

Chinese Speakers' Attitudes Towards Their Own English: ELF or Interlanguage

By Ying Wang

The globalisation of English has motivated the research into English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the debate concerning non-native English speakers' (NNESS') own English. Despite the scholarly justification of NNESS' variations from native English, how users of non-native Englishes perceive their own English is crucial in the discussion of linguistic pluricentricity. This paper sets out to investigate Chinese speakers' perceptions of their own English in order to offer insights into this issue. The findings reveal a positive sign of the consciousness of ELF in the participants' language attitudes and indicate that further efforts are needed to raise awareness of the changing role of English in the on-going process of globalisation.

Introduction

The globalisation of English highlights the role of English as a global lingua franca. An increasing consensus that English belongs to all those who use it (Cogo, 2008; Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 236) poses challenge to the presumption that native English is "the final basis of correctness judgements" (Ammon, 2000, p. 113) and questions the relevance of English as a native language (ENL) for ELF speakers (Jenkins, 2000). Research into ELF offers insights into non-native English speakers' (NNESS') Englishes in terms of their linguistic regularities, pragmatics and functions as well as situational process of intercultural communication via their Englishes, suggesting that English is shaped by NNESS (Cogo and Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). Yet, language users' attitudes serve as a principal factor for linguistic legitimacy (Jenkins, 2007; Bamgbose, 1998). It is thus a pressing task to investigate NNESS' own perceptions of English as used by them in intercultural communication. This paper proceeds to find out whether Chinese speakers see their own English as an interlanguage within the traditional framework of reference to ENL or an autonomous

language equal to ENL in line with the new research paradigm known as ELF.

English as a lingua franca

The discussion of ELF inevitably touches upon its distinction from English as a foreign language (EFL) (see e.g. Jenkins, 2006, Jenkins, 2014, Swan, 2012, Seidlhofer, 2011, Widdowson, 2013). According to Jenkins (2014), EFL relates to the discourse in the system of modern foreign languages, which highlights the origin of English among NESs and implies NESs' authority over those who have other first language backgrounds. By contrast, ELF follows the paradigm of global Englishes, which acknowledges the pluricentricity of English and highlights linguistic equality among speakers from all over the world using English in different ways.

The two paradigms point to different perspectives on NNESS' variations from ENL (Jenkins, 2014, Seidlhofer, 2011). While EFL is associated with a deficit perspective, ELF is linked with a difference one. The former follows the presumption that the closer NNESS' English is to ENL the better (Jenkins, 2006), taking NNESS' variations as errors. In a

difference perspective, NNESS' performance is evaluated with the focus on the function of their linguistic output, whether native-like or non-native-like. Correspondingly, some variations considered as unacceptable on the EFL paradigm take new lives on the ELF paradigm. For example, L1 transfer/interference is conceived as NNESS' identity marker, code-switching/code-mixing as part of bilingual resources.

However, ELF does not suggest that 'anything goes'. While formulaic correctness is irrelevant in ELF communication, appropriateness is an important indicator of successful ELF performance. NNESSs adopt certain forms of English according to communicative contexts and their interlocutors so that they can achieve their purposes of communication. In this regard, empirical research has uncovered some functions of NNESS' variations from ENL, such as identification, communicative efficiency and a sense of humour (see e.g. Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). The findings challenge the traditional judgement on NES variations as indicators of a lack of control in English proficiency and reinterpret them as alternations of NES repertoire in ELF users' performative resources (Jenkins, 2000; Wang, 2013). Here are a few examples of the patterns of NNESS' Englishes (e.g. Cogo and Dewey, 2012):

- 'Dropping' the third person present tense – *s*
- Inserting 'redundant' prepositions, as in *We have to study about...*
- 'Overusing' certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as *do, have, make, put, take*

The acknowledgment of the value of NNESS' variations touches upon NNESS' linguistic rights. Widdowson's (1994) discussion of the ownership of English challenges the exclusive control of English by NESs and lends support to NNESS' right to English. As Widdowson (2003, p. 35) points out, English in its spread is "seeded" among NNESSs, but not "ceded" to them. That is, while NNESSs are not passive receivers of ENL that is passed over to them, it is wrong to think that NESs should passively conform to what "belongs" to NESs. Instead,

NNESSs actively make English their own and they are entitled to do so.

In addition, the centrality of NESs in use of English vis-à-vis the neglect over NNESSs' active role in the spread of English is problematic in that it treats *the* English, i.e. ENL, as a decontextualized entity, which seems to be a one-for-all solution in spite of differences between ELF contexts and NES contexts and, in turn, the speakers' responses to different settings. To borrow Mair's (2003, p. xi) point, the entity is sanctioned through the form of "decontextualized structural systems which can be described by listing their phonetic, grammatical and lexical features". The focus on formulaic conformity to ENL thus reifies the entity view, which clearly conflicts with the nature of language. As Garrett (2010) notes, the intention to fix a sociolinguistic phenomenon which is changeable in itself is implausible.

In short, the notion of ELF highlights the flexibility of language, the context of language use and linguistic equality among different users, highlighting the meaning of language in its interactive process and in its social contexts.

