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**What does ELF mean for the simultaneous interpreter? An overview of the current situation of the Spanish interpreting market**

**¿Qué representa el Inglés como Lingua Franca para los intérpretes profesionales? Una panorámica de la situación actual del ELF en el mercado de la interpretación en España**

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**Abstract:** The article reports on a survey of Spanish-based interpreters' perceptions of ELF in simultaneous interpreting settings. The findings of the survey were then further explored through interviews with eight professional conference interpreters in order to provide a more accurate overview of the current situation of the Spanish conference interpreting market. Our research revealed the growing prevalence of ELF at international conferences held in Spain, and that this new reality is perceived as a threat to the interpreting profession. Participants were asked about the quality and accessibility of non-native English source speeches, about their approach to interpreting into English for a non-native English audience, and about whether or not they had to seek alternative employment in other parallel language services, such as translation or teaching in order to make a living.

**Keywords:** ELF, conference interpreting, multilingual communication, Spanish

**Resumen:** Este artículo se basa en una encuesta realizada entre intérpretes de conferencias con domicilio profesional en España acerca de sus percepciones sobre el uso del inglés como lengua franca en reuniones con interpretación

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simultánea. Los resultados de la encuesta se profundizaron después con cinco entrevistas realizadas a intérpretes profesionales para ofrecer una panorámica más precisa de la situación actual del mercado español de la interpretación de conferencias. Nuestra investigación revela la creciente hegemonía del inglés como lengua franca en las conferencias internacionales celebradas en España y que esta situación es percibida como una amenaza para la profesión de intérprete. Se preguntó también a los participantes acerca de la calidad y accesibilidad de los discursos pronunciados en inglés por hablantes no nativos, sobre su enfoque a la hora de interpretar hacia el inglés para un público de hablantes no nativos y sobre si se han visto obligados a complementar sus ingresos con otros trabajos relacionados con las lenguas, como la traducción, o con la docencia.

**Palabras clave:** inglés como lengua franca, interpretación de conferencias, comunicación multilingüe, español

## 1 Introduction

The widespread use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) by both native and non-native speakers in professional contexts has brought about substantial changes in conference interpreting, a transformation the exploration of which Albl-Mikasa has defined as “the emerging subdiscipline of ITELf (interpreting, translation and English as lingua franca)” (Albl-Mikasa 2017: 369). In order to contribute to the study of this growing linguistic practice, this article seeks to explore the perceptions of the interpreting profession in Spain about the evolution of the use of ELF in simultaneous interpreting settings, using both a survey among Spanish-based conference interpreters and a series of in-depth interviews with eight Spanish-based conference interpreters. As the use of English as a lingua franca in professional contexts has now become widespread on a global scale, it has inevitably led to substantial changes in practices at international conferences. Specifically, the current environment of growing ELF prevalence has meant significant modifications in terms of the need for international conferences to adapt to this new reality, which entails a shift from speeches and texts mainly produced by native speakers to the current increase of those delivered by non-natives, with all of the linguistic variety that this entails.<sup>1</sup> One of the language professions that is currently most affected by this trend is conference interpreting, as English is used habitually by both native and non-native speakers. According to House, ELF “is a useful default tool for communication, which does not, at the moment, present a threat to

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete analysis of this question, see Mauranen (2012).

multilingualism and translation” (House 2013: 294). However, this author also argues that this is a complex issue and more research is needed. In the particular case of conference interpreting, the increase of the use of ELF at international meetings has inevitably transformed and complicated the nature of the work of professional conference interpreters and, although this tendency towards ELF practice clearly poses new challenges for professional interpreters, there have currently been very few studies conducted into this issue. Indeed, according to Albl-Mikasa (2017), there is little research into the relation between ELF and interpreting and the transformations that it is beginning to create in the very nature of the profession. In terms of what little has been published, we can highlight the studies of the phenomenon by Albl-Mikasa (2017) and Gentile and Albl-Mikasa (2017).

In their 2017 study of conference interpreters’ perception of the impact of English as a lingua franca on their profession, Gentile and Albl-Mikasa (2017: 64) highlighted how their participants had considerable concerns about this issue. Many of those surveyed pointed to the loss of status of interpreters as “everybody speaks English nowadays,” which means that the professional interpreter is therefore increasingly seen as superfluous and, in fact, several interpreters surveyed by Gentile and Albl-Mikasa (2017: 57) declared that they were considering other career options. Another frequent complaint noted by Albl-Mikasa (2010, 2014a) was the lack of quality in communication due to the growing use of “Globish” and, indeed, the same author has noted in the above-cited studies that some professional interpreters tend to speak pejoratively of non-native ELF as either BSE (Bad Simple English) or even “Desperanto.”

This article proposes an empirical approach to a specific example of the effect of ELF on conference interpreting. It is based on the presentation and analysis of the results of a survey among Spanish-based conference interpreters, which gathers data on the perceptions of conference interpreters in Spain about the evolution of the use of ELF in simultaneous interpreting settings. This study also incorporates a series of face-to-face and online interviews with eight conference interpreters, three men and five women, discussing their impressions and their first-hand experiences of the current situation of the Spanish interpreting market, in which professionals are now required to work with source speeches, which vary enormously in terms of their quality and accessibility.

