

Investigating perceptions of different English accents within an ELF framework: A case study of one university in mainland China

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The considerable influx of non-native English speakers (NNEs) into the English-speaking communities has changed dramatically the development of English language, one of which is the status of native English speaking norms. Today, English is not used for the competence of how close one approximates to native English speakers (NESs), but is more frequently adopted as a lingua franca facilitating a variety of pragmatic undertakings. This research, under the framework of English as a lingua franca (ELF), investigated how different English accents were perceived and appropriated as identity markers by university students in mainland China and to what extent their perceptions were under the influence of the emergent ELF environment. Drawing on data from a comparatively large-scale online questionnaire, this article reports ambivalence about participants' attitudes toward different English accents and a dilemma about projecting their L1 identity. It also suggests a replacement of the current teaching paradigm to reflect better the changing configuration of English language around the world.

Keywords: attitude; accent; identity; English as a lingua franca; China

Introduction

“A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognised in every country” (Crystal, 2003, p. 3). English is such a language. Its global status has facilitated its universal spread in the world arena but, at the same time, has resulted in the language ceasing to be an asset owned exclusively by its native English speakers (NESs) in the Inner Circle countries (Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 1994). The repercussion of this realisation is significant, especially in the field of English language teaching (ELT). The relevance of the NES norms, in particular the standard varieties of British and American English which have once been taken-for-granted reference models for non-native English speakers (NNEs) in the Outer and Expanding Circle countries, is under increasing criticism. As English is currently appropriated by far more NNEs as a lingua franca than NESs as a first language, interactive competence is gradually being substituted for NES conformity. And L1-influenced linguistic features, for example, L1 regional accent, are perceived not as language deficiencies, but more as identity markers.

Studies of attitude and identity changes in mainland China – in particular with regard to how these relate to the changing role of English, i.e., English as a lingua franca (ELF) – have, however, received very little attention. This paper intends to fill the gap by investigating how different English accents were perceived and appropriated as identity markers in tertiary education in mainland China. Drawing on data from a recent large-scale questionnaire survey, the study reveals ambivalence about participants' attitudes toward different English accents and a dilemma about projecting their L1-Chinese identity. A replacement of the current teaching paradigm is also proposed to be in line with the changing configuration of English language.

Literature review

Attitude formation

Most social attitudes are proved to be acquired other than innate (Ajzen & Cote, 2008; Garrett, 2010). Some attitudes form out of rational or cognitive evaluations of the potential favourable or unfavourable outcomes brought by an attitude object. Some attitudes can form as a result of either positive or negative emotional responses or repeated exposure to an attitude object, while others form simply from people's past experiences or behaviours (Olson & Kendrick, 2008).

The three ways of attitude formation are far removed from a complete alignment with each other. A case in point is the attitudinal ambivalence experienced by people in view of the ongoing development of English language. On the one hand, people are cognitively and rationally fully aware of the changing status of English and the plain fact that English has been adapted for its in situ purposes and functions and that people who use English are using it for more and more pragmatic purposes beyond the confinement of homogeneous norms and proficiency. On the other hand, the widely-exposed and deeply-entrenched Standard English (StE) ideology and people's past experiences of dogged conformity to StE principles are most likely positioning them as StE norm defenders rather than StE norm breakers. Since attitude is acquired, which indicates that attitude is susceptible to social influence and individual differences, we therefore argue that it is of necessity and significance to conduct further research on attitudes of different subjects in different locales.

“My accent, my identity”

The intricate link between accent and identity was first addressed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) in their influential social identity theory, although its one-to-one correlation between language and identity is under criticism for its “monolingual and monocultural bias” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 5). It illustrates that accent or more precisely accentuating ethnic dialect is an effective strategy in intergroup encounters if people wish to assume a positive identity, because their speech variety is regarded as a dimension of comparison with outgroups. But it is this very dimension of comparison that once stripped non-speakers of RP, a so-called accentless StE, of equal accessibility to countless dimensions in their career and life (Abercrombie, 2006; Trudgill, 2008). And it was also interpreted deliberately as a justifiable excuse by the listener of harbouring discrimination against speakers with accent (Lippi-Green, 1994, 2012).

