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# British and American standards in the English language classroom: Using corpora to overcome doubts about ‘correct’ usage

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British and American English are both recognized as target varieties in institutionalized ELT settings. However, these are on an unequal footing when it comes to the impact they have on learners and the reactions they evoke among teachers. The present contribution discusses the problem of standards in English as a pluricentric language, the ideal of consistency in the use of one or the other, their representation in teaching materials and potential alternatives, as well as current linguistic research on varieties and their mutual influence. A quasi-experimental questionnaire study involving more than 400 non-native teachers of English confirms the expectation that language professionals’ intuitions about acceptability are constrained by the variety they know best. Advocating a pedagogy that takes into account the role of English as an international lingua franca and concomitant variation, the study demonstrates that corpus literacy, widely taught in the linguistic components of teaching degrees, should also be routinely applied as a practical tool empowering teachers to transcend limitations resulting from their language contact biographies. The final sections point to the challenges of adopting an ELF-aware mindset in institutional settings and ways of overcoming these.

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The present contribution can be read as a plea for a more frequent use of the wavy underline by ELT practitioners engaged in correction work. As will be argued, at a time in which English is omnipresent as the global lingua franca, there is much less that can be judged as downright ‘wrong’ than professional English teachers can be demonstrated to believe. To support such an approach, online corpora are proposed as a handy tool to help teachers decide what is appropriate in which context, and to share their insights with learners.

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The discussion is situated at the crossroads of subdisciplines as diverse as descriptive variationist linguistics (researching the multiple differences between varieties of English), applied linguistics (emphasizing the global appropriation and ownership of English as a Lingua Franca [ELF] by second-language [ESL] and foreign-language [EFL] users), language pedagogy (interested in teaching models and corrective feedback given to learners) and practical language proficiency (investigating the limitations of native speaker and non-native speaker competence).

The questionnaire study to be reported followed a quasi-experimental design, probing into acceptability judgements by 56 native English speaking teachers [NESTs] and 413 non-native English speaking teachers [NNESTs]. Participants completed a sequence of two nearly identical tasks, but in the second round were given additional information derived from a corpus of global Englishes, which served as an independent variable whose effect on their behaviour, the dependent variable, was measured. By selecting some prepositional variants for study, I will only scratch the surface of the monolith that written Standard English is commonly considered to be when it comes to teaching (Bieswanger 2008: 34, Gnutzmann 2012: 322, Dewey 2015: 129, Syrbe 2018: 444, Modiano 2020: 73). And as a bidimensional substitute for a truly global perspective, I will restrict the focus to the two standard reference varieties, British [BrE] and American English [AmE]. For all its limitations, the study will serve as a magnifying glass, exposing current shortcomings of English Language Teaching [ELT] and larger implications for the professionalization of (future) teachers.

The discussion will sketch out answers to the key questions guiding this volume, along the following lines: Section 2 will elucidate the relevance of the topic of competing teaching standards in educational contexts, referring to current discourse on the question of norms in ELT. Subsequently, Section 3 will outline the design and results of my questionnaire study. Focusing on the implications of ELF-aware English teaching and the importance of corpus literacy, the following Section 4 will discuss the potentials and benefits for teachers in training and on the job (4.1), as well as the challenges and limitations of linking variationist linguistics with Teaching English as a Second or Other Language [TESOL] (4.2). Finally, Section 5 will propose a way ahead, spanning the different phases of professional development.

## 2 The question of language norms in TESOL

The question of language norms in the English language classroom can – for present purposes – be approached from two perspectives, a historical linguistic one and an applied linguistic one. The historical aspect concerns the choice and codification of a standard: “In short, a standard language is a dialect that has been elevated to special status not because of its linguistic properties but because it is spoken by a powerful minority” (Dewey 2015: 131). In the history of English, standardization has been a long-winded process, accompanied by heated debates and fierce opposition due to its unconcealedly prescriptive and elitist thrust. Even today, Standard English is disputed and deprecated as a “fictional concept”, a “construct” with only a “relative validity” (Widdowson 2012: 7–8) or an “ideology” (Seidlhofer 2011: 42–46, Dewey 2015: 130, Jansen et al. 2022).

Against this backdrop, it may come as a surprise that the selection of a standard variety as a model for TESOL remained uncontested and was taken for granted until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gnutzmann 2012: 315), up to the Quirk/Kachru controversy about a language standard for ESL and EFL countries (Quirk 1990; Kachru 1991). The debate has recently gained new impetus with the development of innovative research paradigms known as World Englishes, Global Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, English as an International Language, and their respective applications to teaching.<sup>2</sup> What all of these approaches have in common is their focus on hybrid, pluralistic linguacultural contexts, their emancipatory outlook, and – in their applications to TESOL – their target of efficient intercultural communicative competence and backgrounding of rigid native-speaker norms (Doğançay-Aktuna & Hardman 2021: 42, see also Beuter, this volume). Since this linguistic paradigm shift has the potential to transform TESOL standards and practices in the future, it will serve to frame the following discussion.

It has to be emphasized that the focal point of the present study is a considerably more modest issue, but one that can serve as a magnifying glass for unresolved problems, as my questionnaire study will demonstrate: Pushing other varieties to the background for the time being, the discussion will revolve around the relationship between BrE and AmE as the two major reference varieties recognized as standards in curricula world-wide. Incontrovertibly, teaching a language requires a model that can be taught (cf. Gnutzmann 2012: 322). English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), meaning “*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; italics in original), has been proposed as a more appropriate target than native speaker varieties. However, ELF is adaptive, dynamic, transitory, and heterogeneous; it is performance that arises from concrete situations of use to which interlocutors bring their own multilingual resources; in short, it is “functionally and not formally defined” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 77). Therefore, “Lingua Franca English” as such is unteachable; it does not lend itself to a systematic description that would qualify as a teaching model (Bieswanger 2008: 33, Seidlhofer 2011: 77, Dewey 2012: 161–162, 2015: 131, Sifakis 2019: 293, Modiano 2020: 59). In practice, the role of a target norm is invariably and rather unquestioningly ascribed to BrE and AmE, for lack of an alternative (Seidlhofer 2008: 170, 2011: 50–54, 201, Kruse 2016: 85, Seyranyan & Westphal 2021: 76), despite certain reservations regarding a mono- or bicultural focus on the UK and/or the US in English language classrooms (cf. Syrbe 2018: 446, Modiano 2020: 48–60). As I will argue, keeping BrE and AmE as target norms is defensible on the condition that language teaching takes an ELF-aware turn, and this means a significant change away from current practices like those revealed by the questionnaire study portrayed in Section 3.

