of the sample, including self-assessed levels of English proficiency, the usual collocutors in English, fluency in other foreign languages, etc.

The questionnaire was distributed in Croatian and then back-translated into English in order to ensure accuracy. The questionnaire included a brief cover letter and data confidentiality note, and was completed with no personal identification so as to ensure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses. Altogether, 425 questionnaires were distributed equally to the first- and second-year full-time undergraduate students. The total number of responses returned was 320 (183 from the first-year students, and 137 from the second-year students), yielding a respectable response rate of 75.3 % of the total sum.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The questionnaire data were analysed by means of the IBM SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 11.0.1. The following statistical procedures were used to interpret the research findings: descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA), Chi square test, and Pearson's correlation.

## 4. Results and Discussion

In order to present the findings and answer the research questions, the results are classified into three sections: 1) students' attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), 2) students' attitudes towards English pronunciation, and 3) students' perspectives on ELF lexico-grammar. Whenever appropriate, the subsections in each part investigate the role of five parameters – students' gender, year of study, self-assessed proficiency in English, self-assessed pronunciation proficiency, and the reported usual collocutors in English – in examining the participants' perspectives on the various aspects of ELF.

### 4.1. Students' Attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to express the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with ten particular statements in order to get an insight into their general attitudes towards English as a global international language. Descriptive statistics for the ten statements are given in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics on attitudes reflecting the notion of ELF

Item	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. English doesn't belong to English speaking countries alone.	<b>4.38</b>	<b>1.03</b>
2. English doesn't belong to a single (Anglo-American) culture.	4.27	1.05
3. Teachers should teach other varieties of English as well, such as Singapore English, South-African English or Indian English.	<b>2.27</b>	<b>1.13</b>
4. I can efficiently communicate with people from different countries (e.g. Germany, Italy, France, etc.) by using English.	4.21	.94
5. I can make friends and work with people from different countries (e.g. Germany, Italy, France, etc.) by using English.	4.27	.95
6. Most Croats need English to communicate with non-native speakers of English (such as Germans, Italians, French, etc.)	4.27	.95
7. English is the universal, global language of business, science, technology, and the Internet.	<b>4.80</b>	<b>.50</b>
8. It is not necessary to know British or American culture in order to speak English well.	4.07	1.01
9. It is more important that my interlocutor understands me, than for me to use proper grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.	<b>3.67</b>	<b>1.09</b>
10. English will become even more important in the future (over the next 25 years), in line with globalisation processes.	4.26	.87

Source: Author's research.

The results presented in Table 4, with the highest mean score achieved on Item 7 (stating ‘*English is the universal, global language of business, science, technology, and the Internet*’) ( $m=4.80$ ,  $SD=0.50$ ), suggest that the participants primarily associate the importance of English with certain areas such as business, technology, or the ubiquitous Internet. This is not surprising given the students’ profile; the participants have reported they use English primarily for online communication and in academic or working environments, and are enrolled in Business English courses at the Faculty. The courses are compulsory at the undergraduate level, each carrying 6 ECTS credits, and are designed as ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses, where students are primarily motivated to acquire the subset of English that would serve specific professional needs in their respective areas of interest (economics, tourism, financial management, marketing, accountancy, etc.). However, the respondents also acknowledge that the role of English in today’s global society far outreaches the needs for professional English of those engaged in specific areas. The participants largely recognize that the language no longer belongs to English speaking countries alone, or to a single, Anglo-American culture (Item 1,  $m=4.38$ ,  $SD=1.03$ , and Item 2,  $m=4.27$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ). Furthermore, the participants also acknowledge the idea that English serves both them and other Croatian L1 speakers primarily as the language of preference when engaging in communication with speakers of foreign languages other than English (Items 5 and 6, with the same mean scores,  $m=4.28$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ). English thus becomes a useful intermediary communication tool and a *lingua franca* in establishing efficient intercultural communication with other NNSs of English. In addition, the participants anticipate that the language will make an even greater impact in the future, in line with the processes of globalisation (Item 10,  $m=4.26$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ).

On the other hand, the participants scored noticeably lowest on Item 3, stating that ‘*Teachers should teach other varieties of English as well, such as Singapore English, South-African English or Indian English*’ ( $m=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ). This is not surprising since they rarely, if ever, have the chance to come in contact with the suggested varieties. Instead, given a relatively homogenous sample, the participants belong to a linguistic and cultural circle that is far removed – not only geographically, but historically, culturally and otherwise – from Kachru’s Outer Circle of English. For this reason, the results on Item 3 should be seen as indicating the participants can hardly recognize any practical benefits in acquiring the suggested English variants, rather than as a reflection of a rigid and narrow-minded stance. The second lowest score was achieved on Item 9, which states ‘*It is more important that my interlocutor understands me, than for me to use proper grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation*’ ( $m=3.67$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ). This might suggest that the participants recognize to a certain degree the importance of acquiring structural features of language, and are reluctant to immediately discard their significance. Nevertheless, a high degree of dispersion indicates low uniformity in their answers, which calls for further analysis (see subsection 4.1.2.). Item 9 is also interesting because it addresses an important question: what constitutes the ability to efficiently communicate in ELF contexts? Is it the individual’s spoken fluency as a more general ability of transferring meaning correctly, or one’s structural and linguistic knowledge? In addition, Item 11 from Part II should help us get a better understanding of the relative importance students assign to the different components of language production. In order to get a more detailed insight into the participants’ views on what constitutes international intelligibility in ELF contexts, additional testing was done, presented in the subsections to follow.

