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ELF OR NELF? ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION STANDARD PREFERENCES AMONG YOUNGER GENERATION OF POLISH SPEAKERS

The ongoing debate as to the English pronunciation model to be selected for training both at academia and for school in Poland remains unresolved. At school not much is done in terms of pronunciation training *per se*, with frequent acceptance of poor performance, and only occasional excursions into more subtle distinctions and features. It appears that English teachers follow implicitly the idea of a simplified instructional model of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) of Jenkins (2000), with the Lingua Franca Core pronunciation component. Until recently, no reasonable, well-argued-for alternative was available. Now, the model suggested in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) termed *Native English as Lingua Franca* (NELF) fulfils the needs of professional and ordinary users of English. This paper reports on the preferences as to the desirable standard in pronunciation instruction among younger generation of Poles. The subjects have been selected among the adolescent speakers of Polish and learners of English as a Foreign Language. The focus will be more on the reasons behind the stated preference. The survey analysis reveals rather high aspirations among the sample, as well as reasonably realistic judgments as to their own performance. The prevailing attitudes seem to agree with the idea behind the NELF concept.

KEYWORDS: pronunciation, ELF, NELF, instruction, standard

INTRODUCTION

For many years now, there has been an ongoing and unresolved debate as to which English pronunciation training model should be selected for use at school. The university level generally prefers to use for instruction either the more precise British model or the less restricted American one. At the school level, however, for the most part, not much is done in terms of pronunciation training *per se*. Whenever pronunciation instruction is executed, anything that conspicuously departs from spelling pronunciation is accepted, with only occasional excursions into any of the more subtle distinctions. It appears that English teachers tend to follow quite implicitly although, perhaps, largely unconsciously, a somewhat impoverished model of English instruction, an idea Jenkins (2000) refers to as English as Lingua Franca (ELF). Until recently, no reasonable, well-argued-for alternative was available. However, the model suggested in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015): *Native English as Lingua Franca* (NELF) is what this author believes to be a model that fulfills

a sufficiently wide range of needs – from those of the English language academics to those of the ordinary language user.

This paper will, however, only report on the preferences found among the group of adolescent students. The focus will not be on the apparent favorites, but rather on the reasons behind their stated preferences, which demonstrate an inclination towards the ideas behind the NELF concept.

SETTING UP REALISTIC PRONUNCIATION GOALS

Generally, there is agreement that a model – a comfortable, able facilitator of communication for both teachers and learners – is required for both teaching and learning pronunciation: “at some point teachers and learners need a clear, unambiguous reference point from which to practice sounds and other pronunciation features” (Rogerson-Revell 2011: 8). With a model, it is possible to measure the appropriateness of pronunciation as well as its accuracy.

Apart from a model, clearly specified goals, those that ensure effective communication, are needed. The minimum where the learners – it is assumed – ought to aspire is to achieve the status of highly intelligible, easily comprehensible bilingual speakers (Derwing 2010). The goals are substantially dependent on the particular contexts in which communication in English is to take place. Because understanding someone who makes frequent pronunciation errors, twists words, and speaks unclearly requires substantial effort on the part of the listener, it can become so uncomfortable that it may cause irritation and confusion in any recipient, native or non-native (Rogerson-Revell 2011).

It has long been observed that for the majority of English learners achieving the traditional EFL goal of (near-)native-like pronunciation is simply unattainable. Realization that this goal was unattainable prompted some in the field to develop ideas about prioritizing certain elements of pronunciation over others, and by so doing, they formulated goals more within reach (Wells 2008). Along with this, another awareness grew: many of the exchanges that take place in English are between non-native speakers of English. Combined, this led to the creation of the concept known as ELF – English as a Lingua Franca, with its pronunciation component of LFC – Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins 2000). Starting with the assumption that native pronunciation models are unrealistic and downright inappropriate for the majority of learners, Jenkins (2000) and her followers put forward a number of arguments for modifying the pronunciation taught¹. Essentially, the LFC contains

¹ The author is not going to discuss them here in any greater detail. The reader is referred to Rogerson-Revell (2011) and, especially, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) for a critical evaluation of these claims. Walker (2010), on the other hand, offers mostly praise and justification for the ELF.

only those features of the phonological system of English that are absolutely vital for communication, other are considered inessential and even detrimental to intelligibility (Walker 2010).