Informed by the curricula of the 16 German federal states (see Meer 2022), accredited textbooks tend to present BrE as a default target variety and AmE as a (less well represented) alternative choice (Hartmann 2022: 48, see also Bieswanger 2008, 2022, Syrbe & Rose 2018). Similarly, when asked about their attitudes, a majority of teachers in German-speaking Europe report a preference for BrE (56 % in Mering’s and 59 % in my own questionnaire study) and only a minority favour AmE (13 % in Mering’s and 28 % in my own

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2 For a summary of their main interests and tenets and the teaching models they propose, see Rose et al. (2020: 6–12, 31–37).

study; see Mering, 2022, p. 306). All in all, in institutionalized contexts, BrE certainly enjoys high prestige and an inherited privilege over AmE (cf. Preisler 1999: 241, Mair 2013: 259, Seyranyan & Westphal 2021: 81, Mering 2022: 18). On the other hand, factors such as the American film industry, the internet, computing, digital gaming, print media, music, sports, advertisements, fashion and other cultural products exert a strong attraction on learners, thus creating a demand for the American variety of English (Preisler 1999: 241, Kruse 2016: 108, Modiano 2020: 110, Mering 2022: 17).

Infusing some empirical data into the debate, Gilquin (2018) compares the frequencies with which various British and American expressions are used in corpora from countries where English is established as a second language and where it is learned as a foreign language. Drawing on geolocated tweets and Google Books data, Gonçalves et al. (2018) plot the use of British and American orthography and vocabulary on a world map. The findings from both studies agree in showing a tendency towards AmE usage that more often than not outweighs the influence of colonial ties, economic relations and geographical proximity: Users world-wide are more subject to the influence of “the forces of globalization” and the “mediascape” than to “the forces of education” (Gilquin 2018: 192, 202–203, 208). Gilquin’s study also suggests that learners do not deliberately pick British or American expressions, but that they possess a single pool composed of opportunistically learned items – one that may become more differentiated as their English proficiency increases (Gilquin 2018: 210).

At this point, the crucial question arises as to a) how distinct and b) how distinguishable British and American English actually are. These are two rather different sides of the same coin. The advent of corpus linguistics has allowed researchers to filter out and put numbers on numerous differences going far beyond well-known phonological, orthographic and lexical differences. Without going into detail at this point, entire books have been written (Tottie 2002, Algeo 2006, Baker 2017) and edited (Modiano 2002, Rohdenburg & Schlüter 2009) on the topic, the latter ending with an outlook chapter proposing another 46 lexicogrammatical differences that are as yet underresearched, and concurring with Tottie’s (2009: 362) appraisal: “the more delicate our analysis, the more differences we will find. It has always been my experience that as soon as we begin to scratch the surface of grammatical phenomena, we find unexpected differences between the two varieties.”

To gain a preliminary impression of the differences, readers are invited to try their own intuition regarding the variety typified by the following expressions, and to check it by entering the bracketed search strings in the interface of the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE; <https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>):<sup>3</sup>

- (1) *High protein foods will make you **fuller for longer**.* (\_jfr for longer)
- (2) *It all **depends on if** you still love him.* (DEPEND on if)
- (3) *Try to be **near to** perfection.* (NEAR to NOUN)
- (4) *It got me thinking about how much of history **is down to** chance.* (BE down to)

3 The examples are taken from Rohdenburg & Schlüter (2009). In the GloWbE corpus (which will be used for the following study as well, accessed in April 2022), type (1) is roughly 5 times as frequent in BrE as in AmE; type (2) is twice as frequent in AmE as in BrE; type (3) is 2.5 times as frequent in BrE as in AmE; type (4) is 4 times as frequent in BrE as in AmE; types (5) and (8) are 4 times as frequent in AmE as in BrE; types (6) and (7) are 10 times as frequent in BrE as in AmE.

- (5) *He's spent the **last several weeks** skating and training.* (the next|past|last|first several \*)
- (6) *I **was sat** there looking at him.* (BE sat|stood)
- (7) ***As well as being** clever, she was an outstanding beauty.* (. as well as \_v?g)
- (8) *I am not **as big of a fan** as many people are.* (as|so|how|this|that|too big|high|good of a)

This may suffice to illustrate the immense size of the corpus-linguistic enterprise of describing differences between the two reference varieties. However, differences are usually quantitative rather than absolute, and as will be argued in what follows, neither native speakers nor proficient non-native users and teachers of English can be expected to possess the requisite meta-level of language awareness to know them all. When speakers (including learners) encounter new vocabulary items or phrases, these do not come labelled as 'American' or 'British': They will usually be taken as a variant or novel means of expression or as near-synonyms, of which the English language contains many. Depending on an item's frequency, perceived usefulness, desirable connotations or other qualities, it will be adopted into the pool that users tap whenever the need to express themselves arises.

