



Between ELF Awareness and Native Norms: Vietnamese University Teachers' Beliefs about Pronunciation Teaching

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Abstract

The global use of English has prompted renewed attention to native-speaker models in pronunciation teaching and to the role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This qualitative interpretive study explores Vietnamese university teachers' beliefs about ELF and their perceptions of how these beliefs relate to pronunciation teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four English language teachers at one Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that the participants recognized the global use of English and consistently emphasized intelligibility, while also maintaining a preference for American or British pronunciation as an ideal classroom model. The four teachers reported prioritizing segmental features and stress in pronunciation instruction, while their use of diverse English accents was limited. They also described institutional materials, assessment practices, and students' expectations as constraints on greater incorporation of ELF-informed principles. The findings suggest a tension between emerging awareness of ELF and continued reliance on native-speaker norms within this particular institutional context.

Introduction

Traditional pronunciation teaching in English as a foreign language has often relied heavily on native-speaker models, particularly those associated with American or British English. However, the global use of English has challenged the assumption that pronunciation teaching should be oriented primarily toward native-like speech (Graddol, 2006). English is increasingly used among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds who may not share the same first language or cultural background. This development has encouraged scholars to reconsider pronunciation goals in relation to intelligibility and successful international communication.

Many scholars, including Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2001, 2004), have therefore promoted an English as a lingua franca (ELF) perspective in language education. They have emphasized the need to consider how English is actually used in global communication rather than treating native-speaker varieties as the sole reference point. Walker (2011), for example, has explored pronunciation teaching from an ELF perspective. Within this approach, intelligibility is central because pronunciation teaching needs to address features that facilitate successful communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

The intelligibility of ELF speech has consequently become an important issue in pronunciation research. Rather than assuming that non-native speech is inherently less intelligible, ELF-oriented research has examined which pronunciation features may contribute to communication difficulties and which differences can be accommodated by interlocutors.

This perspective shifts attention from approximating a particular native-speaker accent toward supporting effective communication.

Teachers' beliefs are particularly relevant to this shift because their understandings of ELF may inform how they interpret pronunciation goals and classroom practices. Dewey (2015) argued that research on ELF pedagogy needs to engage with teachers' pre-existing beliefs and their understandings of what ELF means in particular pedagogical contexts. Similarly, Sifakis and Bayyurt (2015) showed the importance of teacher awareness and professional development in supporting ELF-informed pedagogical change.

With respect to the Vietnamese context, previous research on pronunciation has been concerned with the pronunciation needs of learners rather than a direct investigation into the beliefs of university teachers regarding ELF as well as pronunciation practices. For instance, Nguyen (2019) studied the pronunciation needs of Vietnamese EFL learners and stressed the significance of systematic pronunciation teaching. In the case of other contexts, there have been some research studies investigating beliefs and practices related to pronunciation and ELF among teachers in Hong Kong (Bai & Yuan, 2019), Brazil (Buss, 2016), Turkey (Aydın & Karakaş, 2021), and Indonesia (Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021). Nonetheless, the correlation between ELF beliefs and pronunciation practices of Vietnamese university teachers has not received much attention. This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring the description of the ELF beliefs and pronunciation practices of four university English teachers in a Vietnamese institution. Consequently, two research questions are proposed to frame the study:

RQ1: What beliefs do Vietnamese university English teachers hold about English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the relationship between their ELF beliefs and their pronunciation teaching practices?

Literature Review

English as a Lingua Franca

According to Jenkins (2009), English as a lingua franca (ELF) is English as it is spoken by speakers of various first languages. "Any use of English among speakers of different first languages and linguacultural backgrounds across all three Kachruvian circles" is what Seidlhofer (2011) describes as "ELF" (p. 7). English native speakers are covered by both definitions, and they can utilize ELF as an extra tool for cross-cultural communication. Most academics in this discipline (Jenkin, 2007; 2014; Mauranen 2012; Cogo & Dewey 2012) agreed with this stance. They concur that ELF is neither a consistent and fixed way of communication nor a variation (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011).

ELF is considered as a flexible and collaboratively constructed mode of communication, making it inherently variable. As distant and virtual communities engage in ELF communication practices, the resulting diversity is not limited to specific geographical places or domains. Instead, it is locally generated across various locations and contexts. This phenomenon is not always confined to spatial boundaries, as evidenced by the research of Jenkins (2014), Mauranen (2012), and others. Setting, function, and enquiry are the three essential fundamental levels that comprise ELF as articulated by Cogo & Dewey (2012). When defining ELF in terms of its environments, any language interaction situation where English is spoken as the dominant language of conversation might be the site of inquiry in ELF research.