We will now address some of the relevant questions in the field of ELF and conference interpreting literature as a backdrop to our study, then in Sections 3 and 4 we will describe the methodology used and the objectives pursued in our study in terms of our survey and the interviews conducted. Sections 5 and 6 will offer the results of the survey and the interviews respectively, followed by a discussion and some conclusions regarding current and future tendencies with

respect to the effect of the widespread use of ELF on the Spanish conference interpreting sector.

## 2 ELF and conference interpreting

As noted previously, there has been relatively little research attention devoted to the field of ITEL<sup>F</sup>.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, Albl-Mikasa surveyed 32 experienced German-speaking conference interpreters, pointing out previously that the precious little research conducted thus far into the subject had focused more on “the effects of non-native source-text production, especially non-native accents, on the interpreter’s comprehension process” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 126). A study by Chang and Wu (2014) analysed the effects of ELF on interpreters’ work and explored their coping strategies. In their specific case, the study reported on a series of interviews, 10 in total, with Taiwanese conference interpreters. Our article aims to add to what is still a relatively small body of literature on the effect of ELF on the profession, analysing a specific case of the Spanish-based interpreter sector. Rather than merely speculating on the future direction that ELF communication might take, and how it may continue to affect professional conference interpreters, this article aims to describe what interpreters subjectively feel and say about the current situation in terms of the last years of increasing dominance of ELF in Spain. For this purpose, we decided to look in detail at the changes of the profession wrought by the spread of ELF in the specific case of one country and language community: Spain and Spanish-based conference interpreters. How is ELF affecting the market for English–Spanish interpreting and vice versa?.

In Spain, as elsewhere, more and more professional, educated people speak English at a reasonably proficient level. This process is now seen as unstoppable in this country, and business executives, politicians and high-level civil servants either refuse interpreting services, interrupt and correct it, or just ignore it completely. According to Albl-Mikasa, the EU “has moved from full multilingualism to cost-efficient multilingualism” (Albl-Mikasa 2017: 381) and an increasing number of meetings are held in English only. Albl-Mikasa also noted that 59% of her respondents “expressed certain fears and saw a negative impact”

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<sup>2</sup> Although in 2006 Pöchhacker had already pointed out that “[w]hile the trend to carry out transactions in business, politics, arts, and science on a world-wide scale could be assumed to boost the role of interpreters in international communication, the spread of English as a *lingua franca* [...] largely offsets its potential need. As much as the official language policy, and interpreting policy, of the EU will preserve Europe’s heritage as the heartland of multilateral conference interpreting, the spread of international English is likely to shrink the market for conference interpreters there as well” (Pöchhacker 2006: 200).

(Albl-Mikasa 2010: 132) in terms of the impact of ELF on conference interpreters and also observed that “the two youngest respondents in terms of working years (10) paint the gloomiest picture of the future that lies ahead for their profession” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 133), in addition to 40% of those surveyed who expressed “fears of declining demand” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 139). Moreover, some respondents to Gentile’s 2016 survey suggested that the need for interpreting would no longer be so strong as people now learn English from a very early age and are confident about expressing themselves in that language, particularly from countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

According to Albl-Mikasa, “it is undisputed among researchers and practitioners in the field that the spread and global use of English as a lingua franca generates *additional pressure to uphold or even uplift quality standards*” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 139).<sup>4</sup> This means raising the bar for interpreters as a higher quality service is expected of them in order to justify their very existence and defend their reputation as language professionals. Moreover, now there is also fiercer competition for fewer jobs, as there are more and more English-only events, which do not tend to request so much professional interpreting, except for highly specialized, technical events, which still perceive the need for quality professional interpreting services. Albl-Mikasa’s aforementioned 2010 survey of ELF in relation to conference interpreting in the German-speaking market obtained detailed results, which point to the profession changing under the influence of ELF. In the quantitative breakdown, 81% of those surveyed in 2010 felt that globalisation and the spread of ELF had exerted a noticeably adverse influence on their work as interpreters and 72% stated that there was a marked cut in booths for languages other than English. Some 69% reported that the number of interpreting assignments had decreased due to an increase in English-only communication. Most respondents entertained fears regarding the profession’s future (59%) or foresaw a noticeable shift from conference to community interpreting (16%). There was also a general sense that interpreters could only subsist by providing a high-quality performance and in a context in which the utmost professionalism was also demanded from them. In fact, in a later study, Albl-Mikasa suggests several avenues for future research in this field, including a “re-branding of the interpreters’ professional status as multilingual communication experts” (Albl-Mikasa 2014b: 31). According to Gentile and Albl-Mikasa, “dropping demand, ignorant or non-appreciative client attitudes, cost-cutting priorities as well as ill-conceived beliefs about communication and language skills are clearly felt to undermine a once highly prestigious profession” (Gentile and Albl-Mikasa 2017: 64).