Furthermore, linguistic research has demonstrated that the varieties exert a mutual influence on each other, with relatively more adoptions from AmE into BrE than vice versa (Modiano 2002, Mair 2006: 193, Rohdenburg & Schlüter 2009: 421, Leech 2009: 258, Crystal 2012: 188, Gilquin 2018: 209). Americanisms frequently used by UK informants surveyed in Mering's (2022: 256–271) questionnaire study include the use of *train station* for 'railway station', *I guess* for 'I suppose', *apartment* for 'flat', *smart* for 'clever', *mad at* for 'angry with', *movie* for 'film', *for free* for 'free', *proven* for 'proved', *snuck in* for 'sneaked in' and the use of the past tense with indefinite past time reference as with *yet*, *just* and *already*. Mering (2022: 2), following Modiano (2002: 13–14), expects that sooner or later BrE and AmE will merge into a hybrid, homogenized, supranational version of English. Crystal (2012: 189) paints the following future scenario: "If WSSE [World Standard Spoken English] emerges as a neutral global variety in due course, it will make redundant the British/American distinction. British and American English will still exist, of course, but as varieties expressing national identity in the UK and USA. For global purposes, WSSE will suffice."

On this background, applied linguists have seriously questioned the pedagogical soundness of teaching learners of EFL to consistently use one variety (Modiano 2002: 11, 2020: 73, 82, 129, Mering 2022: 7; see also Llurda 2018: 522). I fully agree with Mering's (2022: 11) conclusion that advising learners not to mix varieties "is no longer realistic as AmE is building up tremendous momentum, in such a way that it even encroaches upon EFL learners' mother tongues and UK English" (cf. also Modiano 2020: 41, 82). Yet, according to Mering's (2022: 307) recent questionnaire study among 62 German and Swiss teachers of English, a majority of 71 % endorsed the consistency rule.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this attitude is most poignantly phrased by Llurda (2018: 522): "The demand for consistency is one of the ultimate proofs that many teachers still consider English the property of NSs [native speakers]."

4 The university students surveyed were also rather ambitious, with 50 % stating that consistency is very or moderately important, while secondary school pupils were the most relaxed, with 31 % agreeing with the rule.

A useful – though not undisputed – concept addressing this problem comes from the proposal of “Mid-Atlantic English” as a teaching model, a hybrid form of BrE and AmE involving a strategic choice of linguistic means to ensure optimal international communication (Mering 2022: 5; cf. Modiano 2002: 10–14, 2020: 80–91). In concrete terms, encouraging non-native learners to use internationally comprehensible English in an ELF-aware English classroom would, for instance, involve avoiding culture-specific or otherwise particular lexis, be it BrE *public school* for *private school*, *surgery* for *Doctor’s office*, or AmE *busboy* for *waiter’s assistant*. It would also favour replacing idiomatic expressions like “it was like Clapham Junction here” by the more transparent “it was very busy or crowded here” (Modiano 2020: 26–28, Mering 2022: 8). It would favour spellings like *criticize* and *civilization* over *criticise* and *civilisation* because the former are commonly used in both AmE and BrE, while the latter are more unilaterally British. And when it comes to corrective feedback, ELF-aware English teaching would certainly tolerate variants such as those in (1) to (8). The drastic claim made by Widdowson (2012: 21) for ELF applies – for all intents and purposes – also to the teaching of EFL in institutionalized settings:

Adherence to these [native-speaker, JS] norms does not, as is often claimed, ensure effective communication but on the contrary will tend to make it more difficult. ELF has often been equated with fossilized learning. But if anything is fossilized it is these norms – fossils, it would seem, set in stone.

Since extracurricular learning of English (with all its mixed input) should be welcomed and seen as an asset in the English language classroom, expecting learners to be consistent in their production would be overtaxing them. In fact, expecting teachers to know all variants is just as unrealistic, as the following study will demonstrate; but it will also show that corpus literacy can help overcome that limitation.

### 3 The questionnaire study

The questionnaire to be outlined in this section targeted two questions: First, to what extent do intuitions of NESTs and NNESTs reflect BrE and AmE in cases of attested divergence? Second, can exposure to corpus data demonstrating such divergence help overcome any potential variety biases? The data are based on two versions of an online questionnaire that were distributed in 2020 and 2021 and answered by 76 native speaker lecturers teaching English at German universities (among them 27 from the UK and 29 from the US) and 413 teachers of English at German secondary schools (99% of whom were German native speakers and most of whom were based in Bavaria). As space is limited, the design and results will be condensed to those aspects most relevant to the context of British and American norms. More details and discussion are available in Schlüter (2022; to appear).

#### 3.1 Design

The questionnaire followed a quasi-experimental setup eliciting acceptability judgements in an error-correction task divided into a ‘pre-exposure’ condition, and a ‘post-exposure’

condition in which corpus data came into play. Participants rated the acceptability of alternative prepositional options for which British and American English show divergent usage in the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE).<sup>5</sup> Prepositions were chosen for being a notoriously problematic area for learners; yet they merely represent one out of many respects in which the two major reference varieties differ. Items were based on examples derived from the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE) and the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP) and presented in randomized order. The instructions to Part I and three stimuli are exemplified in Figure 1.

### Part I: Routine Correction Task

Go through the following sentences written by learners of English as quickly as possible (as if doing routine corrections) and give your intuitive reactions to the bold-printed words. If you cannot decide in a hurry and would look things up, you can indicate that too, but do not actually look up anything.

	unacceptable ✗	doubtful ~~~~~	acceptable ✓	cannot decide (would have to look up) ?
The payments were considered as unfair <b>on</b> the poor because their situation was not taken into account.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When Mick started to pay attention to her, she felt as if she had a new lease <b>on</b> life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fast food consists <b>from</b> a large number of ingredients which are unhealthy for humans.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Fig. 1: Screenshot of Part I of the questionnaire (pre-exposure condition).<sup>6</sup>

The selection of 20 stimulus sentences was inspired by the lists of British-American divergences provided in Algeo (2006: 159–198). To qualify for inclusion, items had to fulfil the condition that they involve alternative prepositions with identical meanings, whose relative frequencies differ significantly between the GB and US sections of the GloWbE corpus. For instance, the preposition following *unfair* in the GB corpus section is *on* in 36 % and *to* in 64 % of all cases; in the US corpus it is *on* in only 4 % and *to* in 96 % of the cases (a 32 % difference). In contrast, the preposition after the noun *lease* is *on* in only 24 % and *of* in 76 % of all cases in the GB section, but it is *on* in 64 % and *of* in 36 % of the cases in the US section (a 40 % difference). The minimal difference between the GB and US data for items to be included was determined to be 17 %; the maximal difference amounted to 73 %. For convenience, stimuli like *unfair on* will be referred to as ‘more British’ and stimuli like *lease*

5 This multinational corpus of internet language contains a total of 1.9 billion words, and roughly 390 million each for GB English and US English. For more information see <https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>.

