Do corpus data on World Englishes inspire tolerance of variation in ELT professionals? An experimental questionnaire study with native English speaking teachers[1]

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Schlüter, Julia. 2024. Do corpus data on World Englishes inspire tolerance of variation in ELT professionals? An experimental questionnaire study with native English speaking teachers. In: Sarah Buschfeld, Patricia Ronan, Theresa Neumaier, Andreas Weilinghoff & Lisa Westermayer (eds.) *Crossing boundaries through corpora: Innovative corpus approaches within and beyond linguistics.* Amsterdam/New York: Benjamins. 217–245. https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.119.09sch

Abstract

The present study aims to show that – given the status of English as a pluricentric global language and as a lingua franca – Corpus Linguistics has important and unique contributions to make to English Language Teaching (ELT). Desirable innovations arguably involve popularizing the use of corpus concordancing as a tool to put native speaker intuitions on a firmer empirical footing, and imbuing ELT practitioners with an awareness that variation –in particular (but not only) between geographical varieties – is an inherent and legitimate characteristic of language in use. To support these points, a quasi-experimental questionnaire study with 76 native English speaking teachers based at German universities is reported, which demonstrates the promises but also the obstacles of such an approach.

Keywords: English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes, English Language Teaching (ELT), Varieties of English, Data-driven learning (DDL), Corpus-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Prepositional phrases, Applications of Corpus Linguistics, Corpus literacy, Error correction, Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs), Target norm, Consistency, Bias

1. Introduction: Researching and teaching English as an International Language

On account of the descriptive, quantitative perspective that comes with the corpus-based study of language, the ubiquity of variation in language is self-evident to any corpus linguist. As for English Linguistics, research charting variation in World Englishes (WE), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the uncountable hybrid ways in which English is used around the world has over the past decades been a center of interest. The present volume is a further case in point. Thus, Meierkord (2020: 311) notes "an enormous increase of publications discussing the spread of English worldwide and the various Englishes that have developed as well as the processes that today seem to characterize interactions conducted in English". These research trends are

[1] Many thanks go to the editorial team and two anonymous reviewers for their thorough reading and helpful comments. I acknowledge financial support by the *Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre* for the project within which the present study has been realized (*Digitale Kulturen der Lehre entwickeln – DiKuLe*, University of Bamberg).

mirrored in the teaching foci of English Linguistics departments at university level (see Bieswanger 2022: 116-117). The availability of large computer-readable corpora, including many that represent geographical varieties of English, has been instrumental in this: "For the last two decades, the field of WEs has received a major boost by its association with corpus linguistics" (Schreier, Hundt & Schneider 2020: 5).

At the same time, the status of English as an International Language (EIL) has raised the stakes in English Language Teaching (ELT) to unprecedented levels. Mair (2022: 262) holds that "the boundary between EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) has become as permeable as the one between EFL and ESL (English as a Second Language)", evidence of which can be seen in "continental Europe, where millions of citizens are being initiated into ELF through a phase of formal EFL instruction in school." These descriptive facts have been echoed by the development of innovative paradigms in Applied Linguistics, known as TEIL (Teaching English as an International Language; McKay 2002; Matsuda 2012), ELF- or EIL-aware pedagogy (Bayyurt & Sifakis 2015; 2017; see also Seidlhofer 2011), GELT (Global Englishes Language Teaching; Galloway 2017; Rose & Galloway 2019) and WE-informed ELT (Matsuda 2020).[2]

However, the fluidity of usage norms poses a potential challenge to stakeholders in ELT. Descriptive variationist perspectives are "difficult to bring home to conservative observers and decision-makers in the educational and political arena" (Schneider 2007: 18), as they can upset established beliefs and practices. One major stumbling block are norms of correctness, which are at a premium in language assessment. This problem was noted by Sinclair twenty years ago, and as will be shown, it is still as acute as ever:

> [F]rom a classroom perspective the emergence of corpora may not seem to be good news – a large amount of new information to absorb, and an unsettling failure to confirm the consensus view of language that has been considered adequate for most classrooms for many years. (Sinclair 2004: 271)

In an attempt to illustrate the persistence and significance of the problem, the present study examines professional language teachers' reactions to variable usage in the choice of prepositions. A quasi-experimental questionnaire study will show that the 76 native English speaking teachers (NESTs) sampled from numerous German universities have intuitions about acceptability that are colored by usage in their native varieties. To establish varietal differences, 33 expressions with competing prepositions will be investigated in a large multinational corpus. In addition, the questionnaire will test a potential remedy for the finding that NESTs are not only unfamiliar with usage in varieties of English other than their own, but that they tend to consider such usage unacceptable. To that end, participants will be exposed to corpus evidence testifying to the commonness of different prepositional usage in other varieties of English, so as to increase their acceptance of the variants in question. If the expectation is met, this will be taken to support Granath's (2009: 64) recommendation of corpora as "probably the best tool we can provide future language teachers with."

Numerous voices have advocated corpus applications in language teaching, and for various reasons (see Section 2). The present contribution will advance another compelling argument in

[2] For a summary of their main interests and tenets and the teaching models they propose, see Rose, Syrbe, Montakantiwong and Funada (2020: 6-12, 31-37).

favor of corpus use in ELT contexts: In view of the global role of English, an unparalleled strength of corpora is that they can reveal facts about language that exceed the intuitions of individual native speakers, who inevitably have their own predilections (Barnbrook 1996: 140; Mair 2002: 121–122; Granath 2009: 63), including varietal biases as revealed by the questionnaire results. In a twofold sense, the study thus crosses existing disciplinary and national boundaries: First, it emphasizes the interdisciplinary value of Corpus Linguistics (both in terms of methodology and content) for Applied Linguistics (in this case, Teaching English as an International Language): The questionnaire data underline the need for practitioners to add corpora to their repertoire of referencing tools. Second, it showcases a practical way of transcending national boundaries between the many varieties of English: Innovative approaches to ELT challenge professionals to keep an open mind and an open eye on divergent usage in Englishes they are less familiar with, but so far have rarely highlighted the redeeming potential of corpus applications for this ambitious aim (see the passing remarks in Modiano 2020: 202 and Jansen, Mohr & Forsberg 2022: 73).

In what follows, a selective literature survey on the advantages and limitations of using corpora in ELT will be provided (Section 2). Subsequently, the design of the questionnaire study will be elucidated and the participants introduced (Section 3), followed up by a synopsis of selected results (Section 4). A comprehensive discussion will evaluate the results from corpus-linguistic and teaching-related perspectives (Section 5). Finally, some concluding remarks will survey the main findings and point to the promises and challenges of corpus applications in EFL teaching more generally (Section 6).

2. Overview: Corpora in English Language Teaching

The benefits of utilizing corpora in language education, both at secondary and tertiary level, have been extensively discussed for more than two decades, for instance by Mukherjee (2002), O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007), Römer (2012), Cobb and Boulton (2015), Callies (2019), and Hunston (2022). Callies (2019: 247) defines corpus literacy as comprising:

- an understanding of basic concepts and the nature of corpora,
- familiarity with corpus interfaces and query syntax,
- extrapolation from and interpretation of corpus data, and
- (for teachers in particular) application of corpus data for didactic purposes.