The phenomenal influx of NNEs into English-speaking communities has changed and is changing the way that English is being perceived. For example, the issue of accent and identity has been granted more weight in the World Englishes paradigm and under the ELF framework. Accent has been employed by a number of colonies-turned independent countries as indexical markers of independence and an expression of identity and group solidarity (Baratta, 2016; Bhatia, 2018; Trofimovich & Turuševa, 2015). The salience of accent is even higher in ELF context than in communication among NESs, in that accent is particularly closely bound up with both personal and group identity (Jenkins, 2007; Lindemann, Litzenberg, & Subtirelu, 2014; Walker, 2010). People in ELF encounters keep their own accent deliberately to “retain their self-respect” as well as to “gain the approval of their peers” (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994, p. 7). Therefore, insisting on their conforming to StE norms and renouncing those of their mother tongue features equates to “forcing them to reject their own identity” (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994, p. 7).

English in China as a variety, a foreign language, or a lingua franca

It comes as no surprise that the status of English in China, i.e., as a legitimate endonormative variety, a foreign language, or a lingua franca, has become a point of debate if we take into account the hundreds of years English being in China and the considerable number of Chinese who are learning English. Specifically, those who approve of the claim that China English is an established variety of English (Gao, 2014; Hansen Edwards, 2017; He, 2015) or an educated variety among the array of Chinese Englishes (Li, 2019) tend to draw on World Englishes theories vis-à-vis the changing status of English. They find support in how China English better accommodates local needs and conveys local culture. Their ideas are under criticism from two groups of opponents. The first batch (Wei & Su, 2012; Yang & Zhang, 2015) holds the view that English in China is mainly for international, especially for communicating with NESs, rather than for intranational purposes. Thus, English in China is better perceived as a foreign language, with NES norms and principles the unquestionable benchmark and NESs' recognition the ultimate attempt, other than a legitimate variety. The second group, which tend to view English as an auxiliary language or a lingua franca for people from different L1 backgrounds, acknowledge the changing status of English and challenge blind conformity to NES norms, while questioning the appropriacy of labelling China English as a legitimate variety of English. For them English in China currently, in view of its scope of application, should be more precisely named performance variety (Fang, 2017; He & Li, 2009) or Chinese speakers' English as a lingua franca (ChELF) (Wang, 2012).

Although consensus is hard to achieve, we argue that debates on the status of English in China, other than bringing chaos to this issue, provide language researchers and instructors across China with opportunities to reflect on, to voice and to subconsciously change their perceptions of and beliefs in English language teaching. These would in turn translate into their teaching practice. In view of the current linguistic reality and the pragmatic appeals of a majority of Chinese English learners, in agreement with Fang (2017), He and Li (2009), and Wang (2012), we hold that English in China, at least for now, is more appropriately being perceived as a lingua franca, an auxiliary language.

The study***Research context***

The research site was a comprehensive university situated in an inland province in southwestern China. The choice of this site was meant to complement findings from similar research conducted in contexts either with an established ELF environment, for instance, Sung (2014, 2016) in Hong Kong, or where the role of English is highly-acclaimed, for example, Zheng and Gao (2017) in Beijing, and Fang (2016) in a coastal area. Students enrolled in the university are from different provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, except Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Mandarin Chinese, or Putonghua, becomes the major language of communication. But at the same time, students are in a multilingual context given that they are constantly having their regional dialects at their disposal. In addition, the university is witnessing a growing presentation of international students and faculty members who come from south and east Asian nations, African countries, and European countries. English is very much likely to be employed as a lingua franca during encounters between them and Chinese students. It also indicates that students are faced with a variety of Englishes other than the so-called StE, i.e., British and American English varieties, that they claim familiarity during these encounters.