The data

This paper draws on the data retrieved through semi-structured interviews with 35 Chinese speakers of English. Twelve of them were university students who majored in English and included both undergraduates and postgraduates; another 12 were university students who were non-English majors and comprised of only postgraduates; the rest 11 were professionals who used English in daily jobs to different extent. As the purpose of the qualitative research was to investigate language attitudes among Chinese speakers, the sample was drawn with the intention to be informative rather than representative.

Some prompts were prepared but no specific questions were stipulated for the interviews, so as to let the participants lead the flow of conversation. The prompts included: their linguistic experience, their attitudes/perceptions/views related to English/their own English/native speakers' English/Chinese speakers' English, whether they were aware of different Englishes, whether they were aware of the function of English as a global lingua franca, their anticipation related to English

teaching/learning activities. All interviews were conducted in Chinese to create free and easy atmosphere for the conversation with the participants. The excerpts used in this paper are thus translations from Chinese conversations.

All participants received a research information sheet explaining that this project was focused on their views of English used by Chinese speakers (Wang, 2012). While the term of ‘English as a lingua franca’ was not included in the information sheet, the data provided by the participants was interpreted by the researcher with the focus on whether their view of Chinese speakers’ English reflected a traditional Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective or an ELF perspective.

Most participants expressed their views of Chinese speakers’ English, which were coded as either interlanguage or successful language. A few participants reported to have difficulties in making comments on Chinese speakers’ English. For them, Chinese speakers’ English could not be considered as ‘a’ describable English. They seemed to be cautious about making comments on Chinese speakers’ English in general. Given this, I asked them about their feelings of their own English or their friends/peers/colleagues’ English. Their evaluation pointed to either interlanguage or successful language.

An interlanguage

A common theme was that NNEs were in the process of approaching the ultimate goal for native-like English. To put it differently, Chinese speakers’ English was associated with the concept of interlanguage. Various metaphors were used to describe Chinese speakers’ English. For example, LJ compared Chinese speakers’ English as 副产品 (a by-product derived from a manufacturing process), (电影) 花絮 (outtakes and bloopers which will be removed in the final cut for a film) and (发展) 瓶颈 (development bottleneck), suggesting that Chinese speakers will eventually break through the ‘bottleneck’ and

reach the goal. By using the metaphors 副产品 and (电影) 花絮, LJ emphasized that Chinese speakers’ English was not *the* desired “product” or successful “take” but an unwelcomed outcome, which would eventually be abandoned, in Chinese speakers’ way to their target, that is, native English as the desired product and successful “take” in LJ’s view. With the metaphor 夹生饭 (under-cooked rice), TR argued that Chinese speakers’ English was not disastrous but neither was it desirable. CZ described it as 婴儿的英语 (baby’s English), suggesting that Chinese speakers should work hard to develop their proficiency in English in order to reach near-native English competence. All these metaphors were used to suggest that Chinese speakers’ English would eventually be replaced by native-like English if they made more efforts. Moreover, some participants made clear that “native Englishes” were set to be the “ultimate goal”. As JF assumed, “everyone is working towards the same ultimate goal”, i.e. native Englishes. In ZB’s words, the more you were close to native Englishes, the better your English was.

Whereas the participants gave favourable comments on native Englishes, the negative views prevailed and implied that Chinese speakers’ English was bad. For example, JF felt frustrated with the belief that an NNE “might not be able to reach the goal in the end”. ZL, another participant, associated Chinese speakers’ English with “anything goes”. It is therefore not surprising that some participants felt unhappy with their own English although they reported to have experience of communicating successfully with foreigners.

A successful language

Despite the widespread perception of Chinese speakers’ English as an interlanguage, a few participants saw Chinese speakers’ English as a successful English. For example, TR made unprompted comments on some Chinese speakers’ English as follows:

Extract 1

- | | | |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | TR | Their English might be, if we compare their English with the standard, I mean |
| 2 | | the authentic English, their English is very bad. But they have no problem in |
| 3 | | communication at all. |

While TR realised the gap of Chinese speakers' English in "authenticity view", he shifted his focus by using "but" and stressed the

achievement of Chinese speakers with the phrase "no problem ... at all". A similar view was found in WB's interview:

Extract 2

- | | | |
|----|----|--|
| 1 | WB | Around me, those who can speak quite well are those who often work with |
| 2 | | foreigners. They can express themselves smoothly, either when they are on |
| 3 | | the phone, or when they talk face to face with foreigners. For example, |
| 4 | | when we are in exhibition fair. They speak English fluently. But if you ask me |
| 5 | | how accurate their pronunciation or something is, few of them can qualify. |
| 6 | R | So, would you, en, feel, say, admire those (who speak native-like English), or |
| 7 | | would you feel, this is nothing special? |
| 8 | WB | I cannot say I would admire them. Everybody has different jobs and meets |
| 9 | | different customers, and therefore needs different skills. There's nothing |
| 10 | | special. |
| 11 | R | So you mean you won't- |
| 12 | WB | -speaking of English, such a thing, you know, in Saige Plaza in Guangdong, a |
| 13 | | well-known electronic market in China [...]You would see the market full of |
| 14 | | foreigners, who are doing business with the Chinese dealers there. Most of the |
| 15 | | time, they only use a few simple English expressions. You know how to say |
| 16 | | the product in English. Then, when they negotiate prices, they used the |
| 17 | | calculators. They just press the numbers. How much is the annual turnover in |
| 18 | | Saige? Massive. |