In addition to the indirect (teacher-guided) application of corpus data, learners can be given direct access to corpora and trained in their use. Corpus-assisted language learning, also known as DDL (Data-Driven Learning), has been claimed to be beneficial since it actively engages learners in discovery learning, enhances their language awareness and strengthens their autonomy and independence from direct instruction. In addition, and with particular relevance to the present contribution, corpus literacy has been suggested as a means of empowerment for non-native English speaking users, potentially surpassing the introspective judgements of native speakers (Mair, 2002: 121-125; Granath 2009: 64). The benefits of corpus use in language learning have recently been confirmed by a large-scale meta-analysis (Boulton & Cobb 2017).

However, the gap between the prevalence of corpus analysis in linguistic research and its incorporation into language teaching practices is slow to close (Timmis 2015: 7–12; Zareva 2017: 69; Friginal 2018: 7; Chambers 2019: 460–461; Ronan 2023: 27-30). The 76 NESTs

participating in the present study form no exception here: Only 13 stated that they occasionally resorted to corpora as reference tools. Several reasons for this disparity between theory and practice have been identified in the above-mentioned literature, including limited access to appropriate corpora, a disconnect between corpus proponents and language teaching practitioners and inadequate proficiency among the latter in effectively querying corpora and managing complex search results. Meanwhile, free web interfaces to large corpus collections (e.g. www.english-corpora.org) have resolved accessibility problems for most user groups and abundant self-learning materials have been produced (e.g. the monographs by Timmis 2015; Liu & Lei 2017; Friginal 2018; Poole 2018; or the newly available interactive materials by Schlüter & Großmann 2022 at https://www.uni-bamberg.de/korplus).

The present contribution aims to emphasize the need for corpus literacy among ELT practitioners with special reference to the status of English as an International Language. Illustrating one type of application, Buschfeld and Weidle (2023) show how corpus data from varieties of English can be introduced in classrooms to familiarize students with authentic examples of WEs. As another use case, the present article will argue that multinational corpora are an ideal tool in the hands of NESTs, enabling them to navigate the heterogeneous nature of Englishes competently and effectively, for instance when doing correction work. Drawing on data from the same questionnaire study, Schlüter (2022) discusses in more depth the attitudinal preconditions for practitioners and pedagogical implications of teaching a language with two standard varieties. Along similar lines, Schlüter (2024) investigates acceptability judgements in a modified version of the questionnaire conducted with more than 400 non-native speaker participants teaching English at German secondary schools, with a focus on the British-American polarity.

3. Study design: Acceptability ratings pre and post exposure to corpus evidence

There is no need to reiterate previous (often corpus-based) research to establish that varieties of English differ on all levels of description. The online questionnaire used for this study targets prepositional usage. This choice was more or less arbitrary and could have foregrounded other features for which varieties diverge, but prepositions were chosen as an area that (1) is known to cause problems for learners, (2) yields many probabilistic divergences retrievable from corpora of different national varieties, and (3) is likely to lie below the level of conscious awareness of many practitioners. Following these criteria, I chose 33 expressions involving alternative quasi-synonymous prepositions from the extensive lists of differences between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) compiled by Algeo (2006: 159-198). Algeo's data are based on the Cambridge International Corpus. I replicated these differences in the corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE, Davies 2013; Davies & Fuchs 2015), extending the searches to all 20 national varieties of English represented in that corpus. The corpus contains data from 20 countries where English is used as an L1 (GB, US, Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa) or L2 (including India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Jamaica).[3]

[3] The GloWbE (https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/) runs to a total of 1.9 billion words, collected from a variety of general websites (roughly 70%) and more informal blogs (roughly 30%) during the years 2012 and 2013. The GB and US sections make up the largest subcorpora (almost 390 million words each), while the smallest component is the Tanzanian one (35 million words) and others are in between.

During data collection, I queried the corpus for expressions containing alternative prepositions, ensuring high precision of the search expressions employed.[4] I then calculated the proportions of the two prepositions in the British (GB) and American (US) corpus sections as percentages. To be included in the questionnaire, the difference between the GB and US sections in terms of preposition choice had to reach or exceed a minimum of 15%, and each preposition had to account for at least 25% of the total number of relevant expressions for either the GB section or the US section or both.[5] In other words, this meant that in one or both of the two standard varieties, each preposition was used in at least one out of four instances of each expression. This condition was deemed sufficient to ascertain that all prepositional variants included in the questionnaire are established usage in a reference variety and are not merely performance errors. The variable prepositional expressions thus selected include verb-dependent ones (e.g. *chat with* vs. *to*, *sign up for* vs. *to*, *cater to* vs. *for*), noun-dependent ones (e.g. *appreciation for* vs. *of*, *membership in* vs. *of*, *lease on* vs. *of*) and adjective-dependent ones (e.g. *starved for* vs. *of*, *fed up with* vs. *of*, *unfair to* vs. *on*) as well as fixed (often idiomatic) colligations (e.g. *in* vs. *at a pinch*, *up/down from* vs. *on last year*, *on* vs. *at short notice*, *in* vs. *on the cards*, *with respect to* vs. *in respect of*).

The complete set of items employed can be inspected in Figure A1 of the Appendix. For each pair of prepositions, their precise proportions across the 20 varieties in the GloWbE corpus were determined and visualized as flags on a scale, the end points of which represent 100% use of the 'more American' option on the left and 100% use of the 'more British' option on the right. For easier reference, the US and UK flags are shown in larger size. Consider two examples (also shown in Figure 2): In GloWbE US, the verb *chat* selects the preposition *with* in 90% of all cases, while in GloWbE GB *with* accounts for only 37% of all hits; the complementary percentages are made up by *chat to*. Most other varieties cluster with AmE, but South African English uses *chat to* even more extensively than BrE. In the case of *in/on the cards*, AmE (along with Canadian English) is the odd one out, using *in* in 74% of instances, whereas BrE hardly uses this preposition (5%) and goes for *on* instead, just like the majority of other Englishes. As can be gleaned from Figure A1, AmE and BrE in many instances occupy the most extreme positions on the scale, with other varieties in their (past or present) national spheres of influence nearby.

The online questionnaire was implemented with LimeSurvey and had two main parts, followed by a demographic section and some free text questions for comments and feedback. Both Parts I and II contained the identical set of 33 stimulus sentences, which had to be rated on a three-point acceptability scale with an opt-out option labelled 'cannot decide (would have to look up)'. The rationale of the study required that the more marginal prepositional alternative, seen against the background of all varieties, was displayed in the questionnaire, as this version was more likely on average to be rejected by the respondents. This was important to generate a sufficient number of stimuli for which participants could switch to more tolerant ratings ('acceptable' or at least 'doubtful') in Part II.

The prepositional expressions were embedded in authentic sentences extracted from student writing in the (BrE) BAWE and (AmE) MICUSP corpora. In some cases, I shortened or adapted

[4] The GloWbE allows for alternates separated by a pipe (|), wildcards as well as lemma- and part-of-speech-based searches. Exemplary search expressions were: "task in|at hand", "ENROL in|on", "CHAT_v with|to", "MAKE a * difference in|to". More details can be seen in Figure A1 of the Appendix.

[5] As it turned out, the actual minimal difference in prepositional choice between the GB and US data amounted to 17% and the minimal share of each preposition in either GB or US data to 27%.

sentences slightly to avoid references to geographical settings and other confounds. In all items, bold font was used for the prepositions to focus participants' reactions on these rather than other features of the sentences. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of Part I, which came under the guise of a 'Routine Correction Task', and includes the wording of the instructions. Stimulus sentences were presented in random order and interspersed with seven distractors, which exemplified typical German learner errors and did not enter the analysis (for instance the third sentence in Figure 1). To reiterate, from a descriptive linguistic point of view, all other items submitted to participants' judgements represent viable English sentences in at least one of the major (British and American) reference varieties, but they were designed to provoke a large share of 'unacceptable' ratings.