Participants

The participants chosen to complete the questionnaire survey included the entire population of English major students in the university. The pragmatic underpinnings of English have been foregrounded by their special field of study, such as business English, English education, and translation. English major students, despite their limited percentage, stand as better candidates in comparison with non-English major students. For one reason, English major students are more likely to develop sophisticated interpretations of and opinions on English language given the fact that they have far more opportunities to be exposed to English language-related practices. Another reason was that their perceptions and beliefs in terms of English are of more significance in that the possibilities are high for them to choose English language-related professions, such as English language teachers.

Questionnaire

To discover how L2 learners in China perceive different English accents and to what extent English accent has been appropriated to project their identity, a comparatively large-scale on-line survey was administered in the participants' L1, Chinese. It consisted of 14 questions in total, including 5 questions eliciting participants' biographical data and 9 questions (5 multiple-choice questions, 2 rank-ordering questions, and 2 open-ended questions) investigating their perceptions towards different English accents (including English accents of their own) and beliefs in English pronunciation teaching.

Two ways were sought to optimise the response rate. Firstly, the participants were explained with the essentials of the research prior to the formal commencement of the questionnaire study. Secondly, most survey items were designed purposefully as compulsory by the researchers, except for the last open-ended question, Q9. This means that the participants were unable to submit their questionnaires unless they completed all the required items. In total, 574 questionnaires were finally retrieved as valid within a one-month duration. SPSS Statistics (Version 20.0) and Nvivo 11.0 were employed as the main analytical tools for quantitative and qualitative data analysis respectively after the preliminary translation process.

Findings and discussion

Demographic information

Table 1 summarises the basic demographic information of the participants. Nearly two thirds (N=391, 68.1%) of the participants were in the 16 to 20 year age group. And more than half (57.3%) of them were first year (N=162) and second year (N=167) students. A majority (N=504, 87.8%) of the participants were female, which is analogous to the typical distribution feature of English majors in mainland China. In addition, the majority (N=363, 63.2%) of the participants commenced their formal English study from primary schools. Surprisingly, less than ten percent (N=37, 6.4%) of the participants had any overseas experiences at the time of the research.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants (N=574)

Items	Options	Number	Percentage
Age	16-20	391	68.1
	21-25	183	31.9
Gender	Male	70	12.2
	Female	504	87.8
Grade	First year	162	28.2
	Second year	167	29.1
	Third year	132	23
	Fourth year	113	19.7
The onset of formal English learning	Kindergarten	29	5.1
	Primary	363	63.2
	Secondary	176	30.7
	Tertiary	6	1
Overseas experiences	Yes	37	6.4
	No	537	93.6

Data analysis

The following sections will report and discuss how different English accents were being perceived and appropriated as identity markers by the participants as well as the participants' beliefs in English pronunciation teaching under the framework of ELF based on the findings captured in Table 2.

Table 2. Questionnaire findings

Questions	Options	Participants (N=574)	Percentage (%)
1. Which English accent(s) that you are most familiar with? (rank-ordering)	British English	256	44.6
	American English	248	43.2
	China English	50	8.7
	Indian English	9	1.6
	Japanese English	7	1.2
	Australian English	2	0.3
	Southeast Asian English	1	0.2
	Canadian English	1	0.2
2. Which English accent(s) do	British English	290	50.5