WB talked about his observation of successful ELF communication between Chinese businessmen and foreigners. He disagreed to link good users of English exclusively with native-like users of English. He first gave examples of his colleagues who did not have "accurate" pronunciation (line 5) but spoke English "quite well" (line 1). When the researcher pushed him with the question whether he would admire people who could speak native-like English, he gave more examples of business dealers. His focus was on the achievement of Chinese speakers who, in his view, did not speak native-

like English. To put differently, Chinese speakers' English was evaluated as to whether it helped to achieve communicative purpose and to get things done. Chinese speakers' English was not connected with the idea of interlanguage but a successful language which helped to realise business transaction.

Apart from the examples of common people, ZB, a non-English major, used the examples of Chinese celebrities and governmental officers to illustrate his view that non-native-like use of English helped to achieve communication:

Extract 3

- | | | |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | ZB | But do you think Shui Junyi's English is good? His pronunciation is not |
| 2 | | correct at all. It is actually very bad. But his communications with |
| 3 | | foreigners are very fluent. This is what I meant. |

Notably, all of the participants who acknowledged the achievement of Chinese speakers of English used seemingly negative words, for example, “bad” and “incorrect”, to describe the achievers’ English. This might suggest that different evaluation criteria co-existed in the commenters’ mind. One criterion, as pointed out by TR (see Extract 1), is the traditional view of authentic English. Another criterion was the achievement of ELF communicative purposes. Importantly, however, those participants were likely to give emphasis on the achievement of Chinese speakers in intercultural encounters. In this sense, their focus seemed to undermine the traditionally SLA based view of ‘deviant’ English as used by Chinese speakers and challenge the label of ‘interlanguage’. This supports Seidlhofer’s (2011) argument that ELF is functionally motivated.

Conclusion

Since Chinese people’s first contact with English language in 1637 when the first British mercantile ships arrived in Canton and Macau (see Bolton 2003), the role of English has changed from a foreign language to a lingua franca for Chinese speakers, with the expansion of English into their life and their domains of English use day by day. This study, however, demonstrates a gap between the sociolinguistic reality of English and Chinese speakers’ perception of this language. The data presents not only a traditional view of Chinese speakers’ English as an interlanguage but also fresh perspective on their English as a successful language in Chinese speakers’ perspective. While the widespread aspiration for ENL and negative attitudes towards Chinese speakers’ own English combine to suggest the need to boost the understanding of English in its sociolinguistic reality, the focus on communicative effects was a positive sign of the influence of the changing English on Chinese speakers’ perceptions of this language. This suggests the need for language teachers to help learners of English to develop their language competence related to the use of this language that fits in the real life situation. The dilemma emerged in this paper about ‘bad’ but ‘useful’ English suggests the need to raise language awareness of Chinese learners/speakers of English through explicit explanation

of ELF concept so that they can see the difference between interlanguage and ELF and, further, develop their confidence in using their own English for intercultural communication.

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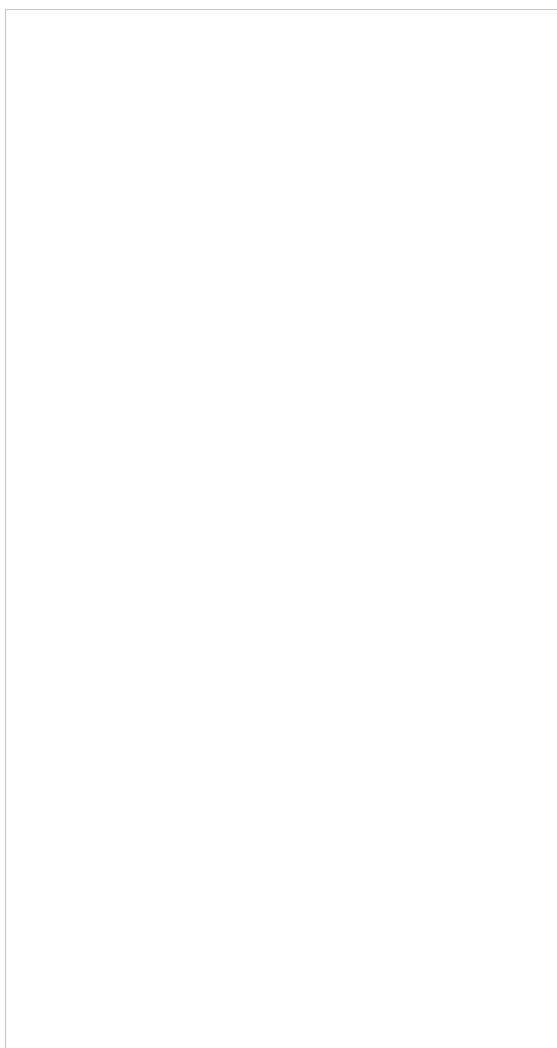
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