Proponents of ELF maintain that by teaching only the LFC properties we equip students with the basics and at the same time reasonably diminish the teaching/learning load. The LFC is thus advocated as a sensible initial goal in training, with no features that are harmful to further progress so as to be needed to unlearn. This claim is fundamentally untrue, since once formed, bad habits quickly take root and are very difficult to eliminate. The infamous “th’s”, the ignored vowel quality distinctions, word stress are difficult to develop after years of instruction in the simplified variety. It thus becomes essential to prioritize those elements which can, at the very least, provide a valid and appropriate starting point without resorting to some artificially established concepts.

On the other end, continually valid proposals to follow an established native standard in pronunciation instruction are still advocated, even if realistically complete native-like quality of pronunciation is beyond most learners’ reach.

NELF AS AN ALTERNATIVE

A different and an attractive alternative to the above appears to be the approach advocated by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015: 24ff) which she termed NELF (Native English as a Lingua Franca), and which she sees a compromise between the two previous extremes. This approach treats native English as a valuable and effective tool of linguistic communication, largely ignoring the issues of historical, cultural or social superiority. NELF seems to cater to the needs of all the participants of communication using English as the means, thus rendering it to be the universal and the most appropriate variety for the learners, the majority of whom do not wish to employ different speech models depending on who it is they are talking to. As she aptly observes:

Most learners do not want to make a choice as to who they want to communicate with and need to acquire the type of pronunciation that will enable them to use English in a variety of contexts and with different speakers. However, instead of proposing an artificially created pronunciation syllabus, such as the LFC, [...] use should be made of native English accents, such as RP or GA, but in a modified fashion. (Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015: 24)

Her idea is that adopting the ready-to-use native variety as a training model and goal is an obvious choice, providing all ideological considerations give way to pragmatic arguments. Additionally, what speaks in favour of aiming at approximating a native accent is its wide intelligibility, coupled with easy availability of phonodidactic materials and dictionaries and a long-standing teaching tradition.

Proponents of NELF admit and accept that a (certain degree of) foreign accent is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon of learning a foreign language as long as the accent is not so strong as to compromise comfortable intelligibility. NELF advocates strongly object, though, to heavily accented speech which has a detrimental effect on successful communication. It is also assumed that learners are exposed to a variety of accents and models with the aim of expanding receptive intelligibility, yet they try to imitate the native accent for their own production. NELF appears to suit the purpose of achieving such comfortable intelligibility.

As a final word in this part, it needs to be observed that the overwhelming majority of English teachers, who themselves are non-native speakers with some degree of foreign accent, may want to practice NELF pronunciation instruction: they assume the native model as reference point and ultimate goal, but do not require their learners to acquire all minute phonetic details, concentrating on selected features instead. It is simply the matter of prioritizing certain phonetic details of the native models, while neglecting others. Those that are prioritized, though, ought to be practised and faithfully imitated.

It would be interesting to investigate what are the actual aspirations and preferences of the general, non-professional public of ordinary NNSpeakers of English. This is partially attempted and reported on in the study described in subsequent sections.

THE STUDY

The study represents a type of small scale research, the results of which may not have universal validity, but which offers insights to contribute to the issues (signalled above) concerning pronunciation for teachers and learners of English.