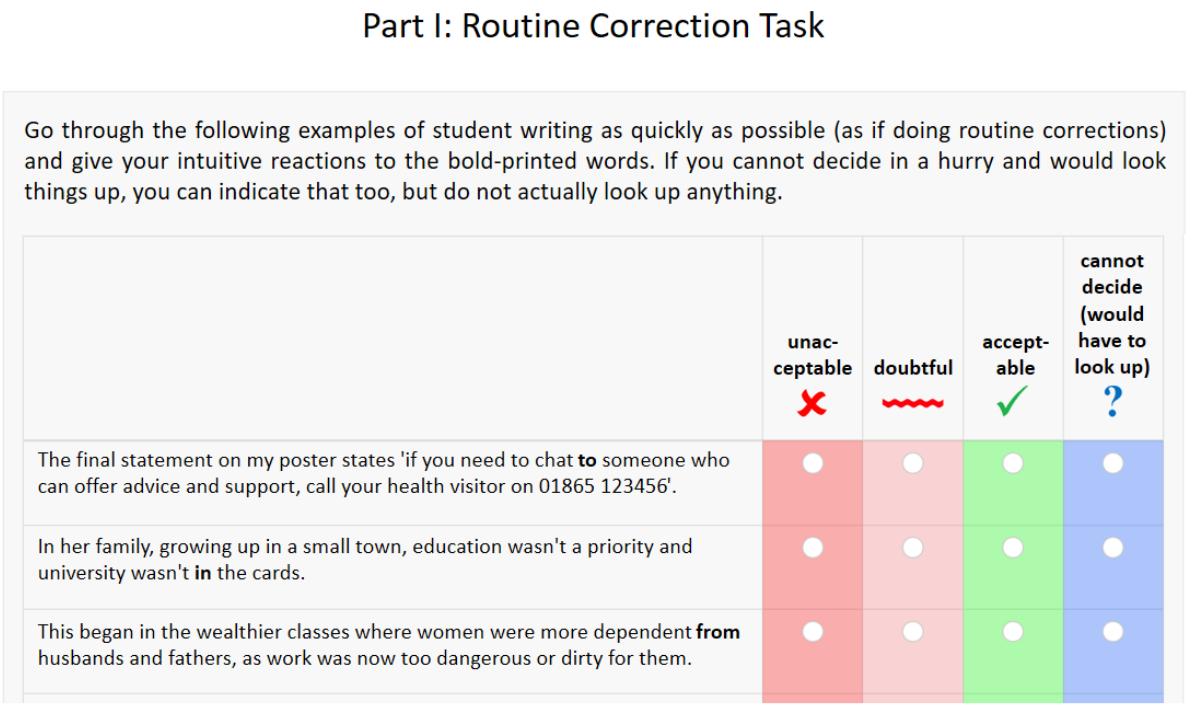

Figure 1: Excerpt from Part I of the questionnaire (pre-exposure condition).

The questionnaire was quasi-experimental in that it implemented a pre-/post-test setup with a visual intervention in between: Respondents' spontaneous acceptability judgements in Part I served as a baseline that pinpointed their linguistic intuitions when left to their own devices. Part II presented the same rating scale and stimulus sentences (minus the distractors) once more, but now accompanied by corresponding data snippets from the overview graph in Figure A1. A screenshot can be seen in Figure 2. The display and instructions thus highlighted the existence of cross-varietal differences in usage but made no explicit attempt to influence participants' responses. Instead, they discouraged consistency with Part I, and flipping back to completed items was prevented by the online interface.

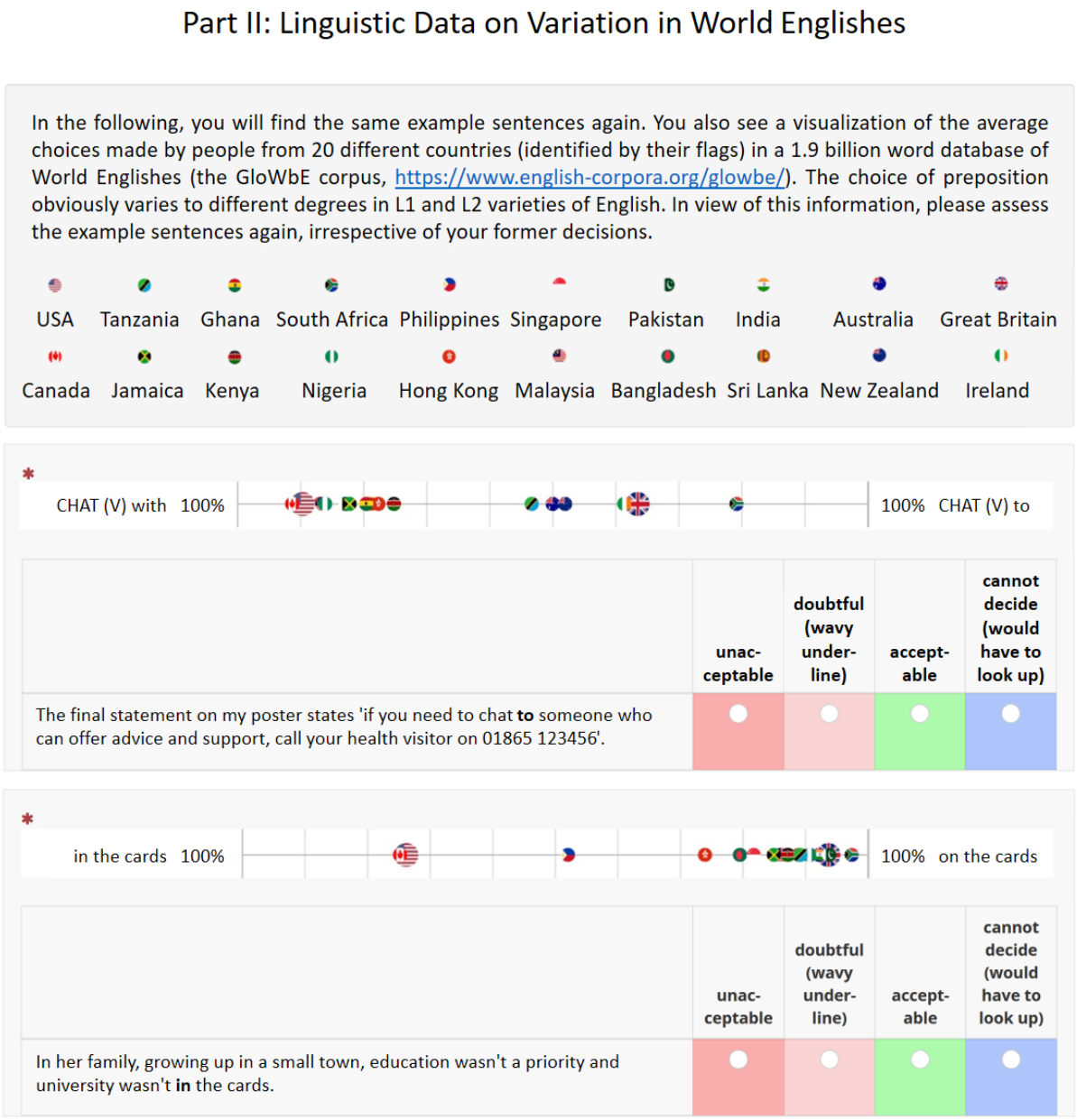

Figure 2: Excerpt from Part II of the questionnaire (post-exposure condition).