Questions	Options	Participants (N=574)	Percentage (%)
you like best? (rank-ordering)	American English	261	45.5
	No preference	12	2.1
	China English	7	1.2
	My own English accent	1	0.2
	Southeast Asian English	1	0.2
	Australian English	1	0.2
	Others	1	0.2
	3. Do you think that some English accents are easier to understand than others? Add reasons if any.	Yes	317
	No	90	15.7
	No idea	167	29.1
4. Do you think that some English accents are more prestigious than others? Add reasons if any.	Yes	176	30.7
	No	221	38.5
	No idea	177	30.8
5. How do you feel about your own English accent?	Not satisfied at all	27	4.7
	Not very satisfied	250	43.6
	Uncertain	159	27.7
	Satisfied	131	22.8
	Very satisfied	7	1.2
6. How do you describe your own English accent? (Open-ended)			
7. What kind of English accent would you like to aspire to?	British/American English accent	532	92.7
	My own English accent	21	3.7
	Do not care about my English accent	2	0.3
	Others	19	3.3
8. What kind of English accent do you think	British/American English accent	545	94.9

Questions	Options	Participants (N=574)	Percentage (%)
teachers should teach to Chinese students?	China English accent	50	8.7
	English accent(s) the teacher is familiar with	47	8.2
	A mix of native and non-native English accent	32	5.6
	Others	10	1.7
9. Please share your comments and thoughts in terms of English accents freely. (Open-ended) (Optional)			

1. Which English accent(s) that you are most familiar with?

Participants, in this survey question, were expected to list English accents based on their familiarity. All 574 participants listed at least one English accent; 462 participants listed two; 218 participants provided three; and another 86 participants listed four. Among the accents listed, British and American English accents, listed by 87.8% of the participants, were the top two English accents that the participants felt most familiar with. This result can be accounted for by the following justifications.

First and foremost, British English accent, especially RP or BBC English accent, and American English accent, GA in particular, are often adopted from the governmental and administrative level (He & Zhang, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002) as the default and the only reference models leaving no space for the instruction in other English accent alternatives. In addition, students' tenacious adherence to these English accents is reinforced by their encounters with other "deviant" English accents. Their open comments in Question 9 reflected that the "funny", "strange", "unintelligible" or sometimes "terrible" English accents are so much likely to be labelled as "culprits" of failed communication. L2 learners, therefore, are inclined to perceive these "deviant" English accents as negative examples to be shunned in future encounters and thus fortified the notion that successful communication derives from, in their own words, "close approximation to NES accent".

The NES-mania is also rooted in the linguistic reality in China. From the first ever contact of English five centuries ago, to the roller-coaster development of language policies throughout the early establishment of new China, to the governmental decision of upholding English as the most important foreign language facilitating the smooth process of open-door policy (Bolton, 2002; Graddol, 2013), British English and American English have been accorded with special prominence. Teaching materials, ranging from textbooks, dictionaries, audio and video recordings, along with teaching syllabi are all either British- or American-oriented and supplemented by variegated entertainment programmes driven by the advance of technology and mass media. All of these make British and American English not just an academic subject but something highly accessible in the participants' daily life.

What is also conspicuous in this finding is the number of different English varieties provided by the participants in addition to British and American English, such as China

English (50/574), Indian English (9/574), Japanese English (7/574), Australian English (2/574), Southeast Asian English (1/574), and Canadian English (1/574). Note here that China English does not refer to a fixed variety of English but a performance variety of English with certain Chinese phonological, lexical, and syntactical features (He, 2015; He & Li, 2009). The participants' perceptions of these NNES varieties, as elicited from their open comments from Question 9, were mostly negative. For example,

I have a Nepalese friend, whose spoken English is not very standard. Although I can understand what she says, it still sounds weird. (S21)

I had a Polish English speaking teacher before. It was really uncomfortable when I first attended his class. I had no idea what he was talking about ... I also had a difficult time when speaking to the Pakistanis, the Africans and the Japanese. (S193)

Their negative evaluation of NNES accents is, to some extent, ascribed to the influence of the supposed existence of a standard language (Milroy, 2007). Conforming to a standard language variety, in light of this, is more likely to be perceived by the interlocutors as a prerequisite for bringing mutual understanding. The situation is further compounded if intercultural communication where English is employed as a lingua franca is limited. But it remains a question of interest whether changes in perceptions will ensue in line with growing language awareness in the wake of frequent contact with other English varieties where conformity to a so-called standard language variety renders irrelevant.