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

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

The decision to investigate those specific issues stems from the conviction that the beliefs and attitudes learners hold about their learning process as well as their experiences and expectations are of paramount importance to their actual learning process. Therefore, the study thus aims to reveal those beliefs and attitudes.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 37 learners of English, aged 14–16, from a lower secondary school in a town in the south of Poland with a population of about 135 thousand. They were not randomly picked from the overall school population, but carefully and deliberately selected on advice from their teachers and the headmistress. These learners had participated in at least one international exchange. Among them were some (18) who participated in exchanges to UK as well as in (an/other) European country(ies). The visits took place in the period between 2013 and 2015. There was a nearly even division in gender with 17 females and 20 males. They have four different teachers, all of whom speak English of good quality, with one (a male) being practically native-like phonetically. It needs to be added that they do not represent only the cream of the cream of English learners in that school. Many of their friends whose English is generally better or more fluent were excluded from the sample on the grounds of not having participated in such international exchanges and therefore not having a direct documented communicative experience in English.

What is seen as a special value of such survey sample is that they are not (potential) professionals using English, nor are they students' of English departments² – they simply belong to a large population of ordinary users of English as a foreign language who have already begun to actually use the language out of the classroom.

THE INSTRUMENT AND THE PROCEDURE

The data were collected by means of a specially-designed and anonymous questionnaire. The tool was very specific in the sense that the questions it contained were intended to offer insights into various aspects relating to respondents' views and experiences with spoken language comprehensibility combined with self-reflection concerning their own pronunciation attainment and preferences. Because the respondents had no previous phonetic training, the 'non-phonetic' descriptions were used instead of proper subject terminology. No mention of, e.g. assimilation, elision, vowel reduction or weak forms is present, and that is a deliberate strategy of the researcher. They are, however, familiar with the term 'native speaker' and understand who is referred to in this manner.

The questionnaire was worded in Polish, distributed in a paper format and filled in by the participants. It consisted of 13 questions, 10 closed-type and 2 open-type questions (plus one semi-open). One question was fed with the suggestions listed in previous items. Some of the items were rather extended in terms of the number of

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

options it allowed respondents to choose from. The construction of the survey was such so as to allow the interviewer to gather both factual and attitudinal information.

To analyze the collected data, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical procedures was employed. Some of the quantitative data was tabulated for easier reference.

THE FINDINGS

As stated in the introduction to the paper, since the focus here is not primarily on numbers and percentages, but rather in what transpires from these data, no division in this section is made to the presentation of the findings and their analysis in terms of relevance and informative value.

The first four questions investigated the respondents' personal experiences in encounters with native and non-native English speech. The questions all started with the following opening: *Have you had the chance to...* and were complemented with defining the actual type of encounter. The questions had the aim to verify the actual experiences of respondents to determine if they form a valid group for subsequent investigations. The numerical data are tabulated below.

Table 1. The respondents' experiences with English native and non-native speech

Have you had the chance to...	talking to a native speaker of English		talking to a foreigner but in English		listen to a native speaker of English		listen to a foreigner speaking in English	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Face to face	21	57%	37	100%	18	48%	37	100%
Online (including games)	8	22%	37	100%	4	11%	37	100%
Other media	–	–	–	–	37	100%	37	100%
In my country	3	8%	8	21%	–	–	–	–
Abroad (exchange/holiday)	18	49%	30	81%	–	–	–	–

The answers testify to a variety of encounters with spoken English that the participants had. The questions were designed in the manner to distinguish between actual speaking and listening only. The aim was to implicitly make participants' aware that these actually are distinct situations that may call for different immediate skills. Introducing the aforementioned distinction instead of simply asking about

interaction opportunities is believed to produce more relevant responses in the further part of the survey.

The next questions concerned the evaluation of the success and ease of communication with the different groups of speakers: native and non-native. The first of these was about who it was easier for them to understand, globally but in reference to pronunciation: the native speaker, the foreigner speaking English or other Poles speaking in English. The second was about the effectiveness of communication in these three groups, but supplemented with some information related to reasons for their choices. They were specifically instructed to think carefully about the choices they make, selecting the options that for them ranked highest on their personal scale. That was to reveal factual preferences. Again, the results are tabulated for ease of presentation.