The link to the online questionnaire was circulated among native speakers teaching English at German universities and teacher training colleges through their institutional e-mail addresses; a total of 76 answers were obtained between July and September 2020. Relevant biographic information about the participants was collected in the last questionnaire section (see Tables A1 to A5 in the Appendix). For present purposes, the analysis will focus on NEST groups with a minimum of two representatives: the US (n = 29), the UK (n = 27), Australia (n = 6), Canada (n = 5), Ireland (n = 3), and New Zealand (n = 2).

4. Results: Foreseeable matches and unforeseen mismatches

The analysis of the questionnaire results is based on (1) correlations between the participants' ratings in the 'pre-exposure condition' (Part I) and the proportions of prepositional alternatives in the corpus sections for different countries, and (2) correlations between the ratings in the

'post-exposure condition' (Part II) with the same corpus proportions: In both conditions, each respondent provided 33 ratings, which were converted to values of –1 ('unacceptable'), 0 ('doubtful') and +1 ('acceptable'). The statistical relationship between these and the proportion of the respective prepositional variant in the corpus data was calculated as Pearson's *r*, such that a separate coefficient was obtained for each participant and each GloWbE subcorpus in both conditions.[6] In other words, a participant's judgements across the 33 prepositional variants could align or contrast more or less distinctly with the relative frequencies of these variants (compared to the alternative prepositions) in usage data from different English-speaking countries.

As a first step, I aimed to demonstrate what seems more or less obvious: that the intuitions of NESTs are influenced by usage in their native varieties. In the questionnaire results, this bias should be reflected in positive correlations between their acceptance of a prepositional variant in the pre-exposure condition (Part I) and the proportional frequency of this variant in corpus data from the respondents' countries of origin. For instance, regarding the items displayed in Figure 1 (whose distributions are shown in Figure 2), British participants should be predisposed to judge the example sentence with *chat to* (63% in GloWbE GB) as acceptable, but the one with *in the cards* (5% in GloWbE GB) as unacceptable. Opposite ratings are predicted for US participants (*chat to*: 10% and *in the cards*: 74% in GloWbE US). Similarly, predictions can be made for respondents from other national backgrounds.

The boxplots in Figure 3 depict in light grey the results of the pre-exposure condition (Part I), which will be scrutinized before we turn to the post-exposure results in dark grey. Each panel visualizes the results for a group of participants defined by their country of origin. Panels for respondents from the same world region are placed side-by-side: North America at the top, the Antipodes in the middle and the British Isles at the bottom. As participants from Canada, New Zealand and Ireland are few in number and their data are consequently less robust than those for the more populous countries on the left, the panels on the right are only included for completeness' sake. Intriguingly, their patterns are very similar to those for respondents of US, Australian and GB provenance, respectively.

A closer look at the light grey graphs yields the following observations:

- The 29 Americans' intuitions correlate very positively with GloWbE US and CAN, but rather negatively with GloWbE GB data; there is no statistical relationship with Antipodean usage data.
- The five Canadians' ratings are more moderate in their alignment with North American usage, rather compatible with Antipodean usage and neutral towards British usage.
- The six Australian's judgements agree strongly with GloWbE AUS and NZ data, but are also quite in line with British and Irish usage; there is no correlation with North American usage.
- The two New Zealanders react in ways that are very similar to each other and virtually indistinguishable from their bigger neighbors.
- The 26 Britons give ratings that are distinctly British and that put an increasing distance between them and usage data from the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand and Australia; correlating the ratings with US American and Canadian usage produces the strongest negative coefficients obtained in the entire study.

[6] Spearman's ρ, which is a non-parametric measure and involves fewer preconditions for the distribution of the data, was calculated as a backup, but the differences turned out to be negligible.

- The three Irish participants' inclinations tend towards British, Irish and Antipodean usage and vary between null and slightly negative correlations with GloWbE US and CAN.

While the boxplots reveal some interesting tendencies and a strikingly consistent split between North America on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other, on the whole this is exactly what was to be expected: In the case of divergent usage, acceptability judgements and the corpus proportions of competing prepositions from the same variety have thus been confirmed to correlate significantly.

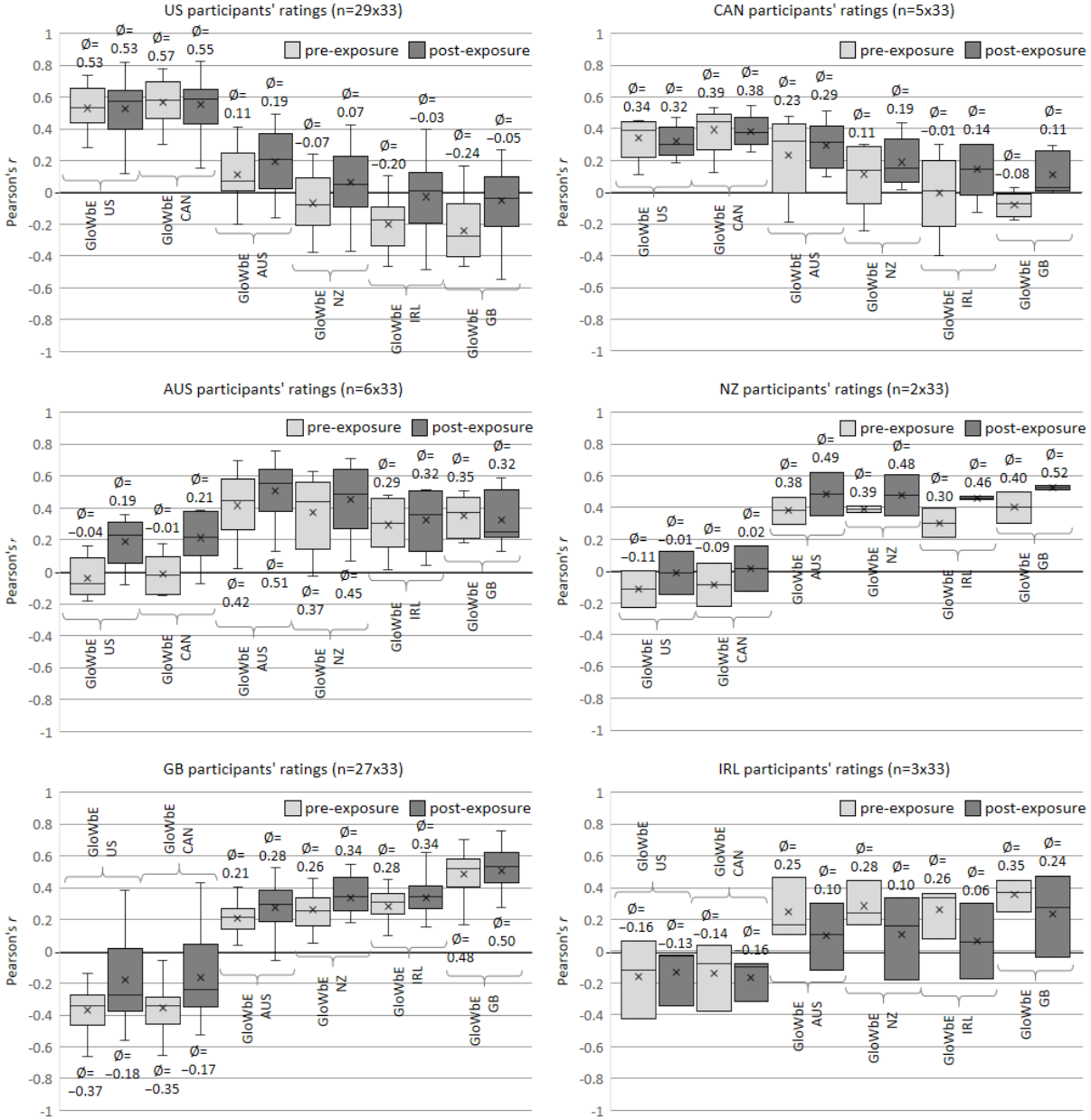

Figure 3: Correlations between individual participants' ratings and corpus data: Absolute values of Pearson's *r*. Light grey: pre-exposure condition; dark grey: post-exposure condition.*

* Boxes indicate the second and third quartiles of participants; whiskers the furthest data points within 1.5 times the inter-quartile range; center lines the medians; crosses the arithmetic means (which are specified by numeric labels).