#### 4.1.1. The Role of ELF as a Contact Language among NNSs of English

According to the results presented in Table 4, the participants generally recognize English as a global language that has far surpassed the needs of a single cultural and linguistic circle, and acknowledge its role as a useful tool in establishing intercultural communication with speakers of other foreign languages. In order to further examine the participants’ awareness of the role of ELF as a contact language among non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, additional testing was done by aggregating their responses on items 4, 5, and 6 composing the scale. The measure involved the respondents’ degree of agreement with

the three statements, with Cronbach's alpha 0.74 indicating high levels of internal consistency. The highest mean score on the variable was recorded for the respondents who assess their English proficiency as "excellent" ( $m=4.4437$ ) (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Attitudes reflecting the notion of ELF as a contact language among NNSs of English \*self-assessed English proficiency

	Assess your knowledge of English.	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Items 4, 5, and 6* composing the scale	poor	38	3.8596	.91904	.14909
	good	140	4.1667	.71246	.06021
	excellent	142	4.4437	.72414	.06077
	Total	320	4.2531	.76734	.04290

\*Items 4, 5 and 6 state as follows: *I can efficiently communicate with people from different countries (e.g. Germany, Italy, France, etc.) by using English; I can make friends and work with people from different countries (e.g. Germany, Italy, France, etc.) by using English; Most Croats need English to communicate with non-native speakers of English (such as Germans, Italians, French, etc.).*

Source: Author's research.

The study variable *the role of ELF as a contact language among NNSs of English* was measured to see whether the participants' attitudes to English reflect the notion of ELF as an intermediary communication tool primarily among people who do not share the same native language(s). The analysis according to self-assessment on English proficiency showed statistically significant difference on the variable, where one-way ANOVA reveals statistically significant difference among the sample means, with the significance value of 0.000 ( $p<0.05$ ) (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Attitudes reflecting the notion of ELF as a contact language among NNSs of English \*self-assessed English proficiency

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Items 4, 5, and 6 composing the scale	Between Groups	12,085	2	6,043	10,899	,000
	Within Groups	175,745	317	,554		
	Total	187,830	319			

Source: Author's research.

In other words, those who excel in English show greater awareness of its role as a useful communicative medium in Croatian L1 speakers' intercultural exchanges with other NNSs of English. Though such results may not seem surprising, it is important to remember that there is an inextricable link between language and culture, and that proficiency in foreign language(s) often goes hand in hand with developed cultural awareness. Being able to communicate in a foreign language and establish efficient intercultural communication goes beyond knowing the right vocabulary, grammar and syntax; it is also about developing cultural sensitivity and openness, international awareness and a global mindset as qualities that contribute to one's ability to successfully overcome not only linguistic, but cultural barriers as well. This is also consistent with other studies in cross-cultural and intercultural communication (*cf.* Lewis 2006; Ferraro 2002). Comparison according to gender and the reported usual collocutors showed no significant differences among the sample means.

#### 4.1.2. The Communicative or Interactional Function of ELF

The needs of students who are learning English to mainly communicate with other non-native speakers of English often quite differ from those who want to integrate into an Anglophone culture, or who are studying the language at a university level. The priority for those participating in ELF contexts is usually to establish efficient intercultural communication by being as intelligible and as clear as possible to the people they are communicating with. This does not necessarily mean sounding like a native speaker, nor does it necessarily imply meticulous use of proper grammar, vocabulary or syntax. The underlying reasoning here is that these aspects of language production are less important *per se* than the more general ability of transferring meaning correctly and keeping the conversation fluid by relying on all the available resources, be it linguistic or extra-linguistic. Hence, one of the main functions of ELF is to enable or ease the process of communicative interaction in intercultural settings. For our current purposes, this function of ELF is termed *communicative* or *interactional* in the Hallidayan sense, where language is primarily used to make contact and develop social relationships with others (Halliday, 1977). In order to better understand the importance students assign to the interactional function of ELF, Item 9, stating '*It is more important that my interlocutor understands me, than for me to use proper grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation*', was analyzed independently. The analysis shows that male participants assign far greater meaning to this item than their female peers (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** The communicative or interactional function of ELF \*gender

Item 9			Gender		p*
			male	female	
<i>'It is more important that my interlocutor understands me, than for me to use proper grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation'</i> .	strongly disagree	N	7	4	0.001
		%	6.7 %	1.9 %	
	partially disagree	N	8	26	
		%	7.6 %	12.1 %	
	neither agree nor disagree	N	27	65	
		%	25.7 %	30.2 %	
	partially agree	N	22	73	
		%	21.0 %	34.0 %	
	strongly agree	N	41	47	
		%	39.0 %	21.9 %	
Total	N	105	215		
	%	100.0 %	100.0 %		

Source: Author's research.

As shown in Table 7, the value of Chi-Square test is 0.001 ( $p < 0.05$ ), meaning that statistically significant difference was observed among the sample means with regard to gender, with a significantly higher proportion of male participants (39.0 %) strongly agreeing with the statement, as opposed to only 21.9 % female participants. In other words, male participants are more interested in "getting the message over" and exhibit a more casual view on the importance of using appropriate grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Female participants are more cautious in this regard and unwilling to discard the importance of the structural features of language in establishing efficient communication, which might perhaps be attributed to their tendency towards perfectionism and the desire to use what is considered correct or appropriate in spoken language production. Previous studies have already confirmed that gender plays a role in determining one's way of using language, and that women are more traditional in

this regard, often showing a tendency towards hypercorrection and conformity to societal norms (e.g. Lakoff, 1975; Pan, 2011). The analysis according to the year of study and self-assessed levels of proficiency showed no significant differences among the sample means.

#### 4.1.3. Aspects of Language Production (Spoken Fluency vs. Structural Features)

In order to supplement the analysis on Item 9, where the divide between male and female participants regarding the interactional function of ELF can be observed, Item 11 from Part II was analysed so as to help us get a better understanding of the relative importance students assign to the different components of language production. Statement 11 was thus analyzed as a set of four items (11a, 11b, 11c, 11d) in order to investigate the relative importance students assign to general fluency in spoken English, and to the structural features of language (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary). Such analysis shows the importance that the participants attach to each of the aspects of foreign language production, assessing what constitutes their individual ability to carry out communicative tasks successfully, and to what extent. Descriptive statistics on the four aspects are given in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Descriptive statistics on aspects of language production (Item 11)

When I speak English, I think it is important:	$\bar{x}$	SD
a) that I am fluent enough for my interlocutors to understand me	<b>4.40</b>	<b>.77</b>
b) that my pronunciation is correct	4.05	.84
c) that my grammar is correct	<b>3.67</b>	<b>.92</b>
d) that my vocabulary is correct/good/rich	4.16	.78

Source: Author's research.