Not merely English is employed as a communication tool among people in the growing circle who speak diverse first languages. Most academics actively involving in ELF research nowadays would likely agree that users from all three of Kachru's circles, including those from the inner circle, may be involved in the ELF setting (Seidlhofer, 2004 and Jenkins, 2007). Jenkins (2007) made it clear that ELF communication encompasses not only individuals from the expanding circle but also those who engage in international English communication, regardless of whether they are citizens of inner or outer circle countries.

When it comes to ELF function, Cogo & Dewey (2012) classified as ELF any contact in which expanding circle speakers, not only those who do not speak a shared language, choose English as their preferred medium for intercultural communication. This includes all three rings. The linguacultural composition of participants, as well as their attitude toward one another and the language itself, are more important factors in defining an ELF encounter than the location of the communicative event.

In terms of enquiry, ELF is defined as the scientific study of creative English use as documented in naturally occurring speech corpora. Research done under this approach seeks to identify, characterize, and explain the mechanisms at work in lingua franca conversation within the frameworks of pragmatic processes, lexical grammatical qualities, and phonology of ELF. They also offer examples of creative linguistic formations. This is meant to show how ELF is hybrid and flexible rather than to try and define the language or its characteristics as a single variant.

Pronunciation in ELF Communication

Pronunciation instruction needs special emphasis if English language learners are to be suitably ready for ELF encounters. According to Jenkins's (2000) empirical research, pronunciation is the most essential language component to effective ELF communication. Pronunciation problems accounted for more than two thirds (27 out of 40) of the communication failures in Jenkins' data. This trend was supported by research conducted by Deterding (2013) on South-East Asian ELF, with pronunciation problems accounting for 86% of misconceptions in his data.

Jenkins (2000) developed a system called the "Lingua Franca Core" (LFC), identifying pronunciation features that may be particularly important for intelligibility in ELF communication. They are:

- all consonant sounds, except for /θ/, /ð/ and [ʃ]
- vowel length contrasts (including those caused by a following lenis or fortis consonant)
- aspiration of /p/, /t/, and /k/
- the long central vowel /ɜ:/
- maintaining initial consonant clusters (word-medial or final consonant clusters may only be simplified according to L1 rules of elision)
- rhoticity and avoidance of [ɹ] for /r/ in intervocalic position
- nuclear stress placement and chunking

As the aforementioned list illustrates, intelligibility in ELF communication was shown to depend more on the segmental level than the suprasegmental level. In fact, negative L1 transfer on the segmental level was the primary cause of almost all communication breakdowns involving pronunciation in Jenkins' data (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 87-88). Because non-native English speakers (NNS) often use bottom-up rather than top-down processing methodologies, Jenkins argues that the segmental level is crucial for intelligibility in ELF because it resulted in them focusing too strongly on the acoustic signal (Jenkins, 2000, p. 20).

Jenkins also calls for the teaching of phonological accommodation skills, which are crucial for effective ELF communication based on her findings, which is another significant component of her plan for pronunciation instruction. Nevertheless, ELF speakers hardly ever employ these phonological modifications, despite their usefulness for communication (Jenkins, 2000, p. 180-181). Jenkins therefore emphasized that students who want to participate in international communication must be taught both productive and receptive phonological adaptation abilities (Jenkins, 2000, p. 210).

After all, granting NNSs "the same sociolinguistic rights as those enjoyed by L1 speakers" (Jenkins, 2005, p. 147) by enabling them to present their L1 identity through their accent was one of the main goals underlying Jenkins' LFC. This is made feasible by the non-core features, or pronunciation characteristics like vowel quality and th-sounds that aren't covered by the LFC and are meant to be left up to the speaker's individual taste.

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Teaching Pronunciation

The “Cinderella syndrome” was originally used to describe the marginalization of pronunciation in language programs (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). In recent decades, however, pronunciation research has expanded to examine areas such as textbook treatment, teachers' perceptions, and classroom practices (e.g., Derwing et al., 2012; Foote et al., 2016; Couper, 2017; Nguyen & Newton, 2020).

Research on teachers' beliefs has generally highlighted the importance of pronunciation for successful communication. Darcy (2018), for example, emphasized the value of effective pronunciation instruction, while Couper (2017) examined teachers' cognition of pronunciation teaching and the concerns that may influence their pedagogical decisions. Bai and Yuan (2019) investigated the beliefs and practices of non-native English teachers concerning pronunciation instruction in Hong Kong. Their findings indicated that although teachers recognized the importance and purpose of pronunciation teaching, some reported insecurity and limited preparedness in addressing it. Similarly, Burri (2015) examined teachers' perspectives on pronunciation teaching and factors that may influence their instructional goals. Saito (2014) investigated experienced teachers' perspectives on priorities for improving intelligible pronunciation among Japanese learners of English. The study emphasized the importance of attending to learners' pronunciation needs and of considering these needs when developing pronunciation curricula. Nguyen (2019) investigated Vietnamese EFL learners' pronunciation needs and highlighted the importance of systematic and explicit pronunciation instruction in supporting learners' communicative goals.