6 As is illustrated by the third example in Figure 1, Part I additionally contained seven distractors, which represented truly deviant prepositional variants, such as are often found as a result of L1 interference. These did not enter the analysis.

*on* as ‘more American’. Note that ‘more British’ does not imply that a variant necessarily makes up the majority of instances in the British corpus section. In fact, the rationale of the questionnaire involved a design where the variants less frequent across varieties were offered in the correction task. However, to ensure that the minority variants must without doubt be considered as sufficiently entrenched options rather than occasional mistakes, the less frequent prepositional options were required to occur in at least a quarter of the total instances in at least one of the two reference varieties. In effect, the smallest percentage, represented by the item *fed up of*, turned out to amount to 29 % of hits in BrE, as opposed to only 6 % in AmE (with the complementary proportions represented by *fed up with*). In other words, all prepositional options shown in the questionnaire were attested in one or both corpus sections well above error level and therefore judged to be well-established in at least one variety.

## Part II: Linguistic Data on Variation in World Englishes

In the following, you will find the same example sentences again. You also see a visualization of the average choices made by people from 20 different countries (identified by their flags) in a 1.9 billion word database of World Englishes (the GloWbE corpus, <https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>). The choice of preposition obviously varies to different degrees in L1 and L2 varieties of English. In view of this information, please assess the example sentences again, irrespective of your former decisions.

USA Tanzania Ghana South Africa Philippines Singapore Pakistan India Australia Great Britain  
Canada Jamaica Kenya Nigeria Hong Kong Malaysia Bangladesh Sri Lanka New Zealand Ireland

\* unfair to 100% [USA, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, Philippines, Singapore, Pakistan, India, Australia, Great Britain] 100% unfair on

	unac-ceptable	doubtful (wavy under-line)	accept-able	cannot decide (would have to look up)
The payments were considered as unfair <b>on</b> the poor because their situation was not taken into account.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* lease (N) on 100% [USA, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, Philippines, Singapore, Pakistan, India, Australia, Great Britain] 100% lease (N) of

	unac-ceptable	doubtful (wavy under-line)	accept-able	cannot decide (would have to look up)
When Mick started to pay attention to her, she felt as if she had a new lease <b>on</b> life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Fig. 2: Screenshot of Part II of the questionnaire (post-exposure condition).

The corpus proportions were visualized in Part II of the questionnaire (the ‘post-exposure’ condition), symbolized by the position of the national flags on a scale between 100 % use of the ‘more American’ and 100 % use of the ‘more British’ variant, as illustrated in Figure 2 for the items *unfair on* and *lease on*. In smaller size, the scales also displayed the distributions found in 18 other L1 and L2 varieties sampled in the GloWbE corpus. The complete corpus dataset employed in the questionnaire is listed in Figure A1 in the appendix. As can also be seen from Figure 2, participants were asked to re-assess the acceptability of the same 20 stimuli as in Part I. The instructions drew attention to the existence of variation and pointed out that consistency with the pre-exposure ratings was not expected. Items were again displayed in randomized order.

Part III of the questionnaire finally elicited some biodata, such as participants’ gender, age, nationality, mother tongue, education, current employment, media intake, variety preference, and reactions to the questionnaire.

### 3.2 Results

The acceptability ratings thus collected confirmed some expectations, but they also held some surprises. Predictably, the British and American NESTs’ spontaneous ratings in Part I of the questionnaire were heavily biased towards usage in their home countries, as attested in the GloWbE corpus. For instance, 24 out of 27 British lecturers rated the item *unfair on* as ‘acceptable’, but 18 of them rated *lease on* as ‘unacceptable’. Conversely, 26 out of 29

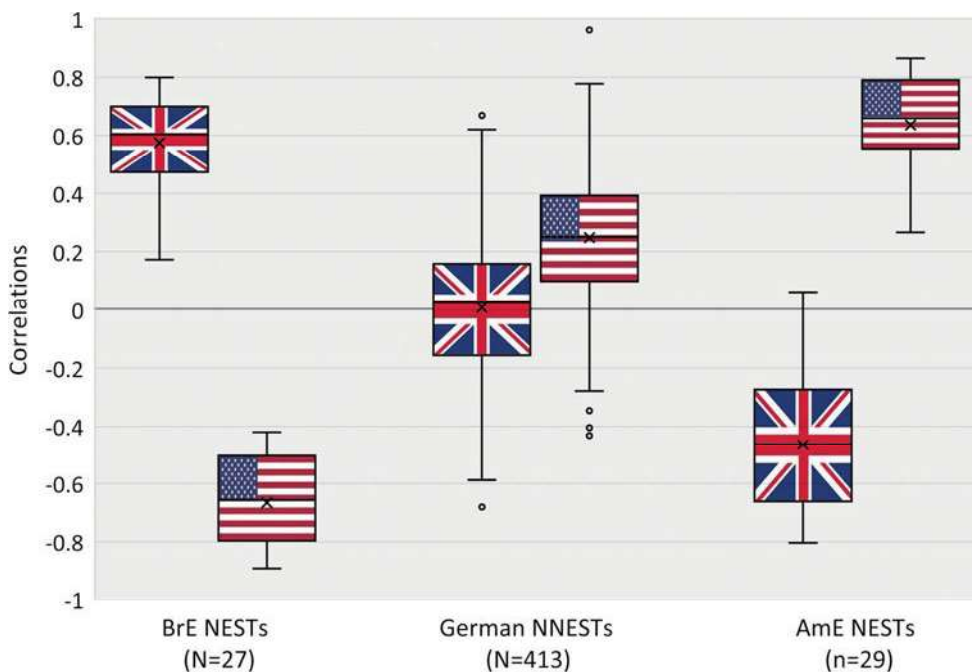


Fig. 3: Correlations between acceptability ratings by individual participants from three groups and corpus data from GloWbE GB and GloWbE US (Pearson’s  $\rho$ ).