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<sup>3</sup> Gentile and Albl-Mikasa (2017: 61).

<sup>4</sup> The italics are the original author’s.

If the twentieth century was indeed “the heyday of simultaneous conference interpreting,” according to Albl-Mikasa, it has now been “superseded by the century of English as a lingua franca, the century of ELF communication” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 126). In her 2010 summary, Albl-Mikasa concluded that “on the whole, the increasing use of English as a lingua franca is seen by interpreters as having adverse effects on their working conditions” and further stated that “there is hardly any doubt that their working conditions have undergone far-reaching changes” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 142). It is indeed abundantly clear that the growing use of ELF also opens up a whole new debate not only about the need for interpreting but about the quality both of the input and the service consequently provided by professional conference interpreters and, back in 2010, for Albl-Mikasa it was possible to identify a “decline in the prestige of the profession” added to the fact that “conference interpreters find and experience that their job is becoming tougher and more strenuous and that job satisfaction is on the decline” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 142–143). In 2010, these German-speaking conference interpreters did not necessarily all see themselves as an “endangered species,” but they were increasingly concerned about demand for their services, their working conditions and even their level of job satisfaction. The job is undoubtedly becoming more taxing due to low-quality ELF speaker input and the concomitant need to accommodate to low-level ELF listeners. Indeed, ELF is generally regarded with a certain reluctance by professional conference interpreters, as the aforementioned studies have confirmed.

### 3 Survey: Methodology and sample description

This study is based on a two-pronged approach: the analysis of a web-based questionnaire complemented with a series of in-depth individual interviews with eight Spanish-based professional conference interpreters who are currently active in the market. This approach is similar to that employed by Albl-Mikasa (2010), who also used a questionnaire completed by 32 German-speaking professional conference interpreters. The survey on the impact of English as a lingua franca on Spanish conference interpreting settings was carried out using a web-based instrument generated by Microsoft Forms, a questionnaire generator tool. A significant advantage of this type of survey is that it is currently one of the most practical ways to gather information anonymously. The survey was conducted in the spring of 2019 among Spanish-based conference interpreters. E-mail invitations to participate were sent to the International Association of Conference Interpreters regional network in Spain (ESPaic) members list, as well as to a list of e-mail addresses compiled from the Association of Conference Interpreters of Spain (AICE) website, and to the publicly available e-mail addresses of a total of 16 university professors who are engaged in the training of future interpreters and are

therefore involved in the Association of Spanish Universities with Official Degrees in Translation and Interpreting (AUNeTI) network and who also work as professional conference interpreters. Participants were informed about the scope and confidential nature of this research in the introductory remarks of the survey. The design of the questionnaire, which contained only 16 simple and direct questions, allowed participants to be able to respond in less than 5 min. In fact, the average response time was significantly lower: 3:18 min. The survey fielding time was three months, from 26 April 2019 to 26 July 2019, which included a reminder sent out to potential participants in the month of June.<sup>5</sup>

Questions 1 to 7 were intended to explore the personal characteristics of those who responded to the sample, and dealt with questions such as their language profile according to the AIIC (2012) classification (which were their A, B and C languages),<sup>6</sup> gender (male, female or non-binary), age (the youngest option was the range 25–35 years of age and the oldest was from 55–65), as well as matters related to their membership of professional associations.

The questionnaire was completed by 34 respondents, seven of whom were male, 23 were female and four preferred not to reveal their gender (see Table 1). This preponderance of female interpreters is even higher than the typical gender

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<sup>5</sup> <https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=HHDSvJujqEk26IPPjuDBwwWgF6w7rk5LvBCej3nIig9URDZBMFg5T0g3WFc0RDAwM0dHNkU2S1dJNS4u> (accessed 1 August 2019).

<sup>6</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/4004/> (accessed 8 October 2019).

Interpreters' working languages are classified in three categories – A, B, C:

- The “A” language is the interpreter’s mother tongue (or its strict equivalent) into which they work from all their other working languages in both consecutive and simultaneous interpretation.

It is the language they speak best, and in which they can easily express even complicated ideas. It is therefore an active language for the interpreter.

- A “B” language is a language in which the interpreter is perfectly fluent, but it is not a mother tongue. An interpreter can work into this language from one or several of their other working languages but may prefer to do so in only one mode of interpretation, either consecutive or simultaneous (often in “consecutive” because it is not so fast). It is also considered an active language for the interpreter.
- A “C” language is one which the interpreter understands perfectly but into which they do not work. They will interpret from this (these) language(s) into their active languages. It is therefore a passive language for the interpreter.

**Table 1:** Survey question 4.

Question 4 (N = 34)	Male	Female	Prefer not to say
4. Gender	7 (21%)	23 (68%)	4 (12%)

**Table 2:** Survey question 5.

Questions 5 (N = 34)	25–35	35–45	45–55	55–65
5. Age range	2 (5.9%)	8 (23.5%)	10 (29.4%)	14 (41.2%)

distribution in the profession as, according to its website, AIIC currently has 3005 members, of whom around two-thirds are female and one-third male.<sup>7</sup>

The largest group of respondents (14) declared their age to be between 55 and 65 years of age (41.2%), 10 participants (29.4%) were in the range of 45–55 years of age, eight participants (23.5%) were between 35 and 45 years of age and only two participants (5.9%) were younger than 35 years of age (see Table 2).