Table 2. Comprehension and communication ease

Total: 37		Ease of understanding		Ease of communication	
Native speaker	29	I understand more	17	I understand more	11
		I benefit more	12	I benefit more	8
				They understand me better	10
A non-native speaker	8	I understand more	8	I understand more	6
		I benefit more		I benefit more	
				They understand me better	2
Another Pole speaking in English	2	I understand more	2	I understand more	
		I benefit more		I benefit more	
				They understand me better	2

The numbers displayed in the table above demonstrate a prevailing preference of the respondents to communicate with native speakers, and that is predominantly because, as they claim, comprehension is easier and broader, while communication is more efficient, both in terms of its reciprocal dimension as well as the ability to communicate the intended message.

It is the stated reason for native speaker preference in communication that is significant, not the simple calculations, nor the ELF-condemned reverence to NS as such. These answers also testify to a highly pragmatic and utilitarian attitude respondents have to their communication effectiveness.

Further, the respondents' awareness of the specific reasons for the comprehension difficulties was investigated. This was attempted at, at least partially, in the next questions, where participants were asked to refer to a list of features which could

contribute to the intelligibility problems on their part – but only receptively. The data gathered in table 3 demonstrate that participants are fairly able to identify the causes for potential or actual problems in mutual comprehension.

Table 3. Factors in comprehension problems

Pronunciation element	Native speakers		Non-native speakers	
	N _O	%	No	%
The speed of delivery	16	43%	8	22%
Using simplified forms (<i>d'you, they've</i> etc)	7	19%	8	22%
Unclear vowel (a?, e?, ae?)	2	5%	20	54%
Unclear consonants (something in between /b/ and /v/)	–	0	15	41%
Accents in different places	–	0	21	57%
Linking words ('the red one' sounding like 1 word)	1	3%	6	16%
Too many different vowels	3		8	22%
No distinction between voiced and voiceless sound at the end of words	–	0	15	41%
Saying /p t k/ with an additional puff of air	–	0	1	3%
Spelling pronunciation	–	0	9	24%

The question related to the perceptive side of communication, nonetheless it provides some valuable insights. First of all, it indicates that indeed perhaps some accommodation on the part of native speakers is called for in terms of the speed of delivery, identified by respondents as the single most serious factor influencing comprehension. Such accommodation, let us reiterate, is advocated both in the ELF and NELF approaches. Secondly, vowel reductions appear not to be a major problem and as such a highly overrated factor by ELFers. A similar point can be argued for certain other features of connected speech, such as word linking and word stress. Providing clear approximation of consonant quality seems to prevent comprehension problems, yet the effect of aspiration (or lack thereof), so forcefully insisted upon by the ELFers, cannot be in any meaningful way evaluated – it is largely ignored by users. Vowels turn out to be of some importance, mostly in terms of their number and also quality. Admittedly, vowel length was not mentioned, so this parameter cannot be in any way verified. Still, the overall observation is that less problems are experienced with native speaker English than with non-native speech. This, arguably, does not go counter some assumptions of ELF, namely that for comprehension a greater number of elements should be acquired than for production. We, however, find this ELF proposal unacceptable – an issue we shall go back to later on.

The next question examined the participants perception of their own pronunciation skills. They were asked to evaluate the quality of spoken English they produce – pronunciation-wise. They were given six options to choose from. Table 4 lists the responses in the numerical and percentage form.

Table 4. Self-evaluation of participants' pronunciation in English

<i>How do you evaluate the quality of your pronunciation in English?</i>		
Approaching the level of the native-speaker	–	–
Fully comprehensible	2	5%
Comprehensible, but sometimes I am asked to repeat	9	24%
Comprehensible, but I make some mistakes and twist some words	20	54%
Probably comprehensible because I make mistakes and twist words	6	16%
Not really comprehensible, I tend to follow spelling pronunciation	–	–

Again, the participants demonstrated careful reflective thinking. None of them overestimated their oral production skills by saying that they approximate the level of the native speaker, and only two expressed no reservations as to the comprehensibility value of their performance. The answers given can be interpreted as showing realistic judgment and full awareness of the participants' self-perceived deficiencies. Since they had the chance to receive feedback from their interlocutors, and not only from their respective teachers, it can be safely assumed that the results here indeed reflect what their condition of the pronunciation skills actually is.

