**“Nativeness” and intelligibility: Impacts of intercultural experience through English as a lingua franca on Chinese speakers’ language attitudes**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the impacts of intercultural experience through English as a lingua franca (ELF) on language attitudes, with the focus on Chinese speakers’ narratives of ELF experience in relation to their views of Englishes. The data retrieved through 769 questionnaires and 35 interviews with Chinese users of English revealed the impacts in four aspects. First, the lack of ELF experience helps to maintain the assumption that conformity to native English is necessary for interactants to understand each other. Second, ELF experience triggers the question about the exclusive connection between nativeness and intelligibility. Third, it raises challenges to the exclusive relevance of native English for successful intercultural communication. Fourth, it helps to develop an awareness of intercultural communication strategies as important for communicative effectiveness in the context of the diversity of English. Attitudes revealed in the four aspects all point to a concern with the issue what is intelligible English. This paper thus discusses intelligibility in relation to (non-)nativeness and the role of intercultural experience in making sense of the issue of intelligibility, which leads to the exploration of pedagogical implications of this study.

“本族语特性”与可理解性：浅析跨文化交际中英语作为通用语的使用经历对中国英语使用者的语言态度之影响

**摘要**

本文旨在考察以使用英语作为通用语的跨文化交际对于语言态度的影响，着眼于中国的英语使用者如何描述跨文化交际中的英语使用，从而探讨中国使用者如何看待多种英语。研究数据涉及769份问卷调查以及35个访谈，表明了在跨文化交际中使用英语作为通用语的经历会从四个方面对研究对象的语言态度产生影响。首先，缺乏跨文化交际体验，会促使人迷信英语本族语使用规范是保证跨文化交流的必须条件；其次， 跨文化交际中使用英语作为通用语的经历能够激励研究对象去质疑本族语特性与可理解性之间的必然联系；再次，跨文化交际中的英语使用经历促使人去审视本族语英语与成功的跨文化交际之间的绝对相关性；最后，跨文化交际中的英语使用经历有助于培养跨文化交际策略意识,继而成功应对英语多样化环境中的跨文化交际。这四个方面所表现出来的语言态度都折射出研究对象对于什么是可理解的英语的考虑。本文考虑了语言的可理解性与（非）本族语特性之间的联系，以及跨文化交际在理解这种联系中所起的作用，从而探讨对教学的启示。

Keywords: nativeness, intelligibility, English as a lingua franca, Chinese speakers, narrative, intercultural experience, language attitudes, pedagogical implications

**1. Introduction**

English is now serving as a lingua franca used by people from all over the world today (Canagarajah, 2006; Ha, 2009; Jenkins, 2000, 2007, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2006, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004, 2011). The globalization of English presents us with a sociolinguistic profile that non-native English speakers (NNESs) greatly outnumber native English speakers (NESs). While English has traditionally been associated with NESs’ norms, the question who speaks English today has motivated scholarly concern for “a state of delicate balance” existing between NNESs as the majority of English knowing population and NESs as the source of authority in English language (Jenkins, 2015a; Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 209). A considerable body of literature has been devoted to the argument that NNESs use English in their own way to suit their own purposes, such as identity projection, communicative efficiency, solidarity and sense of humor (Cogo & Jenkins, 2010; Jenkins, 2012; Kaur, 2009). Challenges are thus posed to the status quo whereby NESs are presumably exclusive “owners” of English and therefore norm providers of English. With the focus on ELF users’ English in its own terms, researchers have uncovered how ELF users, instead of conforming to established norms of English, adapt their way of using English to cope with international communication in various contexts (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). The research in ELF offers insights into how the relationship is established between form and function in ELF users’ own Englishes and challenges the assumption that effective communication in English relies on conformity to the norms of Standard native English (Seiflhofer, 2011; c.f. Quirk, 1990).

Undoubtedly, the scholarly insights into the development of ELF have implications for English education in the NNESs’ contexts. Given that the unprecedented global spread of English has caused changes to the role of English for NNESs in intercultural encounters (Jenkins, 2015a; Seidlhofer, 2011), it is time to rethink the subject matter of English education today (Jenkins, 2012; Widdowson, 2003). However, while scholarly debates challenges the exclusive equation between “nativeness” and effective communication (e.g., Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011), it is important to understand how NNESs perceive native English as their reference in the context of English globalization so as to offer the most immediate implications for English classrooms. As Ha (2009, p. 201) claims, while NNESs are in the periphery and NESs at the center, the peripheral “voices must be heard, not assumed.”

Given the large number of Chinese learners and users of English, this paper focuses on the investigation into Chinese perceptions of native English in order to shed light on ELT in NNES contexts. Previous research has demonstrated a widespread aspiration for NES norms-based English among Chinese speakers (Evans, 2010; He & Li, 2009; He & Miller, 2011; Hu, 2004, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Li, 2009; Wang, 2013). Among the very few published studies that address the reasons behind the aspiration for native English, Li (2009) reports a questionnaire study demonstrating that intelligibility and identity are two factors underlying Chinese speakers’ attitudes towards NES norm-based English. Wang (2013) looks into the exonormative orientations of Chinese participants in her study and considers three contributing factors, which include the belief in the centrality of NESs in providing norms of English use, the conceptualization of English as a fixed entity and the aspiration for symbolic capital. The said two studies suggest that Chinese speakers and learners’ aspiration for native English relates to the assumption that only native English satisfies their need for the use of English. In Kramsch’s (2009, p. 9) words, the “myth” of native English “manipulates.”