Research has also examined teachers' beliefs about ELF and the challenges associated with incorporating ELF perspectives into teaching. Aydın and Karakaş (2021) found that teachers could demonstrate awareness of ELF while maintaining reservations about ELF-associated accents. Ramadhani and Muslim (2021) similarly reported that teachers with positive attitudes toward ELF faced challenges related to exposure to diverse accents, teacher and learner readiness, institutional support, teaching materials, and native-speakerism.

Overall, these studies suggest that teachers may recognize the importance of pronunciation and ELF while continuing to rely on established native-speaker norms in their classroom practices. However, the available evidence is drawn largely from contexts outside Vietnam, and the Vietnamese literature identified above has focused more on learners' pronunciation needs than on teachers' ELF-related beliefs and reported pedagogy. This leaves a contextual gap concerning how Vietnamese university teachers themselves understand ELF and describe its relationship with pronunciation teaching.

While previous studies have examined teachers' perceptions and practices in pronunciation instruction and, in some contexts, their attitudes toward ELF, the present study focuses specifically on Vietnamese university teachers and the relationship they perceive between ELF beliefs and pronunciation teaching. Rather than testing whether ELF beliefs cause particular teaching practices, the study examines how teachers themselves explain this relationship within their institutional context.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher cognition provides the conceptual framework for the present research. It encompasses teachers' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and understandings that are related to their pedagogical decision-making (Borg, 2015). Teacher cognition is shaped by teachers' education and experience and is closely connected to how they interpret and approach classroom practices.

In the domain of English language teaching, the phenomenon of ELF questions native-speaker models. According to ELF research, English is mainly used as a lingua franca, i.e., as a tool of international communication among non-native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2011; Jenkins, 2015). As a result, the main purpose of pronunciation classes has changed from developing native-like pronunciation to intelligible speech.

Teachers' ELF beliefs may be related to how they perceive pronunciation teaching. For example, teachers who strongly subscribe to native-speaker models may place greater emphasis on pronunciation accuracy, whereas teachers who adopt a more ELF-oriented perspective may place greater emphasis on intelligibility and accommodation. These possibilities provide a conceptual basis for examining how the four participants describe the relationship between their beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the present study does not hypothesize a causal effect; instead, it explores teachers' reported perceptions of this relationship in the Vietnamese university context.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative interpretive research design was adopted because the study seeks to understand how Vietnamese university teachers describe their beliefs about ELF and their reported pronunciation teaching practices. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of social phenomena (Merriam, 2009). In applied linguistics, qualitative approaches can also provide detailed accounts of teachers' beliefs and perceptions of their pedagogical practices.

Semi-structured interviews were used because they combine a predefined set of topics with opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives (Dörnyei, 2007). This format was appropriate for exploring teachers' understandings of ELF and their explanations of how these understandings relate to pronunciation teaching.

Research Context

The research was conducted in a Pronunciation course designed for first-year English majors. The course lasted nine weeks and included 15 periods of theory and 30 periods of practice in the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. The course assumes that students develop pronunciation systematically during their university study, although some students may have encountered pronunciation instruction at an earlier age. Each teacher was responsible for two classes, resulting in eight classes in total. The students were first-year students, except for those retaking the course after an unsuccessful attempt. According to the course outline, the main textbook was *English Pronunciation in Use: Intermediate* (2nd ed.; Hancock, 2012).

Participants

This study included four Vietnamese university English language teachers who were responsible for teaching eight Pronunciation classes in the 2025–2026 academic year. Purposive sampling was used because all participants met the following criteria: (1) they were members of the English Language Division, Faculty of Foreign Languages, at one Vietnamese university; (2) they had at least three years of university-level teaching experience and taught both English-major and non-English-major students; and (3) they were currently teaching pronunciation courses. Before the interviews, the researcher sought approval from the Dean of the Faculty to collect data from faculty members. After permission was obtained, the researcher individually approached eligible teachers and invited them to participate in the study.