Table 8 shows that the highest mean score was achieved on Item 11a ( $m=4.40$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ), while the participants scored lowest on Item 11c ( $m=3.67$ ,  $SD=0.92$ ). In other words, the students emphasize spoken fluency as the most important aspect of one's ability to efficiently communicate in ELF contexts, and assess the usage of proper grammar as the least important component in establishing successful ELF communication. Further analysis shows that students' gender, year of study and self-assessed pronunciation proficiency play no role in establishing what constitutes the ability to efficiently communicate in ELF contexts. However, a series of Chi-Square tests conducted on each of the four components shows that self-assessed English proficiency represents an important factor in students' perceptions of the importance of each component of language production – except grammar (see Tables 9, 10, 11).

**Table 9.** The perceived importance of spoken fluency \*self-assessed English proficiency

11. When I speak English, I think it is important:			Assess your knowledge of English.			p*
			poor	good	excellent	
<i>a) that I am fluent enough for my interlocutors to understand me</i>	strongly disagree	N	1	0	2	0.000
		%	2.6%	0.0%	1.4%	
	partially disagree	N	1	0	0	
		%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	
	neither agree nor disagree	N	10	18	8	
		%	26.3%	12.9%	5.6%	

	partially agree	N	9	58	38
		%	23.7%	41.4%	26.8%
	strongly agree	N	17	64	94
		%	44.7%	45.7%	66.2%
Total		N	38	140	142
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Author's research.

**Table 10.** The perceived importance of pronunciation \*self-assessed English proficiency

11. When I speak English, I think it is important:		Assess your knowledge of English.			p*
		poor	good	excellent	
<i>b) that my pronunciation is correct</i>	partially disagree	N	3	10	4
		%	7.9%	7.1%	2.8%
	neither agree nor disagree	N	11	23	21
		%	28.9%	16.4%	14.8%
	partially agree	N	15	72	57
		%	39.5%	51.4%	40.1%
	strongly agree	N	9	35	60
		%	23.7%	25.0%	42.3%
Total		N	38	140	142
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Author's research.

**Table 11.** The perceived importance of vocabulary \*self-assessed English proficiency

11. When I speak English, I think it is important:		Assess your knowledge of English.			p*
		poor	good	excellent	
<i>d) that my vocabulary is correct/good/ rich</i>	partially disagree	N	0	5	1
		%	0.0%	3.6%	0.7%
	neither agree nor disagree	N	10	25	22
		%	26.3%	17.9%	15.5%
	partially agree	N	16	68	54
		%	42.1%	48.6%	38.0%
	strongly agree	N	12	42	65
		%	31.6%	30.0%	45.8%
Total		N	38	140	142
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Author's research.

As shown in Tables 9-11, statistically significant differences among the sample means were recorded for three of the four aspects of language production, with the highest levels of complete agreement recorded for participants who assess their English proficiency as “excellent” – 66.2 % of them strongly

agree on the importance of general spoken fluency, with the significance value of 0.000 ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 9); 42.3 % strongly agree that correct pronunciation is an important aspect of spoken English, with the significance value of 0.012 ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 10); and 45.8 % show strong agreement on the importance of their vocabulary being rich, with the significance value of 0.047 ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 11). In other words, the proportion of more proficient students strongly agreeing on the importance of spoken fluency, active vocabulary and correct pronunciation in constituting one's ability to successfully complete communicative tasks was significantly higher than the proportion of those who assess themselves as less proficient in English. Such results suggest that more proficient students tend to use language-learning strategies in a more structured and purposeful manner, and exhibit therefore greater awareness of the importance of acquiring various structural features of language, and applying them to a wider range of communicative tasks. The results presented in Tables 9-11 suggest that the more fluent speakers of English tend to show greater awareness of the importance of regularly developing and improving their spoken fluency, vocabulary and pronunciation. As for the perceived importance of grammar, statistical analysis shows no significant differences among the sample means according to the study parameters, revealing a rather homogenous sample in this regard. Such results might be pointing out the anxiety students typically exhibit over grammar and their usual reluctance to invest extra efforts in acquiring grammatical categories. Overall, the findings are consistent with the idea that individual structural features of language are seen as intrinsically less important than the overall spoken fluency in ELF communicative contexts.

#### 4.2. Students' attitudes towards English pronunciation

In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to express the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with nine statements in order to examine their attitudes towards English pronunciation (Item 11 excluded; see subsection 4.1.3). More specifically, Part II was used to investigate the perceived importance of pronunciation in spoken English, and the students' general preferences with regard to native and non-native accents. Descriptive statistics for the nine statements are given in Table 12.

**Table 12.** Descriptive statistics on attitudes towards English pronunciation

Item		$\bar{x}$	SD
12.	I think pronunciation is important while speaking English.	<b>4.07</b>	<b>.84</b>
13.	I am concerned about/not satisfied with my English pronunciation.	3.00	1.30
14.	While speaking, I want to sound like a native speaker of English (e.g. the English or Americans).	3.42	1.29
15.	It bothers me to have a Croatian accent, even if my interlocutors can understand my English.	<b>2.23</b>	<b>1.23</b>
16.	I think pronunciation is just as important as grammar and vocabulary.	<b>3.66</b>	<b>1.07</b>
17.	When I speak English with non-native speakers of English (e.g. the French, Italians, Germans), their foreign accent bothers me.	<b>2.01</b>	<b>1.15</b>
18.	I sometimes find it hard to understand the pronunciation of native speakers of English (e.g. the English, Americans).	2.74	1.26
19.	I would like to get better training on how to improve my English pronunciation.	3.60	1.14
20.	I believe I would learn to pronounce English better if I were taught by a teacher who is a native speaker of English.	2.87	1.29

Source: Author's research.