American lectors rated the item *unfair on* as ‘unacceptable’, but all of them rated *lease on* as ‘acceptable’. This produced high positive correlations between British NESTs’ ratings and GloWbE GB data, but high negative correlations in the cross-over comparison with GloWbE US data, as shown by the two boxes on the left of Figure 3. Exactly the opposite was true for American NESTs, though the rejection of BrE usage was not quite as pronounced (Figure 3, right). In other words, British lectors tended to mark mistakes where American lectors did not, and vice versa.

Another predictable finding was that German NNESTs (Figure 3, centre) exhibited more variance in their ratings, and also that they took an intermediate position between British and American native speakers. What came as a surprise is that on average, tolerance of the AmE variants was considerably higher. A closer look at individual rating profiles showed that out of 413 teachers, as many as 178 demonstrated strongly Americanized intuitions, while only 33 turned out to judge items in a British-like way – a contrast that resulted in a small positive correlation with US corpus data.

Focusing on the German NNESTs only, Figure 4 visualizes the distribution of the four rating categories across all test items. The left-hand panel depicts the results of Part I, showing that out of 20 items rated by each participant, a median of 7 were judged to be ‘unacceptable’, 2 were considered ‘doubtful’ and 8 were accepted. The escape option labelled ‘cannot decide (would have to look up)’ was selected 3 times.

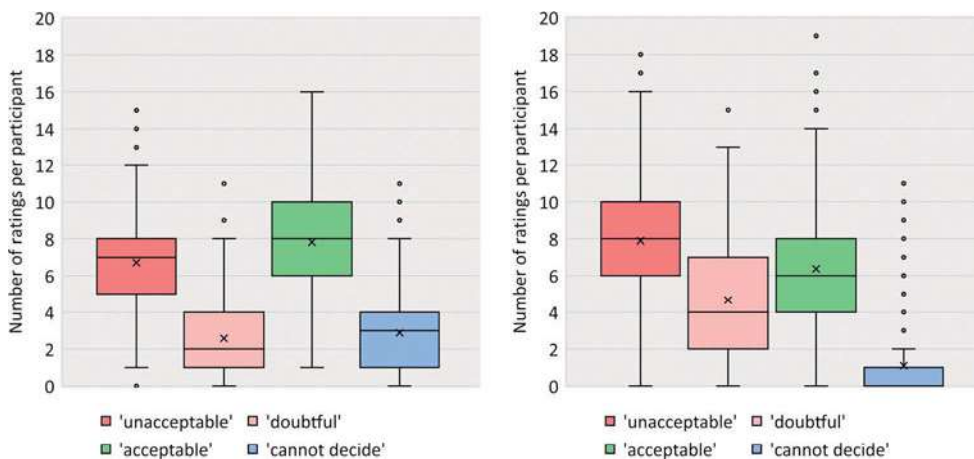


Fig. 4: Distribution of acceptability ratings by individual German NNEST participants (N=413). Left panel: pre-exposure condition. Right panel: post-exposure condition.

The right-hand panel of Figure 4 indicates the distribution of ratings from Part II of the questionnaire, after participants had been exposed to the corpus data displays. To the present researcher, these results provided the biggest surprise: Despite the solid evidence for the existence of each of the prepositional variants examined, the uptake of the usage information led only to very moderate changes in the rating patterns. What is more, the median of ‘unacceptable’ ratings increased by 1, the ‘doubtful’ ratings increased by 2 and the ‘acceptable’ ratings decreased by 2. The only expectation that materialized was a clear reduction in the number of undecided choices.

### 3.3 Discussion

First of all, the analysis of the intuitive acceptability judgements by the university lecturers in Part I provides strong evidence for the hunch that even ELT professionals of the most sought-after kind, viz. native speakers,<sup>7</sup> are prone to judge learners' text production through the lens of their 'congenital' bias: Their intuitions are shaped by usage in their countries of origin, and this influence cannot easily be thrown off, even after (in some cases) decades of teaching English at German universities. In the examples at hand, divergences are mostly below the radar of metalinguistic awareness (with the possible exception of prepositions following *different*, which have attracted prescriptivist attention). But as has been argued in Section 2, the two major reference varieties have numerous unheard-of contrasts of comparable size. If the strict assessments made in Part I are truly representative of routine corrective feedback as provided daily by ELT practitioners at university level, this is cause for concern.

As for the German secondary school teachers, all of whom are NNESTs, it is interesting to observe that their intuitions on average resemble those of Americans more than those of Britons, despite the fact that a majority of 59 % said they considered BrE as their 'most desirable variety' (as opposed to only 28 % for AmE), and that school books in Germany usually promote BrE as the default variety. This may be taken as further support for "the forces of globalization" and the "mediascape" (Gilquin 2018: 192) at work not only among the younger generation in Germany.