A recent paper (Wang 2015a) reports on Chinese university students’ attitude change in focus groups and argues that the awareness of ELF and experience of ELF contribute to the shift from a monolingual perspective to a multilingual one. Nevertheless, our understanding of the role of ELF experience in shaping language attitudes is sporadic. In Jenkins’s (2007) research, participants report to be influenced by the feedback they received on their English, whereas Kalocsai (2009) finds that ELF experience motivates ELF users to resist the notion that English enables them to align with NESs, as her participants tend to identify themselves as members of international communities. Ehrenreich (2009) considers students and teachers as language-focused users of English and professionals as content-focused users, claiming that content-focused users attach less importance to the conformity to native English norms. Among the very few studies focusing on Chinese speakers’ language attitude change, Gao and her team (2012) investigate Chinese university students’ language attitude change through their work as voluntary helpers during the Olympic Games in 2008. The four-year working experience is found to have impacts on Chinese university students’ identity projection, witnessing those students’ identification and re-identification during the work period. As Gao and her team (2012) point out, those students develop from imitators of native English speakers to legitimate speakers of their own English and further to communicators engaging with intercultural communities on the equal footing with native English speakers. Nevertheless, more needs to be explored. It remains to be understood how Chinese speakers perceive the form-function relationship in English, given the heated debates on this issue in ELF research (e.g., Cogo, 2008; Saraceni, 2008), and how their awareness of how English works can be developed in experience. This study focuses on Chinese university students and professionals respectively in terms of their views of English, with particular attention to their linguistic experience in relation to their understanding of English-related linguistic intelligibility.

Towards this end, we shall discuss the relationship between nativeness and effective communication, with the focus on Chinese speakers’ views of native English. We shall also describe the background of this study before we present the methodology and the analysis of the participants’ narratives of their linguistic experience in relation to their language attitudes. This paper will then discuss the impacts of ELF experience on language attitudes and make pedagogical suggestions.

**2. (Non-)nativeness and effective communication**

Traditional second language acquisition (SLA) research steers towards the goal that NNESs should develop what Chomsky (1965) describes as ideal native speaker competence. Nevertheless, the spread of English poses challenge to this undertaking. It has given birth to different Englishes and brought to the fore the debates on (non-)nativeness of English.

Some linguists question the assumption that native English is the ideal choice for intercultural communication and make a vigorous argument that native English is irrelevant for ELF communications (e.g., Jenkins, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011). While native English is associated with idealized monolingual native English speech communities, ELF communication takes place in multilingual contexts where people from different first language backgrounds use English to communicate and they use English to suit the social contexts which might not resemble the contexts where ideal native English speaker-hearer communication happens (Seidlhofer, 2011). The scholarly debate underpins the meaning of sociolinguistic context for language use, with the focus on appropriateness rather than correctness in linguistic performance. Halliday (1997, p. 31) adopts a sociolinguistic perspective and argues that language includes “a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behavior that are available to the individual in his existence as social man.” In his view, the context justifies “any particular selection that is made” by a language user from the available choices (Halliday 1997, p. 31). In this sense, the exclusive orientation towards native English is problematic given its limitation on language users’ choices of linguistic forms, that is, only “correct” forms, which conform to native English norms.

Some linguists take issue with such a monolingual focus on English and argue that multilingual perspectives should be appreciated in English language education in various contexts (e.g., Galloway & Rose, 2014; Jenkins, 2015b; Wang, 2013). A monolingual focus on native English relates to the presumption described in Seidlhofer (2011, p. 64) that “English is English is their [i.e., native English speakers’] English” and *the* English that suits all contexts of English use and all purposes (Seidlhofer, 2011; original emphasis). Among other initiatives, Hall (2014, pp. 376-377) makes it explicit that “Standard English is not the language itself” and claims the need for language testing to move beyond the focus on linguistic criteria to address the “effectiveness of resources” that learners draw on to address their purposes of using English. Jenkins (2015b) theorizes ELF by adopting a multilingual approach. In line with this approach, her study on a reputed international university questions the status quo that Standard native English serves exclusively as the reference for language practice and assessment (Jenkins, 2014). Her major argument is that international students are from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and, thus, their language needs are diversified and go beyond native speakers’ English (Jenkins, 2014).