Their potential awareness of what they perceive as inadequacies and deficiencies is further corroborated in their answers to the question referring to their aspirations and ambitions in the field of pronunciation. The ideas they were given to choose from this time were not the simple dichotomy native – nonnative speaker quality. Instead, the seven options contained some justification for a given statement.

Table 5. Participants' aspirations in the field of pronunciation skills

<i>What are your ambitions and aspiration when it comes to quality of your pronunciation?</i>		
To talk like a native speaker because we should	–	–
To talk nearly like a native speaker because it help when communicating	17	46%
To talk like a native speaker because it sounds nice	12	32%
To be comfortably intelligible	5	13%
To be intelligible, with some mistakes in more difficult words	2	5%
To be intelligible, though without certain sounds or characteristic features, as long as communication is successful	–	–
I do not really care about this, I can sound Polish	1	3%

The wording of the possible responses was such as to disclose not only the young people's preferences and ambitions, but also to be able to receive some insight into what lies behind such choices. On the whole, the aspirations are rather high. Admittedly, they may have been heavily influenced by the kind of instruction they have received. More so, the fact that one of the teachers can easily be taken for a native speaker of English may be of some significance here. It is nonetheless significant that not a single person was ready to contend themselves with what was in a descriptive way specified primarily as ELF: a speech which is comprehensible but without certain characteristic elements or sounds. Also, native English was selected as a desirable target on the grounds of two reasons: because it is an asset in communication and because it is aesthetically appealing. Notice that no mention was made of the supreme value of native speaker speech. Nobody chose the option defining native speaker quality as a performance norm. These results appear to be highly significant as they defy the concern of Jenkins that too much attention and significance is given to native speakers as "owners of English". It seems that young people largely ignore this aspect. If they aspire to the goal of native quality of pronunciation it is because of pragmatism and aestheticism.

In order to further corroborate the evidence obtained so far, respondents were asked to reflect on some specific features of their pronunciation. This was supposed to provide some validation of their initial judgments. Later, in the open-format question, they were asked to personalize the list of pronunciation features they would like to work on with improvement in mind. They were advised that the list of features shown earlier may inform their answers but it could also be ignored. The following two tables present the results.

Table 6. Reflecting on one's own pronunciation

Pronunciation feature	Number of responses	Percentage
I don't have a problem with distinguishing or producing sounds like /ptk/ and /bdg/	37	100%
I can and do say the 'th' sounds as in <i>think</i> or <i>they</i>	19	51%
I can hear the difference between the 'th' sounds and other consonants but I don't use them	8	22%
I don't hear any difference between the 'th' sounds and /f/ or /v/	3	8%
When speaking I mark the difference between short and long vowel, e.g. <i>sheep</i> and <i>ship</i> .	21	57%
In terms of length <i>sheep</i> and <i>ship</i> are identical to me. I do not produce this length.	4	11%

Pronunciation feature	Number of responses	Percentage
I can and do say the sound which is spelled as <i>-ng</i> , also at the end of words	17	46%
I say the <i>-ng</i> sound only before /k/ and in the middle of words (<i>finger, bank</i>)	7	19%
Words like <i>bed</i> and <i>bad</i> are said with roughly the same vowel sound	10	27%
I say words like <i>bed</i> and <i>bad</i> with different vowel sound	8	22%
In words like <i>banana</i> or <i>America</i> I pronounce the last sound as an /a/	17	46%
My <i>sz, ż, cz, dż</i> sound like in Polish	12	32%
My <i>sz, ż, cz, dż</i> sound a bit softer less harsh than in Polish	17	46%
I use shortened forms of some verbs, e.g. <i>they've, we're, D'you, she'll</i>	31	84%
I don't use shortened verb forms but I can hear them	6	16%
I articulate the vowels clearly, mostly according to their spelling	13	35%
I do not articulate all the vowels in the same manner, sometimes I ignore the spelling	16	43%
I often shorten some vowels, even skipping some, especially not stressed ones when unaccented, e.g. in short, not main words (e.g. <i>of, at, from, have</i>)	24	65%
I never reduce any vowels	11	30%
I say the words separately, not linking them	---	---
I link the words in speech, I don't make unnecessary pauses	37	100%
I normally stress the last but one syllable as in Polish	7	19%
I learn how to stress words and apply the rules most of the time, stressing the right syllable	27	73%
I do not change the tone of voice, not even in questions	---	---
I try to raise my voice in questions or some strong statements	37	100%