Critically, this finding implies that prepositional variants that are well-entrenched in varieties other than their own native ones are frequently rejected by NESTs as 'unacceptable'. This widespread but highly problematic bias in a task that mimics practitioners' everyday correction work will provide the pre-test baseline against which experimental effects will be measured.

As detailed in Section 3, the questionnaire aimed to go one step further, implementing a quasi-experimental design in its bipartite structure. The second part confronted respondents with an intervention consisting in additional corpus-based information that was displayed in a visually accessible format. The corpus data were such as would persuade any descriptively-minded corpus linguist to rate each individual stimulus sentence as 'acceptable'. Likewise, ELT practitioners were expected to spontaneously notice that there are L1 varieties around the globe (in particular those they are less familiar with) in which the prepositions in question are used with considerable regularity. This information was intended as an eye-opener and an instantaneous remedy for the limitations inherent in native-speaker competence: In the post-exposure condition, it was predicted that participants would judge the same items as before more favorably; in fact, ideally, all items should be rated as equally acceptable. Notably, in terms of correlation strengths, such a change would reduce any pre-existing statistical relationship between ratings and corpus data, as the former would be uniform across stimuli and independent of the variant's exact share in the corpus sections.

To cut a long story short, the expected change did not materialize. The overall proportions of 'unacceptable', 'doubtful', and 'acceptable' ratings remained virtually unchanged post-exposure, as can be seen in Table 1. Potential reasons for this unforeseen and perplexing outcome will be discussed in Section 5.

Table 1: Absolute and relative numbers of ratings in pre- and post-exposure conditions.

Rating	Pre-exposure		Post-exposure	
	N	%	N	%
'unacceptable'	708	29.4%	728	30.0%
'doubtful'	319	13.2%	311	12.8%
'acceptable'	1,382	57.4%	1,388	57.2%
'cannot decide (would have to look up)'	99	3.9%	81	3.2%
Total	2,508	100.0%	2,508	100.0%

However, the confrontation with corpus data did not leave the distribution of ratings between the stimulus sentences unaffected, confirming the effectiveness of the experimental setup. In Figure 3, the results from the post-exposure condition (Part II) of the questionnaire are depicted as dark grey boxes next to the light grey ones for direct comparison. What is immediately obvious is that in almost all cases, the correlation coefficients moved towards the upper end of the scale. This means that respondents on average tended to conform their ratings even more to the positions of the national flags in the graphs: Generally, prepositions with high usage levels in the corpus data received more positive ratings while those with low usage levels received still more negative ratings. Note that since the corpus proportions for the 20 varieties of English vary along a range from relative homogeneity to wide divergence (as can be seen from Figure A1 of the Appendix), a positive correlation of ratings with usage data from one country (for instance, the participants' homeland) does not necessarily imply a negative correlation with another country's usage.

Some noteworthy observations regarding Figure 3 include the following:

- For five out of six participant groups (US Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and Britons), correlations with the datasets from their native countries remained strong or grew even stronger. For example, a US respondent made the following comment in one of the free text boxes: "I paid particular attention to the American and British responses. Usually they confirmed my choices; sometimes they convinced me to change my mind." The effect was that her personal ratings after exposure correlated even more than before with the US corpus data (Pearson's *r* went up from +0.37 to +0.70) and even less with the GB data (down from –0.17 to –0.31). It seems that NESTs from the Antipodes in particular gained more confidence in their own intuitions as they saw them supported by corpus data.
- In the pre-exposure condition, the most pronounced negative correlations had emerged between GB ratings and US and CAN corpus data. British NESTs had been quite homogeneous in their dismissal of North American usage. Post-exposure, the increased height of the boxplots indicates that the uptake of the evidence varied substantially between individuals with opposite approaches to corpus data. This may be illustrated by two quotations: One British participant wrote: "I thought that some prepositions that I would consider to be incorrect might be considered to be correct in other parts of the world. I chose my answers in part 2 according to the information given in the graphic data, even though I would consider them to be incorrect." Thus, she (reluctantly, it seems) brought her correlation with US data up from –0.40 to +0.39 and with CAN data up from –0.34 to +0.43. Another British respondent commented: "Section 2 does not appear to take into account the fact that a preposition may be used frequently but nevertheless be wrong. Statistical frequency is no proof of correctness" – and kept his negative attitude to US and CAN usage.
- The US participants also started out with markedly non-British assessments, but showing somewhat higher flexibility and variance in their reactions to 'more British' items. Their negative judgements were largely neutralized in the post-exposure situation. One US respondent articulated the precise experience that the exposure to usage data was intended to provoke: "I discovered several British prepositional forms that I was heretofore unaware of." Another one sounded a similar note: "I was more willing to accept something as being correct when I saw that the version that I wasn't familiar with (or that sounded wrong to me) was actually fairly widespread."
- Last but not least, one of the three Irish participants deserves special mention. While his initial ratings had been plainly in line with those of other Irish and British practitioners, his behavior in the post-exposure condition truly stood out. He was the only one who embodied my anticipated reaction to the data displays and rated every single questionnaire item as 'acceptable'. His comment was: "It made me aware of the diversity of expressions, and the fact that forms with which I am unfamiliar are perfectly acceptable to large numbers of English speakers." On account of this standout, the boxplots for IRL participants in the post-test results increased in variance to approach or include the zero line (absence of a correlation).

5. Discussion: Corpus-linguistic and teaching perspectives

Overall, the results from Part II of the questionnaire reveal that my expectations as to the rescuing potential of corpus data in correction work had been too optimistic: The uptake of

descriptive corpus data by language professionals was limited and variable. As was shown in a more quantitative analysis of the same quasi-experimental questionnaire (Schlüter 2022), an individual's permeability to this kind of empirical evidence only partially depends on factors such as age and level of education. The spotlights that Section 4 has thrown on some participants' comments indicate that the effects of corpus evidence are to a large extent subject to idiosyncratic attitudes. In the absence of any instructions on or discussion of how the information was to be interpreted and what the implications for the assessment of student writing could be, a considerable number of professionals ended up being less accepting of variants than before exposure to corpus data. To contextualize these findings with current practice in advanced ELT at university level and the role of corpus literacy in it, several discussion points and desiderata will be explored.