According to the results presented in Table 12, with the highest mean scores achieved on Item 12 ( $m=4.07$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ), and Item 16 ( $m=3.66$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ), the participants generally believe pronunciation to be an important aspect of spoken English. However, at the same time, the participants scored lowest on Item 17 ( $m=2.01$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) and Item 15 ( $m=2.23$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ), exhibiting a tolerant perspective on foreign accents, both their own and those of other non-native speakers. Interestingly, though acknowledging the importance of pronunciation in spoken English, the participants clearly showed they simply don't mind nationally or regionally recognizable features in one's spoken English. Additional testing was done to see if domestic students are indeed pragmatically oriented and liberal towards English pronunciation, and to further examine their perspectives on native and non-native accents.

#### 4.2.1. Traditional vs. liberal views on English pronunciation

In order to investigate students' general preferences regarding English pronunciation, and to see if the divide between traditional and liberal views can be established among the sample, Items 14, 15 and 17 were analyzed individually in relation to gender, year of study, self-assessed English proficiency, self-assessed pronunciation proficiency, and the reported usual collocutors in spoken English. The purpose of such a procedure was to see if Croatian L1 students prefer native or native-like accents, or are more open and tolerant towards foreign, accented speech in ELF contexts. While Item 14 reveals whether the participants strive to approach native or native-like accents in their own language production (*While speaking, I want to sound like a native speaker of English, e.g. the English or Americans*), Items 15 and 17 should tell us about the participants' views on non-native accents, where features revealing their or their interlocutor's national identity can be recognized (*It bothers me to have a Croatian accent, even if my interlocutors can understand my English; When I speak English with non-native speakers of English (e.g. the French, Italians, Germans), their foreign accent bothers me*). Additional analysis according to the five parameters showed no statistically significant differences among the sample means, revealing a homogenous sample and a rather unanimous stance towards English pronunciation, with participants showing no particular preferences regarding native or native-like accents. Instead, although recognizing pronunciation as a constituent component of spoken language production, the participants are nevertheless quite pragmatic and liberal towards their own and other non-native speakers' foreign accents, failing to ascribe any significant role to the divide between native and non-native pronunciation. In other words, the participants exhibit a rather liberal view on one's national and regional recognisability in speech, which further supports the idea that domestic students already see themselves as contemporary users of ELF.

#### 4.2.2. Perspectives on English pronunciation teaching

The traditional approach to English teaching in Croatia has long been based on the two major native varieties – either Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American – as exclusive models of English pronunciation, often accepted as “proper” to the exclusion of all the other varieties. In order to investigate students' views on English pronunciation teaching models, the participants' responses on Items 19 and 20 were analyzed according to gender, self-assessed English proficiency, and self-assessed pronunciation proficiency. Item 19 (*I would like to get better training on how to improve my English pronunciation*) questions the students' willingness to improve their foreign accents. As shown in Table 13, the value of Chi-Square test is 0.007 ( $p<0.05$ ), meaning that statistically significant difference was observed among the sample means with regard to gender, with a significantly higher proportion of female participants partially (34.0 %) or strongly agreeing (28.8 %) with the idea of investing additional efforts in improving their English pronunciation, as opposed to 26.7 % of male participants showing partial, and only 16.2 % showing strong willingness to do so.

**Table 13.** Willingness to improve one's English pronunciation \*gender

Item 19			Gender		p*
			male	female	
<i>'I would like to get better training on how to improve my English pronunciation'.</i>	strongly disagree	N	10	12	0.007
		%	9.5%	5.6%	
	partially disagree	N	13	11	
		%	12.4%	5.1%	
	neither agree nor disagree	N	37	57	
		%	35.2%	26.5%	
	partially agree	N	28	73	
		%	26.7%	34.0%	
	strongly agree	N	17	62	
		%	16.2%	28.8%	
	Total	N	105	215	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: Author's research.

Such results might be attributed to women's willingness to adapt to the prescribed norms and pronunciation conventions of Standard English, as opposed to a more casual view exhibited by their male peers. Other previous studies also confirm female tendency towards conformity in this regard, and a more traditional perspective on English pronunciation (e.g. Stanojević & Josipović Smojver, 2011). Furthermore, significantly highest levels of complete agreement were recorded among the respondents who assess their English proficiency and pronunciation proficiency as 'poor'. In Table 14, we can see that the value of Chi-Square test is 0.000 ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that a significantly higher proportion of less proficient speakers of English (60.5 %) is highly motivated to get additional training on English pronunciation.

**Table 14.** Willingness to improve one's English pronunciation \*self-assessed English proficiency

Item 19			Assess your knowledge of English.			p*
			poor	good	excellent	
<i>'I would like to get better training on how to improve my English pronunciation'.</i>	strongly disagree	N	1	1	20	0.000
		%	2.6%	0.7%	14.1%	
	partially disagree	N	0	10	14	
		%	0.0%	7.1%	9.9%	
	neither agree nor disagree	N	4	41	49	
		%	10.5%	29.3%	34.5%	
	partially agree	N	10	51	40	
		%	26.3%	36.4%	28.2%	
	strongly agree	N	23	37	19	
		%	60.5%	26.4%	13.4%	
	Total	N	38	140	142	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: Author's research.