Furthermore, the relatively low acceptance rates with which NNESTs met the questionnaire items were presumably due to the choice of the less well established prepositional versions as test items for the questionnaire. Since this was part of the strategy, the present researcher would have expected higher selection rates for the 'doubtful' or 'cannot decide (would have to look up)' options. However, the vast majority of judgements went for one of the categorical extremes: either 'unacceptable' or 'acceptable'. As has been shown in Section 2, the plethora of differences between Englishes and learners' language intake from heterogeneous sources beyond teachers' control would recommend more caution here: No single person, be they native speaker or not, can possibly know all there is in the two reference varieties, not to mention Englishes globally.

Fortunately, there are corpora available for teachers to come to grips with such variation – or so the present author thought. The visual displays of corpus data presented to participants in Part II were intended as an instant remedy for unnecessary scepticism regarding the acceptability of the questionnaire items.<sup>8</sup> Note that all prepositional variants included in the study are established in at least 29 % of hits in either BrE or AmE corpora, usually more. Thus, the variants may not be the most widely used ones and not represent the ideal targets for teaching. However, by descriptive linguistic standards, all items would

<sup>7</sup> See Galloway (2021: 94) for a critical discussion of native-speakerism.

<sup>8</sup> In the open text areas in Part III, participants did not report any difficulties understanding the condensed scalar representation of usage data, though a few participants' comments indicated that they had misinterpreted the data as acceptability judgements (such as those elicited in the questionnaire). This was, however, deemed inconsequential for the analysis.

without any doubt deserve full acceptance in a correction task, considering that the task contained isolated sentences of unspecified origin, with prepositional options that a writer might well have picked up in authentic native speaker usage. I expected the share of ‘acceptable’ ratings to rise dramatically at the expense of all others. The limited success that this design brought about consisted in minimizing the ‘cannot decide’ answers and increasing the ‘doubtful’ answers. However, teachers were generally reluctant to recognize prepositional uses they were unfamiliar with as fully acceptable. Especially thought-provoking was the finding that the share of ‘unacceptable’ ratings increased while that of ‘acceptable’ ratings shrank. There was also a noticeable trend (not shown here for reasons of space) to correct towards the BrE norm and to reject the AmE variants that had been accepted in Part I.

#### **4 Implications for (future) ELT professionals**

In view of these – to my mind – disappointing results, more reflections will be offered as to which potentials and benefits can realistically be envisaged by educating (future) ELT professionals about varieties of English and equipping them with corpus tools, and why one without the other is no panacea to the problem of standards in the English language classroom.

##### **4.1 Potentials and benefits**

Reasons for including topics in variationist linguistics and corpus linguistic methods in the education of (prospective) teachers can be viewed from the perspectives of preparatory teacher education and professional development on the job. Both will be discussed in turn, beginning with teaching degree courses at German universities. To date, World Englishes, cross-varietal relations and mixed codes such as ELF and Mid-Atlantic English are ‘hot topics’ in linguistic seminars (cf. Bieswanger 2022: 116–117). They are paralleled by current themes in literary and cultural studies, which also broaden their perspectives beyond Anglo-American contexts and foreground multiculturalism, diversity, post-colonialism and multilingualism (cf. Seidlhofer 2008: 170). Studying variation across space and extending the concept of ‘English’ beyond the language as used by closely circumscribed native-speaker communities can help future teachers gain self-confidence and emancipation as language experts. As Llorca (2018: 522) remarks, non-native speakers in ELT often consider themselves as imperfect learners rather than competent users because they have been confronted and compared with the unattainable ideal of native-like competence throughout their careers (see also Galloway 2021: 94, Matsuda 2021: 135–136). They feel inhibited because they perceive a “displacement of their authority on the native speaker”, while their role as teachers should rather be “not to protect the essences of the language in its purely idealized form, but to bend it and bring it to use in order to meet the needs of all kinds of speakers in all kinds of situations” (Llorca 2018: 522, 523). To borrow Blair’s (2015: 91, 99) terms, English teaching has moved to a “‘post-native’ era” and should promote “‘beyond-native’ competence” as a target, combining multilingualism, pragmatic and intercultural competence with ELF-awareness, regardless of a teacher’s L1.

Linguistic research on varieties and variation to a large extent relies on – in fact, it has been significantly shaped by – the availability of corpora. Therefore, large sections of the student population encounter corpus methods as part of their studies in linguistics. However, a logical further step frequently not taken is the routine application of corpus queries to resolve students’ own practical language issues, for instance in academic writing and error correction tasks (see Großmann & Schlüter, this volume). Moreover, as has been demonstrated by Part I of the questionnaire, non-native speakers’ competence may be different from that of native speakers, but each has its limitations in the face of the global and pluricentric lingua franca. Therefore, ELF-aware teacher training can arguably only be implemented if it is underpinned by a solid level of corpus literacy among students as well as their educators. In particular, having corpora at their fingertips “empowers non-native speaking students and teachers because it allows them to develop a rational view of the authority and limitation of native-speaker intuition” (Mair 2002: 125; cf. Granath 2009: 64, Modiano 2020: 202).

Turning to the professionalization of English teachers already on the job, both the subject matter of norms and varieties and the corpus-linguistic method have considerable potential; in fact, they complement each other in substantial ways. Returning to the question of language norms (discussed in Section 2), since ELF practices do not lend themselves to codification as a pedagogical model, there is currently no prospect of an alternative to Standard BrE and AmE. However, the widely held view that successful communication depends on the degree of approximation to a consistent native-speaker norm is mistaken, as can be observed on a daily basis in the efficient and thriving use of ELF by billions of speakers (cf. Seidlhofer 2011: 197, Dewey 2012: 163, 2015: 126). And above all, this norm cannot realistically be defined as either BrE or AmE, to the exclusion of the other variety. ELF-aware teaching is sensitive to the fact that ‘Standard English’ subsumes at least two Englishes that differ in more ways than any single expert can tell, that these are in constant flux and mutually permeable, and that native speakers and learners alike are continually exposed to mixed input, which comes unlabelled for variety.<sup>9</sup>

Pivotal to this contribution is the concern that to handle such complexity, ELT practitioners should be ready to mistrust their own intuitions about ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ usage and to routinely consult corpora of both BrE and AmE in cases of doubt. At the very least, this is imperative when it comes to corrective feedback: It is obvious that assessment practices determine how a language is appropriated by those being assessed (the “test washback”, Rose et al. 2020: 92–93; see also McNamara 2012: 201), but feedback is problematic when those providing it are confronted with variation they are unsure about (Modiano 2020: 181, Jansen et al. 2022: 74–75). Institutionalized language assessment has an important gate-keeping function; therefore, to be defensible, correction decisions should be made on a robust evidential basis and avoid subjective bias.