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were selected to gain insight into the participants' perspectives and experiences. Qualitative interviewing can provide access to participants' interpretations of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Dörnyei, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured format also allowed the interviewer to follow a common set of questions while asking follow-up questions when clarification or elaboration was needed (Galletta, 2013). As such, the interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions based on the research aims, and follow-up questions were asked to probe into the responses of participants. This method offered a balance between uniformity and flexibility in conducting the interviews.

The open-ended questions, which were aligned with the research aims, were utilized to gain a comprehensive insight into the perceptions of the four participants with regard to their understanding of ELF, pronunciation objectives, and teaching priorities, as well as those factors that either facilitated or hindered teaching pronunciation based on ELF. The interview protocol underwent a pilot phase involving two teachers to test whether the questions were clear, relevant, and useful.

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom and digitally recorded with participants' consent. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. Vietnamese was used as the primary interview language to allow participants to articulate their perspectives comfortably and in detail.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Content analysis involves systematic procedures for classifying textual data and developing interpretations that remain attentive to context (Krippendorff, 2013). After transcribing the data, the researcher translated the interviews into English and had the translation checked by a lecturer who is an expert in translating texts. The researcher then read the transcripts several times to get acquainted with the data. Open coding was done using a coloured coding approach (Saldaña, 2013), after which the codes were grouped into larger categories using ATLAS.ti.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the qualitative analysis conducted in this study. First, member checking was performed whereby participants were invited to look at the goals of the study, interview questions, and interpretations of the study results. Second, peer debriefing was carried out to solicit the opinion of educators about the research process and interpretations made.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics were strictly adhered to during the research process. Prior to collecting any data, participants were told about the purposes of the study and how the data would be used. Consent was obtained before any data was collected, and participation in the study was voluntary. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

Findings

The findings are organized around the two research questions. The four interview participants (T1–T4) described their beliefs and reported practices in relation to five themes: Native Speaker Orientation, Intelligibility Orientation, Awareness of ELF, Teaching Priorities, and Constraints and Challenges.

RQ1: Vietnamese University English Teachers' Beliefs about ELF

The first research question examined the four teachers' beliefs regarding ELF and their pronunciation-teaching goals. Across the interviews, the participants described an awareness of the global use of English, a strong emphasis on intelligibility, and continued attachment to native-speaker norms.

Awareness of ELF and Intelligibility Orientation

All four teachers described a practical understanding of the global use of English, although not all reported being highly familiar with the academic acronym “ELF”. They explained that their students would likely use English to communicate with speakers from other linguistic backgrounds in their future careers. As T2 noted, “I always tell my students that they are learning English to talk to Japanese, Korean, or Singaporean partners, not just Americans or British people”.

The four participants also emphasized intelligibility as an important goal of pronunciation teaching. T3, for example, emphasized communication clarity over accent perfection: “As long as people understand them, their pronunciation is acceptable. I don’t force them to lose their Vietnamese identity completely, provided it doesn’t cause communication breakdown”.

Native Speaker Orientation

At the same time, the four teachers described continued preference for American or British English as an ideal classroom model. T1 expressed this dual position: “Intelligibility is the baseline, but the ultimate goal, the gold standard, is still native-like pronunciation. Students should try to sound like native speakers because it sounds more professional”.

This account illustrates the coexistence of ELF awareness and native-speaker orientation within the participants’ reported beliefs. Rather than treating these positions as mutually exclusive, the interviews suggest that the teachers could value intelligibility while still associating native-like pronunciation with a desirable classroom standard.

RQ2: The Relationship between ELF Beliefs and Pronunciation Teaching Practices

The second research question examined how the four teachers perceived the relationship between their ELF beliefs and their reported pedagogical choices, particularly their teaching priorities and the constraints they encountered.

Teaching Priorities and Strategies

The participants reported giving substantial attention to segmentals (consonants and vowels) and to some suprasegmental features, particularly word stress, because they associated these features with comprehension problems. T4 stated, “I have devoted much time to teaching ending sounds and stress in words. Vietnamese students tend to omit terminal consonants and pronounce ‘white’ for ‘wife’. This is not negotiable”. The participants did not explicitly refer to Jenkins’ *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC) when describing how their syllabuses were developed, suggesting that their attention to intelligibility-related features was based primarily on their teaching experience rather than on an explicitly stated ELF framework.

The teachers also reported some willingness to expose students to different accents, although they described this as limited. T2 explained, “I sometimes use YouTube videos of Indians or Australians to practice their listening skills, but for pronunciation practice, I only use the standard American accent”.

Constraints and Challenges

The four teachers described several institutional and contextual constraints on greater incorporation of ELF-informed principles. One concern involved the course textbook, *English Pronunciation in Use* (Hancock, 2012), which they described as strongly oriented toward British English. T3 explained, “The course syllabus and the textbook are very much British English. We need to evaluate them based on the textbook audio, so we cannot really assess them in other ELF accents”.