Similarly, Table 15 shows that an almost equally high proportion of students who are less proficient in English pronunciation (53.8 %) is again significantly more willing to invest extra hours in improving their accents, with the same value of Chi-Square ( $p=0.000$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 15.** Willingness to improve one's English pronunciation \*self-assessed pronunciation proficiency

Item 19			Assess your English pronunciation.			p*
			poor	good	excellent	
<i>'I would like to get better training on how to improve my English pronunciation'.</i>	strongly disagree	N	0	6	16	0.000
		%	0.0%	4.0%	12.2%	
	partially disagree	N	3	10	11	
		%	7.7%	6.7%	8.4%	
	neither agree nor disagree	N	2	51	41	
		%	5.1%	34.0%	31.3%	
	partially agree	N	13	48	40	
		%	33.3%	32.0%	30.5%	
	strongly agree	N	21	35	23	
		%	53.8%	23.3%	17.6%	
Total		N	39	150	131	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: Author's research.

Though such findings were expected to a certain degree, they are nevertheless surprising given the relatively pragmatic and liberal view the participants exhibited towards non-native English accents. The underlying reason for such results might be found in a more general desire, or even pressure, to adapt to the commonly accepted norms of what is "required", "proper", or generally "acceptable" in spoken English. The imposed standard of RP or General American as the only desirable models of English pronunciation might cause our students to feel self-conscious about their own foreign accents and thus feel the need to improve or get rid of their national or regional recognisability, despite the fact that they personally do not believe such traits represent any impediment to establishing successful ELF communication. Instead, the author suggests that the real challenge would be to inspire our less proficient students to practice and use the language in as many communicative contexts, and motivate them to overcome their anxiety and unwillingness to communicate simply because they fear their overall proficiency might not be substantial or "acceptable". Interestingly, the current findings are in contrast to those of other studies, which have shown that the English learners' attitudes to native-like pronunciation is sometimes ambiguous: on the one hand, the learners from the expanding circle might generally agree that pronunciation is important but, on the other hand, they sometimes lack motivation to invest extra efforts in improving their pronunciation proficiency so as to achieve greater intelligibility in speech (e.g. Bissett & Ma, 2015).

The conclusion that the student profile in question is largely characterized by pragmatic and liberal view on foreign English accents is further corroborated by the results on Item 20, stating *'I believe I would learn to pronounce English better if I were taught by a teacher who is a native speaker of English'*, where no statistically significant differences among the sample means were recorded considering the participants' attitudes to their teachers' pronunciation. As already shown, the respondents scored rather low on Item 20 ( $m=2.87$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ), failing to exhibit any particular preferences towards the idea of being taught by a native speaker of English, where over a third (35.7%) partially or even strongly disagreed that such a model of teaching would improve their pronunciation, while up to 31.2% provided neutral answers

(see Table 12). Additional testing shows that gender and self-assessed English proficiency play no role in this regard either, revealing a unanimous perspective that a teacher's accent represents a rather unimportant factor in English language teaching.

### 4.3. Students' Perspectives on ELF Lexico-Grammar

In order to investigate students' perspectives on the lexico-grammatical features of ELF, the third part of the questionnaire asked the participants to evaluate thirteen English sentences, each containing an error, i.e. a lexical or grammatical deviation from Standard English. Such lexico-grammatical deviations from the linguistic norm – for example, the omission of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular present tense suffix *-s*, or the extension of countability to uncountable nouns (e.g. *informations, datas, advices*, etc.) – would normally be discarded as mistakes that require correction. However, all of the thirteen examples represent and illustrate eight common features of ELF, as identified by previous studies (*cf.* Ren et al., 2016; Soruç, 2015). Given the student profile, the underlying assumption is that the respondents should be able to decipher the context and understand the central message of each sentence despite the obvious errors. For this reason, the participants had to evaluate the 13 sentences in a two-fold manner: first, they had to decide whether each sentence was grammatically and/or lexically correct, and second, they had to state whether each sentence was intelligible or not, meaning they had to decide if any given item had the capacity to accurately transfer meaning. It is important to note here that, while students' evaluation of *accuracy* or *correctness* of the 13 items indicates levels of English language proficiency, the estimation of each item's *intelligibility* is more a matter of personal judgment and experience in ELF communicative contexts. In other words, the students' *evaluation of accuracy* is regarded as reflecting their measurable, *objective knowledge*, while the students' *evaluation of intelligibility* is viewed as indicating their *subjective comprehension* of the 13 items. The extent to which the participants were able to recognize the eight features of ELF as deviations from Standard English – and thus regard each sentence as 'incorrect' – is a question in its own right, especially in relation to the reported average years of learning English, but remains nonetheless outside the scope of the current study. Rather, the focus here is to see the extent to which the participants were either prone to hypercorrection – by automatically dismissing the inaccurate sentences as 'unintelligible' – or inclined to take a more pragmatic attitude by showing the general tendency to accept each item as 'intelligible' despite the obvious errors. The author anticipates a tendency among the sample to give priority to intelligibility over accuracy, and a rather relaxed view on the importance of lexico-grammatical correctness, which would confirm the idea the respondents are more inclined to focus on general English fluency, comprehensibility, and "delivering the message" in achieving communicative effectiveness in ELF contexts. If so, then this would further support the idea that domestic students are indeed pragmatically oriented towards ELF, rather than being overly concerned about proper grammar, syntax or lexical choices they make in ELF communicative interactions. The eight distinct lexico-grammatical features of ELF under consideration, and the thirteen items illustrating those features, are given in Table 16.

**Table 16.** The 8 categories of ELF lexico-grammar and the corresponding items

Category	Item(s)
1. Omission of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. present tense suffix <i>-s/-es</i>	1 <i>My sister work as a teacher.</i>
	7 <i>He think I won't pass the exam.</i>
2. Misuse of relative pronouns <i>who/which</i>	2 <i>The man which wrote this book is very famous.</i>
	8 <i>This is the song who I like the most.</i>
3. Zero articles (omission of definite/indefinite articles)	3 <i>He is best boy in class.</i>
	9 <i>They live in small village.</i>

4. All-purpose question-tag ( <i>isn't it/is it?</i> )	4	<i>You are leaving today, isn't it?</i>
	12	<i>She will graduate next year, isn't it?</i>
5. Extension of countability to uncountable nouns	5	<i>They discovered many new informations.</i>
	11	<i>I'll give you two advices.</i>
6. Using redundant prepositions	6	<i>We discussed about it.</i>
7. Redundancy in using extra words	10	<i>How long time were you in London?</i>
8. That-clause instead of the infinitive	13	<i>I want that you study more.</i>

Source: Author's design.