At the planning stage of the present questionnaire, it was assumed that Part I would expose the problem (varietal allegiances of native-speaking English teachers), and that Part II would present an instantaneous remedy (increased tolerance towards choices documented for other varieties) since it would provide insights hitherto unavailable to the respondents. Contrary to expectation, the results suggest that without prior instruction, the uptake of corpus data was rather unpredictable. Reactions tended to cluster in two ways (visualized in more detail in Schlüter 2022): Some participants were prepared to give more lenient acceptability judgements for variants they had rejected in Part I, but unconditional acceptance of all variants was the exception. In a larger group of participants, confrontation with the corpus data promoted even more normative orientations: Rather than accepting prepositional variants on a range of different proportions of use, these were prepared to accept only the single most dominant option, or the one most frequent in the variety that happened to be closest to their hearts. This may in part be due to the lack of clearer instructions, as the study was interested in spontaneous behavioral changes and left the participants in the dark as to what was expected of them. Further research should thus replicate the pre-test/post-test design and include extensive training on corpus-linguistic matters and the role of EIL in between.

To this end, a small-scale study in which 14 students of English Linguistics at the University of Bamberg followed a semester-long corpus literacy course between taking Parts I and II of the questionnaire is reported in Großmann and Schlüter (2024). Varieties of English were one of the course's focal areas, but the students' uptake of the corpus data did not differ in any significant way from that of the NEST professionals involved in the present study. Totally in line with these findings, Matsuda (2017: xv) points out that "brief exposure to WE issues" is insufficient to effect a shift in attitudes, and "that a longer and sustained engagement is essential for deeper and richer understanding of WE issues necessary for EIL teaching." Matsuda therefore calls for a change in teacher preparation programs on a more general level. As my study shows, the mindsets of NESTs working in teacher training at university level would provide a good starting point to leverage change. Some participants voiced a feeling of unease at having their views shaken up (quotations 1 to 3) – a 'collateral damage' that was deliberately incurred in the construction of the questionnaire, while others turned out harder nuts to crack (quotations 4 and 5). It would thus be desirable to intensify the discourse about WE between stakeholders in practical language and Linguistics departments, and to actively involve teachers-in-training in this debate.

(1) "They [the linguistic data shown in Part II] made me second guess myself..." (US participant)
(2) "I gained an awareness of the limitations I have regarding varieties of English. My eye/ear is trained to notice deviations from a narrow band of Englishes." (AUS participant)

(3) "It was fun but made me feel inadequate. Always good to get out of one's comfort zone." (GB participant)
(4) "A couple of instances were surprising for me – so I'd either rely on my intuition (!) or look them up to be safe and get more detail." (GB participant)
(5) "I usually don't look up doubtful cases of prepositional usage at all. I rely on my native speaker competence and 40 years' experience of TEFL. (Arrogant, I know.)" (South African participant)

As a desirable side-effect of this study, questionnaire participants as well as readers of this contribution may have noticed British, American, or other usage they had so far not been aware of. Moreover, there are numerous additional examples that can be found in Algeo (2006: 159-198) and other corpus-based literature. In view of the notorious volatility of prepositional choices across varieties, it is indeed astonishing to see that ELT participants did not select the opt-out option 'cannot decide (would have to look up)' in more than 3.9% of the total responses in Part I (see Table 1). This can be interpreted to reflect a strong sense of self-reliance and/or a routinization of corrective practice, quite possibly acquired for reasons of economy of time and effort. My results suggest that more judicious evaluations of divergent usage could be achieved if NESTs were more wary of their spontaneous intuitions and habitually referred to more objective resources.

Interestingly, the display of corpus data did not reduce the share of 'cannot decide' answers substantially: In Part II, this option was still chosen in 3.2% of the answers. While it seems self-evident to a corpus linguist that corpus data are a legitimate source of information on established usage, only some of the ELT professionals appeared to share that view (e.g. quotation 6). Others rejected the relevance of quantitative data completely (e.g. the opinion, already quoted in Section 4, according to which "[s]tatistical frequency is no proof of correctness") or were prompted to seek more information elsewhere (quotation 7).

(6) "In a couple of cases it [the linguistic data shown in Part II] gave me the sort of information I would have looked for." (US participant)
(7) "[On account of the linguistic data] I started to doubt my original answers and felt the need to look things up [in another source]." (US participant)

Moreover, as mentioned in Section 2, fewer than one in five participants in this study said they commonly used corpora when doing correction work. Thus, corpus advocates still have a lot of convincing to do to promote corpus tools as a standard reference source besides dictionaries and general Internet search engines.

Besides the two poles of BrE and AmE and five other L1 varieties, the data displays in Part II also included a range of L2 varieties, which are receiving due attention in current variationist research. While their status as emergent endonormative standards is widely recognized in Linguistics, their legitimacy as language models at German universities would probably be contested by most ELT practitioners like those answering the questionnaire. Such an opinion was voiced by a US participant: "[…] though I don't think the Philippines alone should influence other Englishes, I do think more standards should be accepted." Needless to reiterate, my questionnaire design ensured that none of the prepositional variants submitted for rating was exclusive to one or more L2 varieties, but all were backed up by either BrE or AmE usage. However, a further unresolved discussion point in EFL countries like Germany, looming in the background of this study, concerns the extent to which varieties other than these two should be accepted as teaching models or from students having spent time abroad.

Another set of reflections concerns the corpus and frequency data that have played a central role in the present study. The GloWbE corpus is a large-scale corpus compilation project drawing on texts from the Internet. Thus, the quality of the data, in particular their correct assignment to one of the 20 countries of origin may be an issue. Despite considerable uncertainty regarding the correct localization of a webpage (especially for top-level domains ending in .org or .com), not to mention the nationality of its author(s), a series of manual checks carried out by the corpus compilers suggested that assignments are largely reliable (Davies & Fuchs 2015: 4-5), and generally, web-based corpora have been shown to match national corpora from more controlled sources very closely (Cook & Hirst 2012). On the positive side, the GloWbE corpus is unparalleled in that it is the only user-friendly and freely available corpus that allows users (including ELT practitioners like the questionnaire respondents) to access data from 20 L1 and L2 countries with a single search.

Using national flags as a shorthand for varieties of English and placing them on a percentage scale seemed a convenient means of condensing rich quantitative information into small graphical data snippets. Participants did not report any difficulties of interpretation, though some free text comments indicated that the data had been misinterpreted as acceptability judgements rather than usage data. Be that as it may, quantitative data split up according to nationalities obviously generated more polarized reactions than one solid cross-national average would have. As illustration, a US respondent wrote: "The British really have some strange preposition usage. I didn't realize that some of their expressions were so backward." In contrast, a British professional commented: "It's useful to see what damage the Americans deem acceptable to my mother tongue and how much I find myself willing to tolerate this […]". Note that information about the respondents' own nationalities was collected in the final questionnaire part, so that when responding to the test sentences, they were not aware that their own backgrounds would enter the analysis.

Furthermore, the analytic procedures (checking only enough hits to ensure search results did not include too many false positives; calculating raw percentages of both prepositional variants for 20 varieties in a row) were somewhat crude. The rationale of the study was based on 33 percentages of binary alternatives in 20 GloWbE subcorpora. Thus, corpus-linguistic best practice would have required me to check 660 sets of hits, which was deemed both impracticable and unnecessary for the purposes of this study. Cases of prepositional variation that required searches with low precision were excluded from the study. As a few respondents justly remarked, different prepositions might not be interchangeable without a certain meaning difference, for example between *at school* and *in school*, *CHAT (V) with* and *CHAT (V) to* or *experience(s) with* and *experience(s) of*. However, for practical purposes (determining the viability and approximate frequencies of the variants), the advantages of corpus consultation can doubtless outweigh its shortcomings, and quick-and-dirty corpus concordancing could be applied by teaching practitioners in a similar way, for instance when completing routine correction work under real-time constraints.