When reflecting on the selected features of their own pronunciation participants were advised that they do not have to deal with every statement, instead, they were asked to provide feedback on those elements that are particularly relevant for them. The findings paint a rather positive picture. Not only are the students aware of what they do when they speak, but they can also rather honestly admit that there are some elements they do not handle skillfully enough. Bearing in mind the fact that questionnaires can be dangerous tools in that respondents may

sometimes answer intentionally, the fair confessions of respondents can be taken to contribute to the overall validity of their answers.

When trying to diagnose the quality of respondents speech from the data in table 6, we can see the potential correlation between these reflections and the self evaluation performed earlier. The correlations will naturally be different for each of the participants separately. Suffice it to say for the moment that it appears they were on the whole right in their self-evaluations.

This is also corroborated from their reports on the possible areas of improvement, as listed in table 7. Their suggestions or recommendations are divided into four major groups: relating to vowels sounds, relating to other individual sounds, connected speech phenomena and other. Some of the responses concentrate more on what they would like to do when practising pronunciation, they are nonetheless included as they allow us to see what it is that they feel they need to work on. Some of the responses are modified to reflect their general ideas, other are quoted directly.

Table 7. Suggestions for improvement

In relation to vowels	In relation to other individual sounds	Connected speech phenomena	Other
Different distinctions between vowels (a? e? ae?)	The <i>ng</i> sound at the end of words and in the middle	More fluency and intonation practice	More drilling with the metronome (rhythm?)
The “inverted e”	“It’s the first time I have heard about this ‘puff of air’”	More rhythm	More spelling to sound relationships
Long and short vowels	The ‘TH’ <i>s</i>	Stressing words, “especially related ones, e.g. <i>polites</i> - politician)	To sound “softer” than in Polish
“I want ‘happy’ [i]”	“Many people have voiceless sounds at the end of words – is it a problem? If yes, I want this”	Simplifying forms when talking (D’you, t’go)	To sound less Polish
Vowel skipping		Not to sound too “choppy”	

Again, the ideas voiced by the participants testify to their rather well-developed sensitivity to issues related to pronunciation. And although they have previously expressed considerable degree of satisfaction with the quality of what they say, they still note areas where they can develop and improve. It should be noted as well that many of the comments were very personal in character, so that only about half of the suggestions can be somehow generalized.

The last-but-one question of the survey was whether they accept and/or judge as sensible the proposal that they need to develop much higher, practically speaking native-like standards of pronunciation for the comprehension side of communication, but can or should satisfy themselves with much lower performance load. Here the first reaction of most participants, as reported by school staff members supervising the survey, was disbelief, expressed verbally. Nonetheless, they were asked to reflect again and provide their answers and comments. As a result, the following data were obtained.

Table 8. Different standards for comprehension and production – respondents' views

<i>Do you agree that it makes sense to develop native-like pronunciation standards for comprehension but considerably lower ones for production you don't need to be that proficient?</i>					
YES	3	8%	NO	34	92%
"you always have to understand more"			"double standards do not work"		
"native like comprehension will at least ensure that I get the message, my own message can be repeated"			"if I try to understand more I am exposed to model that sticks in my mind and can be imitated, so one feeds the other"		
"It is always more difficult to say things nicely than to say them nicely yourself, that means I don't need to be that good, I don't need to study that hard"			"If I am expected to understand native speech why am I not supposed to produce it? Isn't it that one is the model for the other?"		
			"I don't want to think that I need to be good at something but not so good for something else, especially that they are two sides of a coin"		
			"Is it because I am too incompetent to learn both?"		
			"joke?"		
			"it's illogical"; Where's the logic here?"		