Considering the student profile, the average years of learning English, and the intermediate to upper-intermediate level of English proficiency among the sample, the expected combination in students' responses would be where they evaluated each sentence as 'incorrect' – which would be the correct answer for all of the 13 examples – and at the same time labelled them as 'intelligible'. The tendency to choose such a combination in evaluating the items would indicate two things: first, that the respondents possess sufficient knowledge of English to recognize the obvious deviations from the Standard English norm; and second, that they embrace a more pragmatic and liberal attitude towards ELF lexico-grammar by denoting each example intelligible despite the obvious deviations. However, the author hypothesizes that the *overall evaluation of intelligibility* on the eight categories will be much higher relative to the *overall evaluation of accuracy* as a more objective indicator of English language proficiency. In other words, the expectation is that the participants will demonstrate greater extent of *subjective comprehension* than *objective knowledge* regarding the eight categories of ELF lexico-grammar, and that the association between the two variables will be rather weak. If so, we might come to a conclusion that the student profile in question is indeed characterized by a pragmatic attitude to ELF, acknowledging its role as a useful tool in establishing efficient intercultural communication. In order to investigate the relationship between the overall evaluation of accuracy and intelligibility on the 13 examples, the arithmetic mean scores for each category were obtained by assigning one point (1) for each expected answer, i.e. for evaluating each sentence as 'incorrect' on the one hand, and 'intelligible' on the other. The respondents' evaluation of each sentence as either 'correct' or 'unintelligible' was given zero (0) points, while responses where students declared they were 'not sure' for any of the given examples were excluded altogether from the final analysis, since neutral answers in this case cannot provide useful data<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the results for each of the eight categories were obtained by summing up the results for the corresponding items. Table 17 shows descriptive statistics on students' evaluation of both accuracy and intelligibility of the thirteen items, classified into the eight categories of ELF lexico-grammar.

**Table 17.** Students' evaluation of accuracy and intelligibility on the 8 categories of ELF lexico-grammar

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1. Omission of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. present tense suffix -s/-es (Items 1, 7)	accuracy	,7283	276	,35224
	intelligibility	,9565	276	,16491
2. Misuse of relative pronouns <i>who/which</i> (Items 2, 8)	accuracy	,9074	270	,20842
	intelligibility	,9241	270	,22146

<sup>1</sup> Neutral answers were nonetheless included in the questionnaire because the author had estimated that excluding such an option would put the participants under pressure to circle one of the answers at any cost, or to avoid providing any answer at all. Rather, the author wanted to make sure the respondents would take a firm position in evaluating the items.

3. Zero articles (omission of definite/indefinite articles) (Items 3, 9)	accuracy	,6101	286	,34934
	intelligibility	,9493	286	,16770
4. All-purpose question-tag ( <i>isn't it/is it?</i> ) (Items 4, 12)	accuracy	,8385	260	,30577
	intelligibility	,8769	260	,25666
5. Extension of countability to uncountable nouns (Items 5, 11)	accuracy	,3275	255	,38119
	intelligibility	,9765	255	,10609
6. Using redundant prepositions (Item 6)	accuracy	,1942	278	,39633
	intelligibility	,9856	278	,11930
7. Redundancy in using extra words (Item 10)	accuracy	,9426	296	,23306
	intelligibility	,8446	296	,36290
8. That-clause instead of the infinitive (Item 13)	accuracy	,8188	287	,38584
	intelligibility	,8990	287	,30192

Source: Author's research.

Table 17 shows that there is a considerable difference between the students' evaluation of accuracy and intelligibility, where the students' subjective ratings on the intelligibility scale are much higher than the overall knowledge they exhibited regarding the eight categories of deviations from Standard English. For example, with regard to the category of omitting the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular present tense suffix *-s/-es* (Items 1 and 7), we record  $m=0.7283$  for accuracy and  $m=0.9565$  for intelligibility, meaning that 72.83 % of the respondents accurately recognized the corresponding items as grammatically incorrect, while up to 95.65 % said the items were intelligible. In the category of omitting the definite/indefinite articles (Items 3 and 9), only 61.01 % of the respondents recognized the items as incorrect ( $m=0.6101$ ), while up to 94.93 % said the items were intelligible ( $m=0.9493$ ). In the category of extending countability to uncountable nouns (Items 5 and 11), only 32.75 % of the respondents evaluated the corresponding items correctly in terms of accuracy ( $m=0.3275$ ), while up to 97.65 % evaluated the items as intelligible ( $m=0.9765$ ). In the category of using redundant prepositions (Item 6), as low as 19.42 % of the respondents evaluated the item as incorrect, and up to 98.56 % evaluated the same item as intelligible ( $m=0.1942$  for accuracy, and  $m=0.9856$  for intelligibility). In the category of using *that-clause* instead of the infinitive (Item 13), we record  $m=0.8188$  for accuracy, and  $m=0.8990$  for intelligibility, meaning that 81.88 % accurately evaluate the item as incorrect, and 89.9 % evaluate the item as intelligible despite the error. There are, however, exceptions in two categories, where the discrepancy between the students' evaluation of accuracy and intelligibility is not that high: the category of misusing relative pronouns *who/which* (Items 2 and 8), where 90.74 % of the respondents assessed the corresponding items correctly in terms of accuracy ( $m=0.9074$ ), and 92.41 % said the items were intelligible ( $m=0.9241$ ); and the category of the all-purpose question-tag (*isn't it/is it?*) (Items 4 and 12), where the difference between the mean scores on accuracy and intelligibility is again negligible (for accuracy, we record  $m=0.8385$ , and for intelligibility  $m=0.8769$ ). Interestingly, in the category of redundancy in using extra words (Item 10), a higher level of knowledge is observed than the overall level of comprehension, where 94.26 % of the respondents assess the item as incorrect ( $m=0.9426$ ), while 84.46 % said the item was intelligible ( $m=0.8446$ ).