Another discussion point might be the minimal proportion that can be deemed sufficient to convince participants that an item is part of Standard English. The threshold of 25%, set at the design stage of the questionnaire, and meaning that one in four use cases or one in four Britons or Americans would employ a preposition in a given way, was considered to secure acceptability in a context-free correction task. For instance, the 'more British' options *round the table*, *fed up of* and *ENROL(L) in* appear in GloWbE GB in 27 to 30% of the cases, and the 'more American' variants *by prescription*, *outside of the*|*a* + *N* and *named for* feature in

GloWbE US in 29 to 33% of the cases. They are all very rare in the other reference variety. Admittedly, in view of their restricted distribution, these prepositional variants would not provide the most commendable teaching models, but in a questionnaire coming in the guise of a 'Routine Correction Task', their status as legitimate variants rather than errors seemed incontestable from a linguistic point of view. As it turned out, the proposed threshold of 25% would be questioned by differently-minded ELT practitioners. One GB participant remarked: "Anything with over 50% either British or American acceptability seemed fair/reliable", and another one, already quoted twice, said: "[…] a preposition may be used frequently but nevertheless be wrong. Statistical frequency is no proof of correctness." These convictions are in stark contrast with those of corpus linguists like Friginal, who points out:

> Correctness and accuracy in using language […] are clearly important constructs in CL [Corpus Linguistics], but instead of focusing on or prioritizing prescribed (i.e., 'correct') forms, actual frequencies of use, not intuitions, alongside a full attention to and consideration of contexts, are established in the forefront. (Friginal 2018: 5)

A final, but important issue in need of consideration is the issue of consistency. As I argued elsewhere (Schlüter, 2024), learners of English in secondary education cannot (and should not) be expected to be consistent in their exclusive use of one standard variety (British, American or other). Arguably, the situation with advanced learners is different, especially those majoring in English at university level (which is where most questionnaire respondents teach; see Table A5). For these students, Linguistics modules as well as practical language classes regularly address varietal differences, and these insights should be reflected in their own language use (at least when it comes to formal writing). The question came up in several of the participants' comments, with views ranging from tolerance of inconsistency (quotations 8 and 9) to enforcement of homogeneous usage (quotations 10 and 11).

(8) "I approached the entire survey from the point of view that both AmE and BrE options should be considered appropriate/correct/acceptable, without trying to always be consistent in choosing one variety over the other." (US participant)
(9) "We used to insist that our students had to be consistent and write in one standard form of English, but we realised that this was becoming less and less realistic, as they hadn't been taught one variety in school. Some of their teachers used US English, some British English." (GB participant)
(10) "We ask our students to decide whether to write in British or American English, so I would look up things I felt unnatural if the student had said they were writing in American English, just to be sure. At this advanced level, we feel that they should be aware of differences between varieties and choose one variety to stick to (usually, they choose the variety spoken in the country where they spent their semester/year abroad)." (GB participant)
(11) "I would expect consistency from my students. I don't mind what variety of English they write in but their prepositional usage should reflect the variety they are trying to write in. I marked a lot of the prepositions in this survey as acceptable because they are in one or more varieties of English. In practice, whether I considered them acceptable would depend on which variety the student was aiming to write in." (GB participant)

In designing the questionnaire, I made sure that this factor was neutralized by selecting example sentences for acceptability judgements that were non-localizable in terms of their content and language. Moreover, they were isolated sentences, so that neither lexical choices nor spellings in their context could give away the authors' varieties. Incidentally, the numerous ratings in

Part I that betrayed lack of acquaintance with usage from other (including major standard) varieties cast doubt on whether even language professionals are really able to tell BrE from AmE (and from true learner errors).

Finally, what is being advocated here may seem to be asking much of ELT professionals: The limitations of native speakers' spontaneous acceptability judgements have been exposed when it comes to assessing usage in another reference variety (BrE or AmE) and, by the same token, usage in WEs. Therefore, it has been suggested that NESTs should be prepared to mistrust their own linguistic intuitions when confronted with usage diverging from their own. This may reduce their advantage as native speakers relative to the world-wide majority of non-native users and teachers of English, but such a move seems timely and in line with current foci on EIL-awareness, equal opportunities, emancipation, international mobility and globalization. On the positive side, free and easy-to-use online corpora are available to help teachers and students alike.

6. Conclusion: The need for a corpus toolkit in ELT

To sum up, the study reported in this contribution demonstrates some of the benefits for the teaching of English as an International Language if we as corpus linguists manage to successfully popularize "the best tool we can provide future language teachers with" (Granath 2009: 64). In particular, teachers would gain "access to a 'native speaker consultant' who can do more than any native speaker can". The truth of this statement of Granath's has been the focus of a bipartite study combining corpus data and acceptability judgements elicited from 76 native English speaking language teachers at German universities and throwing into relief two major findings:

- Solid evidence has accumulated for a strong 'congenital' bias in routine correction work among NESTs: There is significant covariance between usage in different L1 varieties and the spontaneous decisions of teachers representing those varieties to accept or reject a variant. The mutual rejection is particularly pronounced between the two major reference varieties of BrE and AmE. The respondents from the other four L1 varieties are somewhat less opposed to the poles of GB and US usage and show linguistic inclinations that seem in line with geographical, economic, historical and cultural contingencies: Canadian English sidles with US English; Australian, New Zealand and above all Irish Englishes with GB English. These findings are cause for concern, as stakes in the correction and assessment of students' written output are high. As a matter of fact, the language that learners take in during their learning biographies and from public and private media typically is a mix of different L1, L2 and EFL varieties. Moreover, the varieties themselves are unstable, one prominent reason being the strong influence of AmE on other Englishes and languages around the globe (cf. Gilquin 2018; Mair 2013; Schlüter, 2024).
- Exposure to corpus data that show clear evidence of divergent usage was proposed as a corrective to the bias inherent in an individual's intuitions on acceptability. Crucially, the uptake of this information varied between individuals as well as between the majority of ELT practitioners and linguistic perspectives on World Englishes research: Among questionnaire respondents, there was a clear trend to orient towards variants with high frequencies in the corpora, which was often done in one of two ways (see also Schlüter 2022): in the worst case, a reinforced focus on participants' own varieties and concomitant rejection of usage characteristic of others; in the best case, a higher

acceptance of usage attested in other varieties as well. With only one exception, none of the NESTs drew the consequences that variationist linguists would draw, viz. to rate each questionnaire item as fully acceptable as it contained prepositional variants attested in at least 27% of relevant instances in either BrE or AmE, and in other varieties as well. After all, from a descriptive point of view, each variant deserves credit as a legitimate and fully functional means of expression, even if it deviates from the single national norm that a single speaker happens to be most familiar with. There can be no serious doubt that both BrE and AmE represent valid target norms in an EFL country like Germany, sitting on the fence between the two reference varieties.