2. Which English accent(s) do you like best?

British and American English accents, in Question 2 of this survey, were chosen by 96% of the participants as the most preferred accent models. British English accent, in addition, was preferred by more than half (50.5%) of the participants, surpassing American English accent. This finding is contradictory to Kirkpatrick and Xu's (2002), Hu's (2004, 2005), Xu et al.'s (2010) and Ren et al.'s (2016) findings, but is comparable to Evans' (2010) results. The result challenges the assumption of simply equating linguistic hegemony with political and economic proximity and influence, and underscores the complexities fortifying the StE ideology.

3. Do you think that some English accents are easier to understand than others?

Over half (55.2%) of the participants believed that some English accents were easier to understand than others. Recurrent justifications for their belief, after close examination of the comments provided along with their choice, were as follows:

British English accent and American English accent are comparatively more widely used in the world. Most non-native English-speaking countries will choose these two types of English accents as their norms of reference. Plus the cultural output of Britain and America, which makes these two English accents the most frequently exposed, thus the most familiar and the easiest accent models. (S47)

Chinese students have been exposed to American English since childhood, and it's no wonder why they find it better understood. (S96)

What can be inferred from their comments is that what is decisive in determining the intelligibility of English accent(s) include long-term exposure to and familiarity with certain English accent(s). These two key factors were, in addition, employed as the major causes of their disapproval of this statement, that is, they did not think that some English accents are easier to understand than others.

I think it's a matter of familiarity. For example, if you have been in the American English accent environment for a long time, you will certainly find that American English accent is easier to understand than other English accents. (S3)

If you get used to some English accents, you will find other English accents unintelligible. (S421)

In other words, intelligibility is not guaranteed by the speaker or listener alone, but “is interactional between speaker and listener” (Smith & Nelson, 2019, p. 431). This indicates that the greater the exposure to English accents that the participants were not familiar with, for example, different varieties of NNES accents, the more likely they will understand the speaker or be understood by the listener.

What is also noteworthy is that 167 participants (29.1%) chose “No idea”. This result, as inferred from other survey questions, can be interpreted as follows. Firstly, a majority of the participants, given the elicited responses in Question 1, were ignorant of other varieties of English at the time of the research, except the two most-exposed models, i.e., British English and American English varieties. Secondly, as indicated in Question 9, a significant number of them did not take English accent seriously so long as it does not compromise successful communication.

4. Do you think that some English accents are more prestigious than others?

This is probably the most contentious question in this study. Nearly 70% of the participants took a clear-cut stance in this debate, although 177 participants abstained by ticking “No idea” due largely to the same reasons as described in Question 3. Close to one third (N=176, 30.7%) of the participants believed that some English accents were more prestigious than others and the primary reasons listed were as follows:

For example, British English accent, especially the London accent, sounds more official, formal, and authentic. (S16)

Standardised pronunciation will reflect a person's identity, knowledge and education. And what's more important is to make the listener feel clear and comfortable. (S186)

Some English accents sound more comfortable, fluent, and easier to understand, thus they are easier to communicate and spread, while those incomprehensible may gradually be restrained within a limited area and groups of people. Another issue is people's identity projected via their accent. If people with certain English accent have decent position, high social status and are from developed regions, it will invite their communicators' favourable attitude, which will in turn be beneficial to their future development. (S327)

Their justifications in support of the claim are two-fold. The first factor, attributed mainly to the impact of the StE ideology, can be labelled as the intrinsic linguistic characteristics of English language per se, such as *intelligibility*, *formality*, and *authenticity*, as mentioned in their comments. The second and more important factor is how English is being perceived. The process of globalisation has in a sense transformed the former colonisers' (NESs') way of speaking English, i.e., their accents, into value-adding social and cultural capital owing to its authenticity (Lan, 2011; Luk & Lin, 2006). That people endeavour to attain that goal, i.e., to approximate closely to NES accents, is with a keen awareness that their social and economic gains will increase in line with the accumulation of their social and cultural capital. This will “enhance the range of identities they can claim in a particular community” (Norton, 2014, p. 69) which will ultimately be “*beneficial to their future development*”.