The participants also identified students’ expectations as a constraint. They described some freshman students as associating an American or British accent with high English proficiency. T1 explained, “Students aspire to speak like Hollywood actors or BBC news presenters. When I explain to them that speaking an international or accented English is acceptable, they think they are compromising on quality”. These accounts indicate that teachers perceived learner expectations, alongside institutional materials and assessment practices, as factors limiting the extent to which they could incorporate more diverse pronunciation models.

Discussion

The findings point to a tension between the participants’ emerging awareness of ELF and their continued reliance on native-speaker norms. This tension can be understood in relation to teacher cognition: beliefs about what counts as appropriate or successful pronunciation are not formed in isolation but are embedded in teachers’ prior experiences, institutional expectations,

and understandings of their students' needs. The coexistence of intelligibility-oriented beliefs and native-speaker preferences therefore suggests that adopting an ELF perspective may involve negotiating between competing pedagogical expectations rather than simply replacing one model with another.

The participants' emphasis on intelligibility is broadly consistent with the ELF literature, which has challenged the assumption that pronunciation teaching should primarily aim at native-like speech (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2011). At the same time, the teachers' continued preference for American or British models resembles patterns reported in previous studies of teacher beliefs and ELF-related pedagogy (Aydın & Karakaş, 2021; Ramadhani & Muslim, 2021). The present study adds a Vietnamese university perspective to this discussion by showing how these orientations are described by teachers within a particular institutional setting.

A significant consideration here is the distinction between awareness and pedagogical implementation. While participants were aware of the worldwide use of English, they also referred to materials, assessment criteria, and student expectations that promoted pronunciation norms. This pattern is consistent with research on teacher cognition, which suggests that teachers stated beliefs and their classroom practices do not always correspond directly, as instructional decisions may also be shaped by contextual factors and competing demands (Borg, 2003; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Farrell & Bennis, 2013). Nevertheless, in the present study, the interview data can only reveal how the four teachers perceived and interpreted the relationship between their beliefs and their pronunciation teaching practices; it cannot establish how these beliefs were enacted in actual classroom practice.

The fact that attention to segmentals and stress in the participants' accounts overlaps with features that are highlighted in Jenkins' (2000) concept of Lingua Franca Core is also an important point to highlight. However, the choices made by the teachers were not consciously linked with the concept of LFC. The fact points to the difference between choices that could be consistent with ELF teaching on one hand, and conscious application of ELF theory on the other. For teacher education, it is an important distinction that needs to be addressed during professional development.

A specific variety of English language along with the expectations for learner's pronunciation skills were discussed as elements of textbooks and assessment system. The existence of such factors might be reinforcing the existing norm despite the recognition of the legitimacy of various English languages by the teacher. The results do not point to the gap between beliefs and practices but to the shaping of pronunciation instruction by interactions between different factors.

Conclusion

This research examined the beliefs about ELF held by four university English teachers in Vietnam, as well as the connection between these beliefs and pronunciation teaching practices. In this specific institutional setting, the respondents highlighted the predominance of the principle of intelligibility, as well as the preference for either American or British pronunciation models in class. Furthermore, the segmentals and stress were emphasized, while the variety of English accents was rarely utilized. Native norm-based resources and assessment, along with student expectations, were considered as barriers to incorporating principles of ELF.

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn. First, since the participants perceived the existence of ELF but mentioned little reference to ELF concepts in explaining their teaching decisions, there could be provided professional development sessions to link ELF notions like intelligibility and phonological accommodation with pronunciation teaching and testing. Second, as the participants viewed the course textbook and testing procedures as limitations, the development of curriculum and materials could involve the use of a variety of English accents and different settings of interaction, as well as clearer assessment criteria associated

with intelligibility. Third, since the teachers indicated the students' expectations of American/British accents as a factor influencing them, the pronunciation courses could involve discussions and listening exercises for the exposure of the students to various English speakers and understanding of intelligibility different from the imitation of one native speaker's accent.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size included only four university teachers, thus, the findings cannot be generalized to Vietnamese university teachers in general. Secondly, the data was collected in the form of interviews, which means that the data presented is an account of the teachers' self-reporting about their beliefs and practices rather than a direct proof of what happens in the classroom. Thirdly, the interviews were done in Vietnamese and then translated into English, meaning that there is a chance of changing the original wording because of translation. Fourthly, there was no classroom observation or any other kind of evidence gathered in class in order to prove the consistency between the self-reporting data and real teaching.

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