The results presented in Table 17 support the author's speculation that the students' overall evaluation of intelligibility would be much higher relative to the overall evaluation of accuracy of the thirteen items. The two variables can be seen as indicating levels of *subjective comprehension* and *objective knowledge* with regard to the eight categories of ELF lexico-grammar. In order to better understand the relationship between the two variables, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMCC) was used to investigate the correlation between the *overall evaluation of accuracy* and the *overall evaluation of intelligibility* of the 13 items. The purpose of this procedure was to test the

author's hypothesis that there will be only a weak association between the participants' overall *objective knowledge* and *subjective comprehension* on the eight categories of ELF lexico-grammar. The correlation between the two variables is given in Table 18.

**Table 18.** Pearson's correlation of the variables: overall accuracy (objective knowledge) and overall intelligibility (subjective comprehension)

		Total – accuracy	Total – intelligibility
Total – accuracy	r	1	,177*
	p		,021
	N	179	169
Total – intelligibility	r	,177*	1
	p	,021	
	N	169	264

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: Author's research.

As shown in Table 18, the research findings show that there is only a weak positive association between the students' *overall evaluation of accuracy* and the *overall evaluation of intelligibility* of the thirteen items illustrating deviations from Standard English,  $r=0.177$  ( $0 < r \leq 0.5$ ) (see Table 18). In other words, there is only a weak positive correlation between the overall *objective knowledge* and the overall *subjective comprehension* that the students exhibited with regard to the eight categories of ELF lexico-grammar. To sum up, if the students' objective knowledge is not significantly correlated with their more subjective comprehension, and if the overall intelligibility of the 13 items is rated much higher than the overall accuracy, then it might be concluded that there is a strong attitude among the students that deviations from Standard English do not necessarily represent any serious impediment to establishing efficient ELF communication. Such results indicate that the participants are indeed pragmatically oriented towards ELF, focusing more on general fluency, intelligibility, and the transference of meaning, rather than the structural features of language. In other words, when engaging in ELF communicative contexts, the participants are more interested in accurately transferring meaning by relying on factors such as extra-linguistic context, the pre-existing knowledge, and the expected intents of their collocutors, rather than being overly focused on structural and linguistic aspects such as using proper grammar or lexis. The ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning, and to accurately transfer one's own, thus becomes far more important than following the linguistic convention. Such findings are once again consistent with the idea that the individual's structural and linguistic knowledge is seen as intrinsically less important than one's spoken fluency as the more general ability of establishing efficient ELF communication. The current findings further corroborate the idea that domestic students are indeed contemporary users of ELF, with important practical implications for EFL and ESL teaching, discussed in the final section.

## 5. Conclusion and Final Remarks

The current findings indicate that Croatian L1 students recognize English as a global language that surpasses the needs of a single cultural and linguistic circle, and acknowledge its role as a useful tool in establishing efficient intercultural communication with other non-native speakers of English. In addition, the current results indicate that *gender* and *self-assessed English proficiency* represent significant factors

in determining what exactly constitutes the ability to efficiently communicate in ELF contexts: while male participants stress the importance of general spoken fluency, more proficient students emphasize the importance of structural and linguistic knowledge. Interestingly, the results show that students generally perceive spoken fluency as by far the most important skill they need to perform communicative tasks successfully, while the more proficient students show the tendency to think more in terms of what exactly constitutes such fluency in the first place. Thus, more proficient speakers of English put significantly more emphasis on the importance of individual structural components of language production. On the other hand, according to the participants' almost unanimous position, grammar seems to remain the main stumbling block and the greatest challenge in English language acquisition, where it seems to be perceived as the least important aspect of successful ELF communication. Such findings are consistent with those of other authors, who have found that students' perceived importance of grammar significantly decreases after engaging in ELF communication for a period of time (e.g. Ke & Cahyani, 2014), and that even EFL teachers who otherwise exhibit rather conservative attitudes, generally favouring Standard English norms, perceive Standard English grammar to be less important than teaching other, more general linguistic skills (e.g. İnceçay & Akyel, 2014). Such results point out the necessity of using purposeful language-learning strategies in ESL and EFL classrooms, and encouraging English language learners to question what exactly constitutes foreign language fluency and overall intelligibility in establishing efficient intercultural communication. The switching of linguistic processing from controlled to automatic and spontaneous is a process that is far from arbitrary, which requires meaningful strategies to be employed over time in a structured and purposeful manner.

Furthermore, the participants exhibit a rather pragmatic and liberal view on English pronunciation, showing no particular preferences towards native or native-like accents. Instead, the results reveal quite a homogenous profile that might be characterized as liberal, tolerant and casual towards non-native accents, be it their own, or their interlocutor's. In other words, though acknowledging pronunciation as an important component of spoken language production, there seems to be an articulate perspective among the sample that features revealing one's national and regional identity represents a rather unimportant factor in establishing efficient ELF communication. Non-native accents are thus regarded either as less important than one's ability of transferring the intended meaning, or even as desirable in one's spoken language production, which calls for further research. Interestingly, the current findings are in contrast to those of other studies, which have confirmed that non-native speakers often hold negative beliefs towards non-native, accented speech, which is sometimes perceived as inferior and deficient in relation to native-like proficiency (e.g. Tamimi Sa'd, 2018; Kaur, 2014a, 2014b). Even in situations where both teachers and students are aware that English is mainly being used in non-native ELF contexts, the British and American varieties often remain the preferred models inside the classroom, while learners are encouraged to explore other varieties of English outside the formal curriculum (e.g. Huong & Hiep, 2010). Instead, the author suggests that English language teachers could help their students recognize the role and value of their L1 proficiency in expressing identity in ELF communicative contexts. Such suggestion is in line with other studies which confirm that English language learners can indeed come to terms with their identities as non-native speakers of English, and take pride in exhibiting their national and/or regional recognisability and multilingual repertoires when engaging in ELF communication (e.g. Sung, 2014).