In terms of working languages (see Table 3), all respondents had Spanish as one of their A, B or C languages and all but one declared English as one of their A, B or C languages. The majority of participants (25) named Spanish as their A language, followed by English (9), French (4) and German and Italian (1 and 2, respectively). Nine respondents declared that they had other A languages, although the survey did not require them to specify which languages these were. However, as far as B languages were concerned, the most frequently reported was English (13), followed by Spanish (9), French (6) and Italian (3). Only one respondent cited German as their B language and one fell into the category of other unspecified languages. Regarding C languages, French was the most frequent profile (19), English and Italian received the same number of responses (11), followed by Portuguese (9) and German (3). Four participants cited another C language and only one respondent reported Spanish as a C language. Another five participants declared that they had another (unspecified) C language and only one respondent reported Spanish as a C language.

The vast majority of respondents, 32 (94%), were members of a professional association (see Table 4): 19 were members of AIIC, eight were members of AICE, one was a member of APTIJ,<sup>8</sup> one was a member of ASETRAD,<sup>9</sup> and three

<sup>7</sup> <https://aiic.net/directories/interpreters/lang/1> (accessed 28 September 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Spanish Professional Association of Court and Sworn Interpreters and Translators.

<sup>9</sup> Spanish Association of Translators, Correctors and Interpreters.



**Table 3:** Survey questions 1–3.

Questions 1–3 ( <i>N</i> = 34)	Spanish	English	French	German	Portuguese	Italian	Other
1. A languages	25	9	4	1	0	2	9
2. B languages	9	13	6	1	0	3	1
3. C languages	1	11	19	3	9	11	5

respondents were pre-candidates for AIIC. Finally, four participants stated that they were members of two or more associations (AIIC and APTIJ/AVINC).<sup>10</sup>

Questions 8 to 16 explored the respondents' perceptions about the evolution of the use of non-native English in simultaneous interpreting settings in Spain and its impact on their professional choices (see Table 5).

Question 8 sought to find out whether the participants felt that their profession was threatened by the spread of English as a lingua franca. Question 9 specifically probed the issue of their perception of a decrease in activity in the Spanish conference interpreting market over the last 10 years. Questions 10 to 13 focused on the respondents' professional choices as a result of the influence of ELF on the Spanish conference interpreting market. Specifically, this meant asking them whether or not they had changed their professional domicile, had incorporated English as a B language to their language profile, or had needed to complement their interpreting work with other activities such as translation or teaching. Finally, Question 14 sought to ascertain the amount of work that they handled from non-native English into Spanish and from native English into Spanish, and Questions 15 and 16 elicited information about the participants' opinion of the quality of ELF source speeches and their interpreting approach when working into English A or B for an ELF audience. The responses to Questions 8 to 16 will be explored in more detail in the Results section of the article.

## 4 Individual interviews: Description and objectives

One particular advantage of individual interviews is that they allow for more in-depth, detailed answers and elicit more information than questionnaires. Therefore, in this case, we deemed it relevant to complement our web-based survey with a series of interviews in order to elaborate on the participants' answers. For that purpose, we conducted eight interviews with freelance professional interpreters

<sup>10</sup> Venezuelan Association of Conference Interpreters.

**Table 4:** Survey questions 6–7.

Question 6–7 (N = 34)	Yes	No
6. Are you a member of a professional association?	32 (94%)	2 (6%)

  

Question 7 (N = 32)	AiIC	AiIC Precandidate	AICE	APTIJ	ASETRAD	AVINC
7. If YES, which association are you a member of?	19	3	8	2	1	1

**Table 5:** Survey questions 8–16.

8. Do you think that the spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) represents a threat to the profession of conference interpreter?
9. Has the spread of ELF led to a decrease in your activity as a professional conference interpreter in the Spanish interpreting market over the last 10 years?
10. Have you recently changed your professional address due to changes in market demand imposed by the use of ELF?
11. If the answer is YES, where have you moved your professional address to?
12. Have you recently incorporated English as a B language to your language profile?
13. Have you needed to complement your interpreting work with another professional activity such as translation or teaching?
14. Please provide an approximate percentage of interpreting work in the following directions for the Spanish market (–25%   25–50%   50–75%   +75%)
– Non-native English into Spanish
– Native-English into Spanish
– Spanish into English
15. What is your opinion of the general quality of non-native English source speeches in terms of accessibility to meaning?
– Worse than Native-English
– Similar to Native-English
– Better than Native English
16. If you have English as an A or B language, does interpreting for an ELF audience affect how you approach your production of target speech?
– Yes, I tend to simplify grammar and to avoid idiomatic expressions
– No, I always use the same approach, regardless of my audience

working in the Spanish conference interpreting market. All but one of the interviewees are based in Madrid and all work with Spanish as an A or B language. Two of them have English as an A language, two have English as a B language and four as a C language. Apart from Spanish and English, all but one also have other languages in their profiles, namely Italian, German, French, Danish, Portuguese and Catalan (see Table 6). The participants' experience as professional conference interpreters ranged from 5 to 30 years and most of them are members of a professional association, either AIIC or ASETRAD (see Table 4). They will henceforth be referred to as Interpreter 1, Interpreter 2, and so on.