In his questionnaire study of the prospects of a post-normative ELF pedagogy, conducted among UK-based teachers of English, Dewey (2012: 167) points to the challenge of dual professional responsibilities:

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, expressions of demonstrably different (BrE, AmE and other) origins provide a formidable occasion for teachers to foster language awareness in learners (cf. Kruse 2016: 103–107).

On the one hand, teachers have a responsibility as educators to respond to the immediate learning needs of their students. On the other hand, meeting these needs has to be reconciled with teachers' institutional responsibilities, which are so often determined by norm-based accounts of language and language testing.

To cope with both demands, Dewey (2012: 61) recommends that teachers adopt multiple perspectives in their approach to correctness, acceptability, appropriateness and communicative success, and to impart these perspectives on learners as their competence evolves. In a post-normative pedagogy (see also Seidlhofer 2011: 175–210), teachers and (with increasing levels of competence) also learners are or become aware of the “text-booky” set of norms set down in grammars and dictionaries, and more flexible ways in which language is actually used.

As mentioned at the outset, in cases of doubtful usage, such as the correction task submitted to teachers in my study, a practical implication would be that teachers resort to the wavy underline in their corrective feedback more liberally and resist the spontaneous impulse to mark downright mistakes.<sup>10</sup> Wavy underlines can be used to alert learners to the fact that an expression may not be ideal in a certain (linguistic or situational) context. They should be accompanied by a comment detailing the kind of norm deviation, be it the degree of formality, collocation, connotation or – at an advanced level – the mixing of different varieties.<sup>11</sup>

## 4.2 Challenges and limitations

When it comes to linking the present linguistic topic and approach with TESOL, two sets of problems have frequently been noted in the literature: One is connected with the skillset requisite for corpus applications, the other with the mindset of attitudes to standards and varieties in the classroom. As for the naturalization of corpus use by teachers and learners, reservations typically concern technical issues, unwieldy corpus output, insufficient linguistic or meta-linguistic skills, difficulties of interpretation and, above all, the time required for training and routinization (cf. Boulton 2021: 13). These obstacles are, however, not insurmountable and in the long run, the investment will pay off, as has been shown in a large-scale meta-analysis by Boulton & Cobb (2017): Corpus users will gain a better grasp of linguistic structures and a resource that exceeds the information that can be found in ordinary dictionaries and grammars in terms of quantification and exemplification.

But as the post-exposure condition in Part II of the questionnaire has revealed, acceptance of variation essentially hinges on an open mindset with regard to linguistic norms, which has been described here and elsewhere as a precondition for ELF-aware teaching.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to pedagogical innovations, reactions among teachers in training and on the job are often adamant. Indeed, giving up norms of correctness would have a deeply unsettling effect; replacing them by an unstable, fuzzy and diverse assortment of variants would cause unease, frustrate teachers and disorient or overtax

10 See Mukherjee (2002: 138–142), who also suggests marking different degrees of norm deviations.

11 Such advice can be backed up by appropriate corpus queries that teachers share with learners. Conveniently, the <https://www.english-corpora.org/> interface allows users to produce a shareable link to a specific search, making it reproducible.

12 For a discussion of further pedagogical and institutional constraints, see Syrbe (2018).

learners (Dewey 2012: 161–165, 2015: 133). Admittedly, calling for “Lingua Franca English” as a teaching model would seem one step too far (Seidlhofer 2011: 77, Syrbe 2018: 441). The thrust of the present contribution is more modest: I have argued that BrE and AmE should continue to serve as models, but that even Standard English is not monolithic, and that consistency defined in terms of ‘pure’ BrE or AmE is both unrealistic and unnecessary. It would be a big step forward if NESTs as well as NNESTs kept an open eye on unfamiliar variants in learners’ usage and were prepared to check them, ideally against multinational corpora. Arguably, in English language classrooms situated in a globalized world, English users owe each other an attitude of respect towards individual learning biographies and variety affinities. In that sense, teaching English should be ELF-aware: The legitimacy and importance of ELF needs to be acknowledged and its influence on learners embraced and deliberately tapped as a resource that can advance language learning and benefit the English language classroom.

It has been pointed out that testing learners’ approximation to native speaker models of grammar and lexicon has only little predictive value when it comes to their ability to successfully use English in an international context (Rose et al. 2020: 85). Since institutionalized language teaching necessitates frequent assessment and formative feedback, a challenge that remains for ELF-aware teaching is “to articulate the construct of ELF communication in such a way that it can be formulated in standards and can act as the focus for assessment” (McNamara 2012: 201, cf. Syrbe 2018: 448). Another rationale for not ditching native Standard English as the ultimate target norm involves maintaining the continuity between transitory, ephemeral, heterogeneous ELF communication and fully native-like, educated and stylistically rich usage, a cline along which learners can progress as far as they can or want (Gnutzmann 2012: 320–321, Modiano 2020: 132). There is no need to deprive them on principled grounds of the highest possible level of achievement, while at the same time valuing competencies such as accommodation to interlocutors, cooperative negotiation of communicative intentions and emancipation of speaker identities.