Regarding the participants' views on ELF lexico-grammar, there seems to be a general tendency among the sample to focus more on the accurate transmission of meaning by relying on all the available resources (linguistic or extra-linguistic), rather than on the individual structural features of an utterance. The participants' tendency to focus more on achieving intelligibility, and less on lexico-grammatical accuracy, indicates a strong perspective that deviations from the linguistic norm do not necessarily represent any serious impediment to establishing successful and efficient ELF communication. In other words, the findings further corroborate the position that one's general ability of transferring meaning correctly is the most important aspect of intercultural ELF communication, be it with native or non-native speakers. The current findings are in sharp contrast to previous studies, which have revealed that non-native speakers of English in the expanding circle are often inclined towards the native English norms (e.g. Jenkins, 2009b; Dewey, 2007; Kuo, 2006; Mollin, 2006b). Other studies have also suggested English

teachers' strong preferences towards the native English forms in terms of lexico-grammar as well (e.g. Soruç, 2015), which is a paradox in itself, since more than 80 percent of English teachers, internationally speaking, are non-native speakers of English (Canagarajah, 1999). Despite the fact that numerous studies show non-native speakers' preferences towards native-speaker norms, often holding the normative models to be prestigious varieties, it seems that exposure to ELF international interactions helps in shifting the focus from *accuracy* to *intelligibility*, thus helping non-native speakers of English in achieving successful and meaningful ELF communication as the ultimate goal. The author advocates that features which tend to be crucial for international intelligibility should be taught to those learners who intend to use English mainly in international ELF settings. This primarily refers to general linguistic skills and cultural awareness, as well as more general communication strategies, since these can prove to be crucial in *lingua franca* settings. Such position on the importance of achieving general intelligibility in ELF intercultural communication is consistent with those by other authors as well (e.g. Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Monroy, 2008). Moreover, certain authors go so far as to hold a strong position that English language teaching practices should be reorganized in accordance with the transition to multilingual, culturally neutral teaching, where English is regarded as the language of worldwide communication that does not coincide with any of its native varieties (e.g. Smokotin et al., 2014).

To summarize the main findings, it can be concluded that the student profile in question is largely characterized by a rather informal, pragmatic and liberal view on the various aspects of ELF, be it foreign accents, the different aspects of language production, or the lexico-grammatical deviations from the linguistic norm. The current findings support the idea that domestic students already see themselves as users of ELF, with important practical implications that can be drawn here, especially in relation to English language teaching, but also to English language teacher education. The author argues the importance of integrating the concept of ELF in teacher education programs and curricula, so as to raise the future English language teachers' linguistic and cultural awareness of intercultural *lingua franca* settings, and inspire them to consider the applicability of the concept of ELF in their future teaching practices. Furthermore, the author suggests that English teachers and practitioners should consider the needs of students who are learning English to mainly communicate with other non-native users in devising ways of teaching English for international purposes. The current results can help us better understand the various student profiles and their needs in foreign language acquisition, as well as to deepen our understanding of the relationship between students' proficiency in English and their views on what is "required", "proper" or generally defined as desirable in language production. The main findings are in line with the idea that the individual's structural and linguistic knowledge is often seen as intrinsically less important in ELF contexts than one's overall fluency as a more general ability of establishing efficient intercultural communication in English. Such findings support the hypothesis that Croatian students are indeed contemporary users of ELF, where the ability to accurately transfer meaning becomes far more important than following the linguistic convention. In addition, such conclusions are consistent with the findings of other studies which imply that the effectiveness of an ELF speaker "is determined primarily by the speaker's pragmatic ability and less by his/her proficiency" (Björkman, 2010). The current results carry important practical implications for ESL and EFL teaching, where educators and practitioners could benefit greatly from recognizing that the various student profiles have different needs in English language acquisition. In order to properly address those needs, the author advocates that English language teachers should tailor their classes in line with the learners' profile, acknowledging that those who are not learning the language at a university level, or who mainly use it in ELF contexts, might primarily be focused towards acquiring more general linguistic and communicative skills rather than metalinguistic knowledge, defined as the learner's ability to correct, describe, and explain second language (L2) errors (e.g. Green and Hecht 1992; Renou 2000; Roehr, 2007). Furthermore, the author advocates the position that the relationship between learners' explicit and implicit knowledge of language, as identified by previous studies (e.g. Hulstijn & Hulstijn, 1984; Ellis, 2005; Roehr, 2007) should be understood more fluidly and, as such, taken into account when devising English language courses. In other words, the learner's explicit knowledge, as one's ability to explain language, its features, structures and phonemes should neither be the primary focus of an ESL or EFL course, nor

necessarily understood as indicating one's implicit knowledge as a more general ability of using these structures and features in a meaningful way. The current findings could inspire the introduction of more pragmatically oriented language-learning strategies and techniques, directed towards acquiring linguistic competencies through personal experience within a wide range of communicative tasks. The current findings reveal interesting insights into the participants' views on ELF, which could help ESL teachers to tailor their classes so as to reflect their students' interests in the role of English in today's society, and inspire them to revise and broaden the learning strategies they use in their classes. Finally, the author suggests that students who are taking the English language courses as additional or supporting courses within study programmes in other fields of expertise might be ready for the introduction of ELF in domestic classrooms, in accordance with their specific needs in English language acquisition. It should, however, be stressed here that the students' perspectives on the various aspects of ELF, as investigated by the current study, should only be used to inform teachers and help them in devising their classes so as to promote more general language and communication strategies, rather than determine what needs to be taught and learnt for particular purposes in intercultural settings, since these will always remain pedagogical decisions.

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