The interviews involved a diverse range of closed and open-ended questions (see Table 7) and the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely and share their personal experiences about the use of ELF within the current context of the Spanish conference interpreting market.

**Table 6:** Interviews, language profiles and experience.

Interpreters	Language profiles	Experience
Int. 1	A: Italian, English; B: Spanish	5 years
Int. 2	A: Spanish; B: English	9 years
Int. 3	A: Spanish; B: English; C: French, German, Catalan	5 years
Int. 4	A: Spanish; C: English, French, Italian, Portuguese	28 years
Int. 5	A: English; B: Spanish; C: French	10 years
Int. 6	A: Spanish; C: English, German, Catalan	7 years
Int. 7	A: Spanish; C: English, French, German, Italian	20 years
Int. 8	A: Spanish, German; C: English, French, Danish	30 years

**Table 7:** Interviews list of questions.

Question 1	How many years of experience in the Spanish interpreting market do you have?
Question 2	What is your personal experience of the use of ELF in the Spanish interpreting market?
Question 3	In your experience, which is more prevalent, the use of unidirectional or bidirectional booth settings?
Question 4	Which is the most common language combination in meetings in the Spanish interpreting market?
Question 5	Do Spanish speakers usually speak Spanish or English?
Question 6	Is it more difficult for you to understand non-native English speakers?
Question 7	Is it easier for you to understand non-native English speakers if their mother tongue is a Romance language?
Question 8	Will ELF or Machine Interpreting influence the future of the Spanish interpreting market?

The questions set also enquired about a selection of topics relevant to our research, including their number of years of experience as professional conference interpreters, whether unidirectional or bidirectional booth settings are more common in their professional practice, which language profile is most frequently demanded, what language Spanish speakers normally use at international meetings, and whether or not they find non-native ELF easier or harder to understand than native-speaker English and why they believe this to be the case. Finally, the interviews concluded with a request for some personal reflections about the future of professional conference interpreting in Spain and the risks that ELF and neural machine translation could eventually pose for the continued existence of their profession.

## 5 Questionnaire survey results

In the paragraphs that follow, the results of questions 8 to 16 of the survey will be explored in more depth (see Table 8).

Of the 34 conference interpreters who filled in and submitted the online questionnaire, 24 (71%) considered that the spread of ELF represented a threat to the profession of conference interpreting (Question 8). The majority of respondents, 20 out of 34 (59%), felt that the spread of ELF had led to a decrease in their activity as a professional conference interpreter in the Spanish interpreting market over the last 10 years (Question 9). Since the questionnaire was sent to interpreters all over Spain, and not just those based in Madrid, the possibility of them moving to other parts of the country was considered in Question 10, and could have provided an interesting result. However, none of the respondents reported having changed their professional domicile due to changes in market demand imposed by the use of ELF, and therefore Question 11 (if the answer is YES,

**Table 8:** Questionnaire results for questions 8–10.

Questions 8–10 (N = 34)	Yes	No
8. Do you think that the spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) represents a threat to the profession of conference interpreter?	24 (71%)	10 (29%)
9. Has the spread of ELF led to a decrease in your activity as a professional conference interpreter in the Spanish interpreting market over the last 10 years?	20 (59%)	14 (41%)
10. Have you recently changed your professional address due to changes in market demand imposed by the use of ELF?	0 (0%)	34 (100%)

where have you moved your professional address to?) was left unanswered in all cases.

It is worth noting that, although the majority of respondents considered the spread of ELF to be a threat to the profession of conference interpreting, very few of them (only four respondents, 12%) seem to have been compelled to incorporate English as a B language to their language profile, considering that activating English would potentially improve their job prospects in the conference interpreting market (see Table 9). To conclude this section, we can highlight the fact that 24 of the 34 respondents (73%) declared that they needed to complement their interpreting work with some other professional activity such as translation or teaching (Question 13).