As the present study has shown, ELT professionals would gain an important tool if they resorted to corpus concordancing more regularly. But, perhaps more importantly, it has also been shown that corpus methods will only have a limited effect if they are not supported by an open mindset, as is advocated by applied linguistic frameworks such as Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)-aware pedagogy, Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT), and World Englishes (WE)-informed ELT. Conversely, global approaches to English can best be implemented if practitioners have access to corpus skills, which allow them to cross the boundaries between international varieties. There appear to be large gaps between methodologies and mindsets in practical language and English Linguistics departments. Since student populations in the two will usually overlap, stakeholders from all groups would be well advised to bridge the gaps by engaging in interdisciplinary questions that the present study has raised:

- How can norms in language teaching and learning be defined in view of the international role of English?
- Should target norms and correction norms diverge? To what extent and in which contexts?
- Which role should varieties other than BrE and AmE play in ELT? For teachers? For learners?
- To what extent should norm deviations and creativity be accepted from non-native users of English? At which level of competence?
- Can learners be expected to be consistent in their use of British, American or other varieties in the face of the mixed input they receive? Is consistency desirable?
- In which areas do corpora show further divergence between varieties? Or are there signs of convergence?
- What do the countless differences between varieties mean for language assessment? At which level?
- What does it take to make corpus use attractive and practicable for ELT professionals? For which kinds of tasks?

Admittedly, routinized corpus use is difficult and onerous to acquire as it presupposes substantial metalinguistic expertise, familiarity with reference corpora, their interfaces and query language, critical scanning of search output, induction of patterns as well as some probabilistic estimation.[7] However, ELT has incontrovertibly and irrevocably arrived in a "post-native" era and requires teachers to develop a "beyond-native" competence (Blair 2015: 91, 99): Professionals need to handle variation that inevitably exceeds any monovarietal

[7] An appropriate place to start is the digital self-learning package available at www.uni-bamberg.de/korplus (Schlüter & Großmann 2022).

individual's competence. Of course, this argument extends to non-native English-speaking teachers as well. As I have shown in a parallel study involving more than 400 non-native teachers of English at German secondary schools (Schlüter, 2024), this group likewise exhibits limited familiarity with international varieties of English, and the uptake of corpus data in many respects resembles that of the group reported in this contribution. As was compellingly argued by Mair (2002: 125), corpus literacy can help empower non-native students and (future) teachers of English, putting them on an equal footing with native speakers. The best place to start are teacher education programs in which linguists and language teachers join forces across disciplinary boundaries. To conclude, I will leave the last word to one of the questionnaire respondents:

(12) "I am acutely aware of some prevailing imperialistic views of language teaching and try to better myself in recognising other authentic varieties of English, which is tricky given the sheer number thereof. The aforementioned views are often particularly problematic among native speaker instructors who did not explicitly study English Language from an international perspective (I include myself here, which is why I make efforts to mitigate this)." (GB participant)

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Appendix

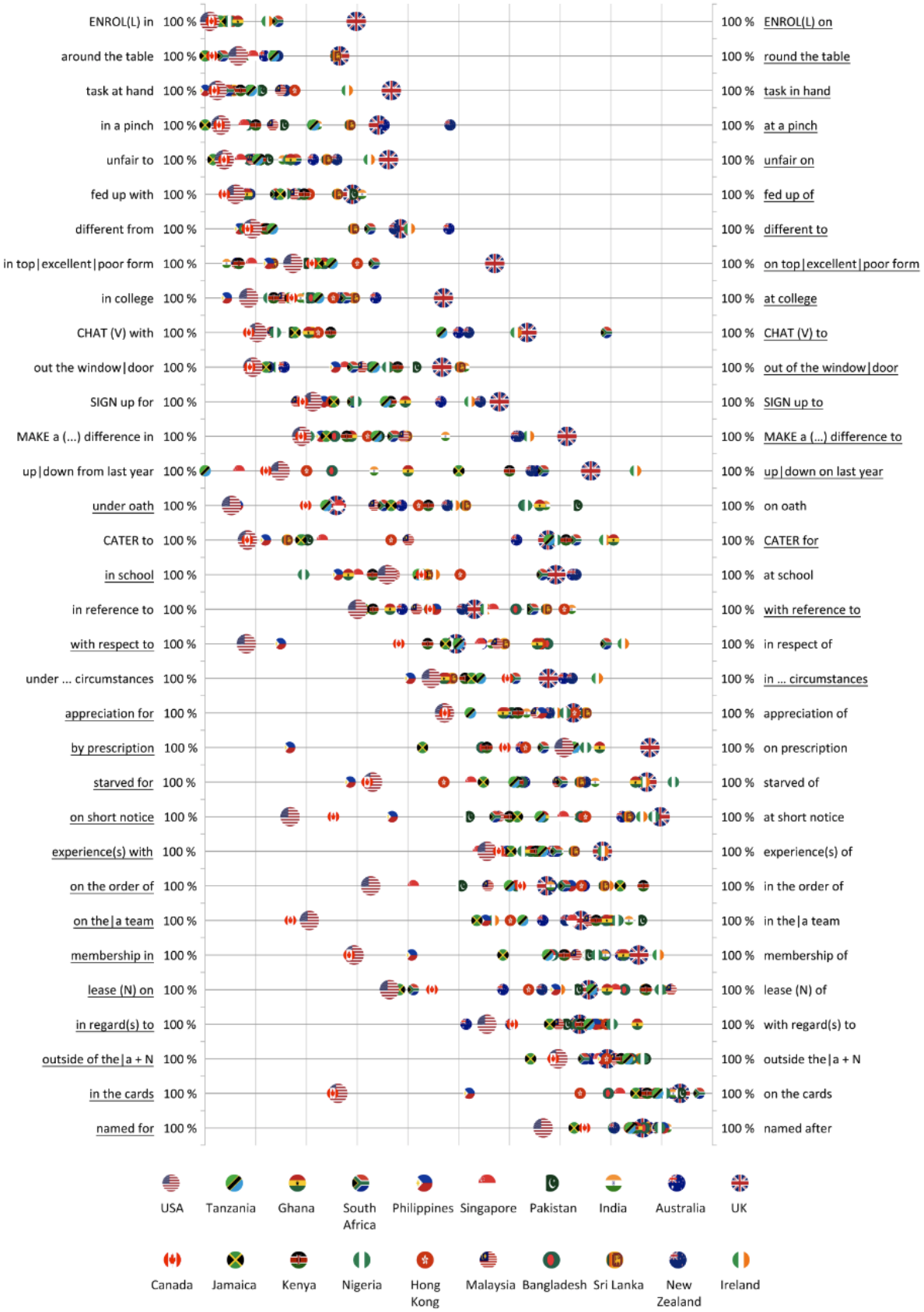

Figure A1: Prepositional choices in the GloWbE data by national variety. 'More American' variant labels displayed on the left, 'more British' variant labels displayed on the right. Underlined variants were represented in the questionnaire.

Table A2: Countries where participants grew up and went to school.

Country	N	%
Australia	6	8%
Canada	5	7%
United Kingdom	27	36%
Ireland	3	4%
New Zealand	2	3%
USA	29	38%
Other	4	5%

Table A3: Participants' age groups.

Age group	N	%
20–29	2	3%
30–39	11	14%
40–49	27	36%
50–59	21	28%
60–69	10	13%
70+	2	3%
No answer	3	4%

Table A4: Participants' highest educational degrees.

Highest educational degree	N	%
Secondary school	0	0%
Bachelor's	8	11%
Master's	44	58%
PhD	21	28%
No answer	3	4%

Table A5: Participants' highest educational degrees in English.

Highest degree in English	N	%
Secondary School	16	21%
Bachelor's	13	17%
Master's	28	37%
PhD	9	12%
No answer	10	13%

Table A6: Level of participants' students (multiple answers possible).

Level of students usually taught	N	%
School – Beginners	1	1%
School – Intermediate	2	3%
School – Advanced	2	3%
University – Students of English	62	82%
University – Students of other subjects	26	34%