## 5 A way ahead

As emanates from the above discussion, on a conceptual level, the links between linguistic research into variation and varieties, the pedagogy of lingua franca communication and corpus literacy to underpin both are evident. As a way ahead, a number of concrete suggestions, practicable ideas and teaching formats can be proposed to achieve better coherence between linguistics and TESOL and between the three phases of teacher education. I will thus conclude with some concrete examples of initiatives that I have put into practice together with colleagues at the University of Bamberg.

For the German state school sector, the training of English teachers is relatively standardized, with pre-service students following a curriculum regularly including linguistic and pedagogical courses as well as practical language classes. Teacher education programmes are catalysts for changes in the educational system (Sifakis 2019: 298). Thus, joint classes crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries do not only provide opportunities to make the connections between these areas explicit and the practical use of corpora in

language teaching palpable for students; they will also help university staff widen their perspectives to include the concerns of neighbouring disciplines.

In-service teachers are expected to take mandatory professional development courses on topics of their choice. In this context, corpus literacy can be offered at a basic or advanced level, or as a complement to more theoretically oriented courses, for instance revolving around grammar teaching, vocabulary work, error analysis, materials design and criticism, World Englishes, etc. Moreover, to bring pre-service students and in-service practitioners into contact and encourage them to take each other's perspectives, students can design educational materials, teaching units, input videos, etc. as part of their course credits. Provided that these undergo close monitoring and editing by teacher educators from the linguistic and/or pedagogical departments, these can be shared as open educational resources (e.g. Le Foll 2021) or brought to fruition in the context of professional development workshops (e.g. Schlüter 2023), thus helping teachers to keep tabs on current developments in the field.

For anyone not within reach of formally organized courses, numerous excellent books have been published introducing readers to theoretical, attitudinal, curricular and practical aspects of English as an international language, e.g. Rose & Galloway (2019) and Rose et al. (2020). Likewise, numerous books provide guidance on the theoretical and practical aspects of corpus linguistics for ELT, e.g. Mukherjee (2002), Timmis (2015), Friginal (2018), Viana (2022).

In addition, as part of a blended learning and digitalization project at the University of Bamberg, a series of interactive demo videos has been developed and incorporated into a growing self-study package that is openly accessible at <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/korplus/>. Its target audience spans prospective users from the secondary and tertiary educational sectors as well as anyone interested in corpus applications. Besides, the <https://www.english-corpora.org/> interface provides a self-guided tour, ample documentation, interactive example searches and, most recently, explanatory videos for all its functions and uses.

It is paramount to emphasize, however, that fostering a knowledge base of Global Englishes and promoting a skill base of corpus literacy will not be enough, as the study reported in Section 3 has undeniably shown. Effecting a move towards ELF-aware teaching will not just require the acquisition of declarative insights and the training of skills that can be made readily and routinely available to solve recurrent problems. Rather, addressing the problem of the “universal school culture of conservatism, convergence and control, which discourages diversity and discovery” (Tomlinson 2006: 135–136) is a mission that involves “teacher education and development”, not just “teacher training” (Dewey 2012: 164).

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### Appendix

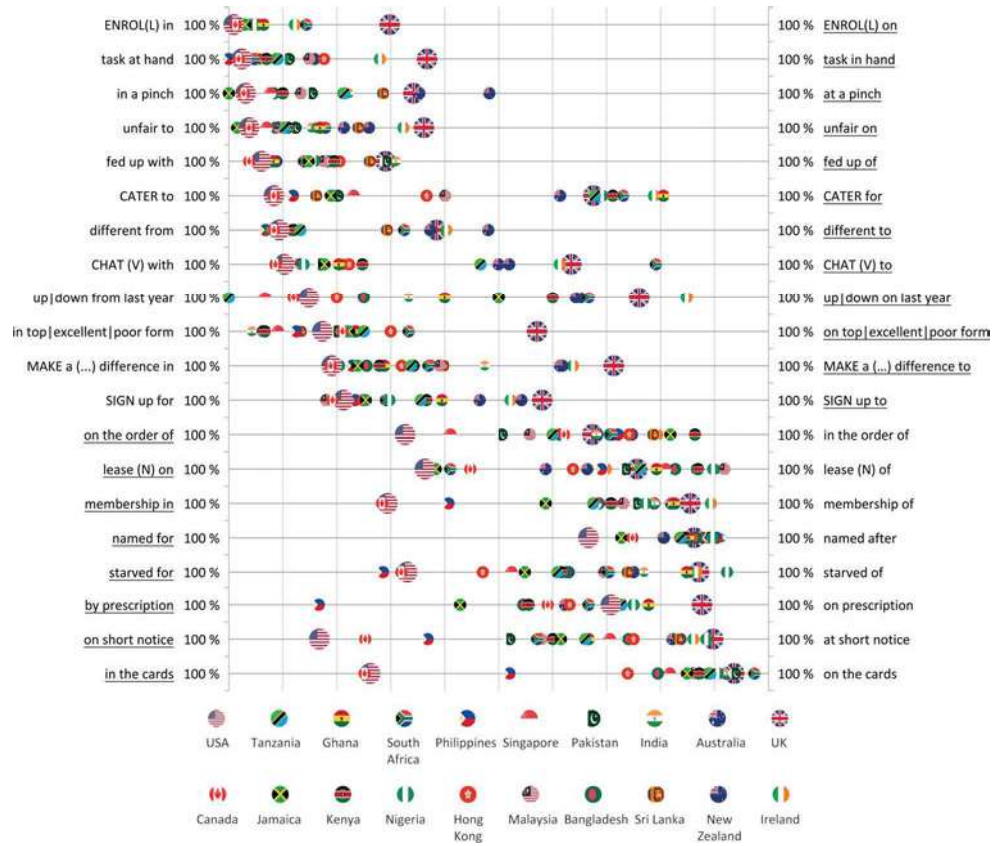


Fig. A1: Prepositional choices in the GloWbE data by national variety. Underlined variants were represented in the questionnaire.