When asked to provide an approximate percentage of interpreting work from native and non-native English into Spanish, and from Spanish into English, for the Spanish market (Question 14), 14 participants replied that between 50 and 75% was from non-native English into Spanish, and seven of them stated that more than 75% of their work was in the aforementioned direction, which was consistent in the first case with the reverse percentage attributed to the amount of work from Native English into Spanish (15 respondents answered 25–50%), but not in the second case (14 participants replied that this represented less than 25% of their

**Table 9:** Questionnaire results for questions 12–13.

Questions 12–13 ( <i>N</i> = 34)	Yes	No
12. Have you recently incorporated English as a B language to your language profile?	4 (12%)	30 (88%)
13. Have you needed to complement your interpreting work with another professional activity such as translation or teaching?	24 (71%)	10 (29%)

**Table 10:** Questionnaire results for question 14.

Question 14 ( <i>N</i> = 34)	–25%	25–50%	50–75%	+75%
<b>Please provide an approximate percentage of interpreting work in the following directions for the Spanish market</b>				
Non-native English? into Spanish	6 (17.6%)	7 (20.6%)	14 (41.2%)	7 (20.6%)
Native English into Spanish	14 (38.2%)	15 (47.1%)	4 (11.8%)	1 (2.9%)
Spanish into English	8 (23.5%)	13 (38.2%)	8 (23.5%)	5 (14.7%)

interpreting work). The same question also elicited information about the amount of interpreting work from Spanish into English, but the answers were extremely varied, which in our view could be attributed to the wide range of A and B languages they offered (see Table 10).

Question 15 (see Table 11) asked for the participants' opinion of the general quality of non-native ELF speaker source speeches in terms of the accessibility of their meaning. In this case, the majority of respondents (76%) were of the view that non-native ELF source speeches were "worse" than native English speakers' source texts. Seven participants (21%) thought that they were similar, and only one of those who replied to the survey (3%) dissented from the general consensus and in fact considered that these non-native ELF speeches were "better" than native English source speeches, i.e. they were actually easier to interpret.

Finally, Question 16 enquired about the nature of the interpreter's approach to target speech production into English when working for an ELF audience and this question was naturally only addressed to those participants who worked with English as an A or B language (22 interpreters in total). However, we obtained 23 answers, which suggests that one of the respondents made a mistake and misread the question. Nevertheless, the differing responses were divided fairly evenly into two groups of 11 and 12 respondents: 49% of them declared that they tended to accommodate and, therefore, simplify grammar and avoid idiomatic expressions, whereas 51% of those who answered the survey replied that they always used the

**Table 11:** Questionnaire results for question 15.

Question 15 (N = 34)	Worse than native English	Similar to native English	Better than native English
What is your opinion of the general quality of non-native source speeches in terms of accessibility to meaning?	26 (76%)	7 (21%)	1 (3%)

**Table 12:** Questionnaire results for question 16.

Question 16 (N = 23)	Yes, I tend to simplify grammar and to avoid idiomatic expressions	No, I always use the same approach, regardless of my audience
If you have English as an A or B language, does interpreting for an ELF audience affect how you approach your production of target speech?	11 (49%)	12 (51%)

same interpreting approach, regardless of the linguistic nature of their audience (see Table 12).

## 6 Interview results

Regarding their experience in the Spanish interpreting market, all eight interviewees declared that nowadays ELF was extremely frequent, indeed almost prevalent, as was the use of bidirectional booth settings (see Table 13). However, it is interesting to note that this was actually perceived as an advantage in some cases (Interpreters 1, 3 and 5), because it was also believed to generate more work for those interpreters with an English A or B profile. Interpreter 2 also mentioned that having an ELF audience simplifies the production of the target text for non-native English interpreters, since the listeners' expectations are not so high. In contrast, ELF comprehension in this scenario was considered more difficult across the board, but for Interpreter 5 (a native-English speaker) this was due to a number of reasons: variety of accents and lack of linguistic skills, syntactic and semantic difficulties and the large cultural gap (Interpreter 3 stated that "some speakers come from the Middle East, India or Japan [...] even German speakers sometimes present more difficulties, as they tend to speak good English, but their way of thinking and developing their ideas is clearly German".<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the same interpreter nuanced this statement arguing that "a non-native English speaker uses a simpler English with less idioms, and it is more structured [...] than native English speakers". Interpreting an ELF speaker from other Romance language-speaking countries, such as Italy, France or Portugal, was generally perceived to be an easier task than interpreting ELF speakers from other parts of the world, but the reasons given by the interviewees differed. Interpreter 2 stated that "when they speak ELF, it is easier for me to understand Italian and, perhaps, Portuguese speakers, but I find it impossible to understand French speakers, so, I would say that it must be due to phonetic rather than syntactic issues", whereas Interpreter 3 pointed out another possible reason behind the relative ease with which Spanish interpreters could understand the ELF of other Romance-language speakers: "Common cultural traits also help us understand Latin-based language speakers

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**11** This question was explored further by House (2003) as part of her analysis of divergent intercultural communication strategies in ELF. As part of an experiment into group interaction with three Asian speakers of ELF and one German participant, the latter pointed to "a certain 'Asian' style of consensus-orientation, that is a tendency to avoid potentially troublesome remarks and to resist argumentative talk". This sole German speaker of ELF also "longed for more argumentative talk", which was taken as confirmation of the "transfer of her German interactional preferences" (House 2003: 569).