More participants (N=221, 38.5%), however, were found to be against the claim that some English accents are superior to others and their reasons were captured essentially by the following remarks:

The ultimate purpose of learning a language is to communicate with others. As long as you can communicate successfully with others, you have achieved your goal and accent is not a big deal. (S383)

English accent is influenced by your own cultural environment and your mother tongue. But it doesn't mean that some English accents are better than others. It's just that people around the world have stereotypical mindset of StE accents. Culture is unique, so is English accent. (S432)

Communication efficacy and mother tongue influence are two primary key themes instilled from their comments. What is inferred from their contrasting attitudes is the tension between the traditional EFL perspective characterised by its deep-entrenched StE ideology and the ELF perspective that acknowledges language speakers' bi-/multilingual background and their dynamic and multifaceted identities. This finding also coincides with the major conflicts in ELT in mainland China: Should we continue to defer to the prescriptive NES norms and principles or face the linguistic reality that the main goal for Chinese people learning English is more often than not to communicate with NNESs from different L1 communities, which highlights mutual accommodation other than strict adherence to NES standards? Or should we strive to rid ourselves of any L1-related influence, or interference, so as to avoid the stigmatised fossilisation or to treat them as identity markers in the process of laying equal claim on the language? The extent to which these conflicts are to be resolved depends largely on how much people's attitudes have changed. Any attempt at shifting language planning, language policy making, and the provision of teaching materials will go in vein unless people's attitudes are in favour of such changes (Baker, 1992).

5. *How do you feel about your own English accent?*

Nearly one half (N=277, 48.3%) of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their own English accents (cf. Fang, 2016; Lee et al., 2013), and approximately one in ten of them expressed strong dissatisfaction. Less than a quarter (N=138, 24%) of the participants held positive evaluations of their own English accents, and another 159 participants (27.7%) were reluctant to voice their opinions.

Interestingly, participants with overseas experiences were found to have more positive evaluations of their English accents (Mean=3.38) than those who did not have such experiences (Mean=2.68). And this difference was of statistical significance after running an independent t-test, and its effect size, given Cohen's $d=0.825$, is large. This finding echoes Dewaele and McCloskey's (2015) and Wang and Jenkins' (2016) results which stated that people's familiarity with different accents has an influence on their acceptance and positive evaluations of different varieties of English, including English varieties of their own.

6. *How do you describe your own English accent?*

Responses retrieved from this open-ended question were generally in line with the statistical findings in Question 5. A considerable number of the participants tended to have a rather negative description of their own English accents. Through running exact matches via Nvivo 11.0, "Accent" was counted to appear 263 times out of 574 responses and one third of its appearance went with "Chinese", which in most cases was perceived as an unwelcoming marker of a failed language learner. "Standard" appeared 152 times

usually in a disapproving tone, such as “*not standard*”, “*not quite standard*”, “*not standard at all*” etc. “Mixed” (74 times) was often employed to describe their English accents as either “*mixed with British and American accents*”, or “*mixed with British, American and Chinese accents*”. Even if in rare cases that a handful of participants expressed satisfaction with their own English accents, they would most likely stress that they would “*strive to get closer to StE accent*”.

English, in view of this, is still being perceived as a foreign language by a majority of the participants who are in a sense ill-informed of the status quo of the development of English. It is thus understandable that NESs and NES norms would continue to assume benchmark roles and to be perceived as the default point of reference as long as the participants continue to label themselves as “perennial and error-prone” language learners (Zheng, 2013, p. 358). Changes in the participants’ attitude and their language awareness, however, can be expected once their ELF experiences increase.