As becomes transparent especially from the comments of the respondents, they do not treat ELF idea of pronunciation competence level dichotomy as a serious offer. They fail to see any logic in it, they are opposed to what they term 'double standards' (the majority of comments expressed their irritation), instead they perceive the mutual relationship between good reception and good production.

The final question aimed at encouraging respondents to reflect on their answers and perhaps revise some of the choices they had made. It was worded in the following fashion: *You have now reflected on your own pronunciation skills and aspirations. Does the awareness that native-like pronunciation, according to research, may not be attainable for most learners of English influence your choices in terms of the*

aspirations defined? Do you now wish to modify them? Here they were not given the options to choose from but rather were asked to put in their own comments. Only 3 people admitted they decided to change their specific aspirations, stating they would want to modify the level of attainment. 1 person said: “my aspirations are already low enough”. The remaining respondents said either plain “no” or “no” with some comments, like: “my aspirations are my own”, “I know what I want”, “I am not discouraged by such things”, “I have already made my choice”. It is with this question where, admittedly, the fear of intentional answers (the statistical “halo effect”) is the greatest. Even if most of these responses indeed reflect the true beliefs of participants, some degree of intentionality and wishful thinking has to be allowed for.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

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

The findings obtained in the present study indicate that the studied population express a strong preference for very high standards of pronunciation in any interaction context. Since, as illustrated in table 1, they have had ample opportunities to communicate with native and non-native speakers, their opinions should be treated as meaningful. This finding, strangely enough, corroborates the outcome of other research endeavours of similar type, even if those investigated mostly the views of English-language-oriented professionals (c.f. footnote 2). Moreover, taken as a whole, the participants voiced positive opinions about the relevance of good quality pronunciation, both in native and international communicative contexts. They generally seem convinced that sounding like a native speaker may have certain advantages, most notably that of guaranteeing comfortable intelligibility. That does not undermine the validity of functional intelligibility in certain international exchanges, yet they feel they aspire to more.

When reporting on their experiences with comprehending the message, they demonstrated a clear preference for native-like quality of the message received, pointing to ease of understanding as the major reason, but also signalling the potential of the learning portion of the exchange. Moreover, they were largely able to identify the problem areas that could contribute to the problems with native and non-native intelligibility. As such, they identified slightly different elements as pertaining to exchanges with native and non-native speakers. Incidentally, no opinions were

solicited as to the effect of clear mispronouncing of certain commonly used words (e.g. “foreign”, “mountain” etc.), something that is widely reported to be the major dissatisfaction area when native speakers make their judgments.

The idea very much disfavoured by respondents is the concept of split standards for reception and production. They do not really understand why this should be. As to their own performance, implicitly understood as taking place in various interactional settings, they appear to possess rather good pronunciation skills, as evidenced by the list of features they identified as present in their production. Likewise, the mishaps are also illustrious in that these indicate the factual validity of their self-evaluations. When this is coupled with the identified elements for future development, a clear picture is painted of a definite preference for very high proficiency in and quality of oral production.

It ought to be emphasized that the concept of native-like pronunciation was only used to provide clear conceptual reference – no mention has been made as to the apparent superiority or ownership of English. In that context it is significant that while delineating their aspirations in the field of pronunciation they do not choose native speech because it is or should be the standard, but primarily because it facilitates successful communication or is simply aesthetically appealing. This, reasonably, could be seen as dismissing Jenkins’ fear of native-speakerism as an imposed normative standard.

What seems to transpire from the discussion is that learners indirectly opt for the concept of NELF as defined by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015), both in terms of what they can produce now and what they want to be able to produce as a result of further training. Also, they are able to perceive the distinction between the system and the realization. It is with the (sound) system that we are concerned with in pronunciation training rather than with details of realization (Wells 2008). The respondents, being young people, most notably prefer to keep things simple and the idea that different pronunciation skills are to be acquired and used for communication in different contact situations is simply disfavoured. To discourage them seems the wrong thing to do.

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