when they use English.” This suggests a convergent style of cultural communication strategies among similar languages and cultures. Portuguese ELF speakers were easier to understand for Interpreters 1, 2 and 4, but not for Interpreter 3: “If a speaker from a Latin country speaks English, I think that an interpreter with a Latin A language would not have many problems understanding that “Latin English”, because of phonetic (mostly coming from Spanish, Catalan and Italian native speakers; less in the case of French or Portuguese native speakers) and syntactic reasons”. In general, Italian ELF speakers were perceived to be easier to understand by all of the participants, although French speakers of ELF, on the contrary, were not (Interpreters 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7). In the particular case of French ELF speakers, phonetic difficulties were mentioned by Interpreters 1, 2 and 3. Moreover, Interpreters 3 and 6 mentioned that, although native-English speakers were easier for them to understand, their tendency to use idiomatic expressions or humour could complicate the task. None of the participants thought that Spanish speakers were inclined to communicate through ELF unless the audience was mainly composed of non-Spanish speakers. In this respect, Interpreters 1, 5 and 7 specifically stated that those Spanish speakers who chose to speak English were usually young. Interpreter 1 even stated that “1 out of 10 Spanish people speaks English.” Interpreter 2 also pointed out that, in their opinion, non-Spanish and non-English speakers were “sort of compelled to speak that language (English) because that way fewer interpreters were required” and Interpreter 5 stated that “when you get to a critical mass of people who are speaking English, those who would perhaps prefer not to speak in English decide to do it.”

Finally, all of the participants perceived ELF as playing a very important role in the future of the Spanish conference interpreting market and believed that it will cause some disruption. Interpreter 4 thought that ELF will entail less interpreting work in some sectors (corporate and finance) and Interpreter 8 specifically mentioned “a decline in input quality and a loss of nuances and cultural references.” On the other hand, none of the interviewees considered that machine translation put their jobs at risk, at least not in the next 15 years, although Interpreter 7 thought that it could be a threat for the profession in a more distant future. Interpreters 2, 3 and 8, nevertheless, mentioned remote interpreting instead, not as a threat *per se* but as a potentially disruptive development to be closely monitored in the years to come in order to “safeguard the dignity and quality of their work” (Interpreter 2). We understand that our sample is only a small fraction of the total population of conference interpreters in Spain, but we do believe that some interesting patterns were identified which we will now analyse in more depth in the Discussion section of this article.



Table 13: Interviews comparative results.

Interpreters questions	What is your personal experience of the use of ELF in the Spanish interpreting market?	In your experience, which is more prevalent, the use of unidirectional or bidirectional booth settings?	Which is the most common language combination in meetings in the Spanish interpreting market?	Do Spanish speakers usually speak Spanish or English?	Is it more difficult for you to understand non-native English speakers?	Is it easier for you to understand native English speakers if their mother tongue is a Romance language?	Will ELF or Machine Interpreting (MI) influence the future of the Spanish interpreting market?
Int 1	ELF more and more common	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish, younger speakers	Yes	Yes	ELF yes MI no
Int 2	ELF is common	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish	Yes	Yes, but not French mother tongue speakers	ELF yes MI no Remote interpreting yes
Int 3	ELF is common	Bidirectional booth settings if only two languages	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish	Sometimes	Yes, but not for French mother tongue speakers	ELF yes MI no Remote interpreting yes
Int 4	ELF more and more common	Bidirectional booth settings if only two languages	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish	Yes	Yes	ELF yes MI no
Int 5	ELF is common	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish, younger	No	Not for me	ELF yes MI no

Table 13: (continued)

Interpreters questions	What is your personal experience of the use of ELF in the Spanish interpreting market?	In your experience, which is more prevalent, the use of unidirectional or bidirectional booth settings?	Which is the most common language combination in meetings in the Spanish interpreting market?	Do Spanish speakers usually speak Spanish or English?	Is it more difficult for you to understand non-native English speakers?	Is it easier for you to understand non-native English speakers if their mother tongue is a Romance language?	Will ELF or Machine Interpreting (MI) influence the future of the Spanish interpreting market?
Int 6	ELF is prevalent	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP	English speakers Spanish	Yes	Yes, but not for French or Italian mother tongue speakers	ELF yes MI no
Int 7	ELF is prevalent	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP C: French	Usually Spanish, younger speakers English	Yes	Sometimes, but not for French mother tongue speakers	ELF yes MI yes
Int 8	ELF more and more common	Bidirectional booth settings	EN<>SP	Usually Spanish	Yes	In my case it is easier to understand German mother tongue speakers	ELF yes MI no Remote interpreting yes

## 7 Discussion

The clearest result from our survey was that a significant majority of the participants (71%) believed that the increasingly widespread use of ELF at international meetings represented a threat to their livelihood as Spanish-based professional conference interpreters, and more than half of them (59%) recognized that this linguistic phenomenon had led to a decrease in their professional activity over the last 10 years (see Table 8). As stated previously, this sample is only a small fraction of the total population of conference interpreters in Spain, but some interesting tendencies and experiences were nevertheless identified, and we believe that it is worthwhile comparing the responses of our 34 Spanish-based conference interpreters to the answers given by Albl-Mikasa's 32 German-speaking respondents in 2010. One of the more curious findings of our survey was that, despite the seemingly unstoppable spread of ELF at international conference settings, very few of our respondents (just 12%) seemed to feel any pressure to reassign English as a B language to their interpreter profile (see Table 9). Instead, our survey points to an interesting profile that would seem to safeguard against the threat to the professional activity (or at least the perception of this threat): the ability to work with more than one A or B language.