7. *What kind of English accent would you like to aspire to?*

Unsurprisingly 92.7% (N=532) of the participants aspired to attain NES accents, British or American English accent in particular. This result is shared by most English language learners, especially learners from the Expanding Circle countries (Buckingham, 2015; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). We also note that 21 participants would like to maintain their own English accents and another 19 participants claimed to aspire to other English accents which, as detailed in their comments, were neither British nor American English accent, but English accents “*that facilitate smooth communication while maintaining their personal or national characteristics*”. Despite the small percentage of the participants, to them English is more than a target of acquisition, but something “capable of expressing aspects” of their personal and “social identity” (Jenkins, 2003, p. 143).

8. *What kind of English accent do you think teachers should teach to Chinese students?*

Participants were allowed to choose more than one option in this survey question in accordance with their personal understanding and preference. The number of the ticked options (N=684) is thus larger than the total number of the participants (N=574). What remains unchanged is the prominent position accorded to NES accents. 94.9% (545/574) of the participants chose either British or American English accent as the most preferable model of instruction. On the other hand, 139 participants gave their considerations to other English accent models, which again signals that, if nothing else, there appears to be an increase of language awareness and a potential challenge of rigid conformity to NES norms and principles on the part of the participants. This may be accounted for by the fact that the choice of a NES model, from its very beginning, is “in fact not a real choice” but “a result of a lack of alternatives” (He & Zhang, 2010).

Conclusion

This research explored perceptions toward different English accents and how these different accents were appropriated as identity markers within the framework of ELF. The findings from the large-scale questionnaire survey revealed both ambivalence about participants’ attitudes toward different English accents and a dilemma about projecting their L1-Chinese identity. On the one hand, StE varieties, in particular British and American English varieties, were still upheld by a majority of the participants as the most familiar, the most preferred, the most desirable, and the most appropriate models of instruction due to the ingrained StE ideology and the ongoing StE-centered pedagogy. And Chinese-accented and other NNES-accented English varieties were, in agreement

with our assumption, often perceived as indicators of failed language learners against the popular theory of SLA and thus were reluctantly being identified with. On the other hand, the growing awareness of linguistic rights and user identity, which demonstrates itself in questioning benchmark roles accorded to StE varieties, endorsing L1-Chinese identity, highlighting pragmatic needs in communication, etc., was found to be embraced by a small percentage of the participants, especially by those who had overseas experiences.

The over-arching problem facing ELT in mainland China, drawing on this research, is similar to the one haunting Europe decades ago (Van Essen, 1997), which is the tension between English as a lingua franca and English as a foreign language. The former emphasises communicative competence and accommodation strategies more than perfect mastery of linguistic knowledge and cultural studies of NES varieties (Seidlhofer, 2011). The latter, by contrast, categorises ill-/non-conformity to NES norms and principles as well as ignorance of NES culture (British culture, in the case of European countries; British and American culture, in China's case) as indicators of undermining the purity of that language (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011). At an age that English is in an urgent need of being exploited as a means of expressing national culture and value systems, how can these be fulfilled if English continues to be perceived as a foreign language whose culture and value systems have to be identified with? We argue, therefore, that the time is more than ripe now to consider seriously the replacement of the ongoing EFL paradigm with an ELF model. The reasons are based on the fact that the EFL paradigm which builds on a deficit model disempowers English language learners by measuring their linguistic competence against NES norms and standards (Seidlhofer, 2009). In stark contrast, the ELF paradigm, which acknowledges NNESS's bi-/multilingual background, empowers them to enact their freedom in using English, and prioritises sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discourse strategies of negotiation against the backdrop of a heterogeneous English speech community (Canagarajah, 2006).

It is undoubtedly an uphill battle before the full implementation of the ELF paradigm into ELT pedagogy in mainland China. However, English language learners', or ELF users' legitimate rights can be attended to in a step-by-step manner, for example, through making informed decisions about the types of English accent that they wish to acquire.

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