Thirteen of our participants who had more than one A or B language declared no significant loss in their professional activity due to the increase in ELF. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that this subjective perception fails to factor in those English-only settings which obviate the need for professional interpreters. Another very clear and logical finding was that exactly the same proportion of the conference interpreters who saw the spread of ELF as a threat to their jobs (71%) also stated that they had to supplement their income with other parallel language services such as translation or teaching (see Table 8). The vast majority of the respondents (76%) had a very poor impression of the overall quality of non-native ELF source speeches and felt that this hampered comprehension and, therefore, the quality of their own work. A minority (21%) saw no appreciable difference in quality, and just one respondent actually preferred working with non-native ELF speech (see Table 11). Regarding the tendency and/or temptation to accommodate in their interpreting of ELF speech, there was a very clear and even division between one half of "purists" who refused to do so, perhaps fearing that it might lower their standards, and the other half who were presumably happy to accommodate depending on their audience.

The interviewees, on the other hand, also provided some valuable insights into the changing nature of the Spanish conference interpreting market due to the upsurge in the use of ELF over the last two decades. Overall, the eight interpreters

interviewed agreed both on the greater difficulty inherent in the comprehension of non-native ELF speech and on its ubiquitous nature at international conferences held in Spain (see Tables 12 and 13). Only three interpreters saw this as a potential advantage (since it might mean more work for those with an English A or B profile). Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the interviewees also expressed their belief that it was easier to interpret the English of non-native speakers if their mother tongue was a Romance language such as Portuguese or Italian. Although this was not necessarily the case with French speakers, there was a certain consensus as to the “common cultural traits” of Romance language speakers that made their discursive strategies (and not only their syntax and pronunciation) easier to understand for fellow Romance language speakers. In our view, this is a question that undoubtedly merits further study in the field of ELF communication. Finally, unlike the diversity of opinion we found among the respondents to our survey, our eight interviewees all saw the ongoing spread of the use of English by non-native speakers in international conferences as a genuine threat to the future of their profession, if not its present or its recent past.

## 8 Conclusions

Even though our sample was admittedly not very large, following the same approach adopted by Albl-Mikasa in her pioneering 2010 study of the phenomenon, our objective was to gain reliable, qualitative data and back this up with in-depth interviews to provide an overview of the current effect of ELF on Spanish-based conference interpreters. We detected an evident preoccupation among this collective, although it is also true that many of those surveyed took a more sanguine view of the phenomenon and believed that this widespread use of English might even be creating more opportunities for work for those who offer English as an A or B language. We also found a reflection of a changing professional self-image, although in some cases in practical terms this had merely meant that they had to supplement their income with parallel activities such as teaching or translation. Traditionally, interpreters tend to be strict and highly self-demanding in terms of the correct use of language,<sup>12</sup> and this is clearly going to clash with the now prevalent use of non-native, “imperfect” ELF. However, this attitude will not be easily reconciled with the clear shift in the paradigm of the profession and the concomitant need for professional interpreters to prove that their services can provide added value to international conferences and meetings.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Albl-Mikasa, “it comes as no surprise that interpreters set very high standards for their own levels of proficiency and language competence” (Albl-Mikasa 2010: 147).

This shift in the paradigm and the need to “rebrand” also hint at more profound changes in the profession highlighted by authors such as Gentile and Albl-Mikasa, the latter of whom has suggested that like in public service interpreting, conference interpreters may be expected to “become less of a neutral voice and more of a mediator” (Albl-Mikasa 2014a: 814). Perhaps the relative optimism of some of our respondents confirms the opinion voiced by House as far back as 2003 when she questioned “the widespread assumption that English in its role as a lingua franca is a serious threat to multilingualism in Europe” (House 2003: 556) and also distinguished between “languages for communication” and “languages for identification”.<sup>13</sup> Our more optimistic Spanish-based conference interpreters clearly see ELF as a language for increased communication and maybe even increased work opportunities if they can offer English as their A or B language. Perhaps the key to survival in the undeniably much altered panorama of conference interpreting in the ELF era is to understand and accept this shift in the paradigm and embrace the “challenge” outlined by Albl-Mikasa, which is to “move from communication expert to communicator in the broadest sense of the term” (Albl-Mikasa 2014a: 815).

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**13** This perspective contrasts sharply with of Gazzola and Grin (2013) who “question the relevance of the concept of ELF from a language policy perspective” and argue that “the use of translation and interpreting, though not free, remains more effective (and at a reasonable cost) than a monolingual regime based on English alone; it is also more fair than a monolingual regime which unavoidably privileges native speakers” (Gazzola and Grin 2013: 93). Indeed, the same authors question the very concept of English as a Lingua Franca: “To all intents and purposes, ‘ELF’ means ‘English’, despite attempts to portray it as something different” (Gazzola and Grin 2013: 97).

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