A major argument in favor of nativeness of English is that conforming to native English is necessary for effective communication or intelligibility in communication. As Seidlhofer (2011, p. 50) makes explicit, however, this argument is “not tenable.” Given the space limit, we would like to summarize the counterarguments here. First, NNESs have their right to use English creatively and to have their own Englishes (Jenkins, 2007; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2003). While English belongs to all those who use it, the phenomenon that non-native English speakers are making English their own and are changing English should be respected instead of being criticized. Second, NNESs are open to all communicative resources available to them and communicative resources go beyond native English forms (Seidlhofer, 2011). It follows that NNESs’ linguistic repertoire includes native-like English, non-native-like English, ELF users’ first languages, and other forms that enable ELF communication. Third, effective communication is not guaranteed by conforming to established norms; rather, it is realized through flexible use of English according to the situation where English is used (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). Fourth, successful intercultural communication reveals the use of some intercultural communicative strategies, such as repetition, clarification, accommodation, intercultural awareness and so on, although these strategies do not make ELF users’ English native-like (Baker, 2015; Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2000, 2007). Fifth, intelligibility is an attitudinal thing. That is, attitudes play an important role in evaluating the intelligibility of forms of English that do not conform to native English norms (Jenkins, 2006, 2007, 2009). In short, the growing knowledge about ELF challenges the presumed link between nativeness of English and effectiveness of international communication.

3**. Background**

China has long received the legacy of English as a foreign language since the early contact with English. Bolton’s work (2003) provides an insight into the development of English education in China, which can be traced back as early as the 17th century when English speakers including businessmen, missionaries and colonizers came mainly from Britain and America to China. With an attempt to “convert the Chinese,” missionaries built up schools and colleges and started English education. From within China, the Chinese government and people started to realize the importance of English in acquiring advanced knowledge and new technology (Bolton, 2003, p. 230). Such a historical context, which steered the Chinese desire for formal English education (Bolton, 2003), ushered monolingual native English-oriented English education in China, with native English-speaking missionaries as major providers of English education. In contemporary time, whereas English was foreign to most of the Chinese, a number of Chinese speakers who were regarded as language elites of society had encounters with the English language in their jobs (Pride & Liu, 1998). Yet, the English-speaking interlocutors they encountered were mostly NESs. Put differently, over a long time in the history of English in China, the context where Chinese speakers were situated featured the use of English by a small number of Chinese speakers to communicate mainly with NESs.

Since the start of the 21st century, English has become a widely used language accessible to many users from China and contributed to the language resources owned by Chinese users of English. Code-switching frequently occurs among Chinese speakers. Chinese speakers use English for intercultural purposes oriented towards people from all over the world, among whom a growing number of users of English come from other countries than native English speaking countries. That is, the context where Chinese speakers and learners of English are situated features the increasing use of English as the chosen medium of communication between Chinese and other first language speakers, such as holiday makers and conference delegates from Japan, France, Middle East, just to name a few. As suggested by Gao and her team’s study (2012), the boundary between “users” and “learners” is getting blurred given the increasing engagement with English in China.

The changing context of English illuminating the changing role and function of English for Chinese speakers, however, urges us to reflect on native English, which, as Wen (2012) observes, is still exclusively favored in formal education. In this respect, Xu (2002) suggests the need for a shift from teaching EFL to teaching ELF. At a more conceptual level, ELF researchers (e.g., Jenkins, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011) challenge the notion that native English, which is used in monolingual native English contexts, is the golden rule for intercultural communication, which often takes place in multilingual contexts. Clearly, what makes certain use of English appropriate depends on the very contexts where the language is used, whereas it becomes problematic to adhere to the norms of English that are generated in America, Britain or other native-English-speaking contexts. Nonetheless, the scholarly work on and insight into ELF (e.g., papers published in the *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*) have “very limited and weak” impacts on English education in China (Wen, 2012, p. 372). These clearly suggest a gap between English in sociolinguistic reality and English in classrooms. Following many applied linguists (e.g., McKay, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 2003), who emphasize the usefulness of the learned subject for real life, this paper proceeds to consider ways of making language classroom more ELF-relevant in China.

**4. Methodology**

The data underpinning this paper were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were administrated in a university and a number of workplaces in China, such as foreign trade companies, international marketing departments in Chinese enterprises, international liaison offices of some China-based organizations and institutions, and Chinese-foreign joint ventures. In this paper, participants from student background are identified as S and those from professional background are identified with P. After screening, 769 questionnaires were accepted for data analysis (Wang, 2012, 2013).

The interview participants were recruited on the basis of screening questionnaires (Wang, 2012, 2013), including 12 English major students and 12 non-English major students from a Chinese university. The English majors included both undergraduate and graduate students. Non-English majors were all graduate students, for whom English was necessary for the purpose of academic study. Another 11 participants were recruited among Chinese professionals whose job duties included communication with foreigners when the fieldwork was conducted, although some of them reported to use English more frequently than others. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on how much information the participants would like to contribute.

As Kvale (1996) points out, researchers use interviews to conduct the in-depth exploration of the issues that make sense to the subjects and to understand the themes by drawing upon the contexts of conversations. Efforts were made to keep the interview conversations natural and easy for the participants and, simultaneously, make the conversations informative for the interviewer. For example, probes rather than questions were prepared; conversations followed the participants’ flow; and Mandarin Chinese was adopted for the interviews, although some participants switched freely between Chinese and English at times during the interviews. The data presented in this paper are translated from the original Chinese version.

**5. The data**

**5.1 The questionnaire data**

At the outset, the questionnaire survey revealed the respondents’ views of “who speaks English today” (Jenkins, 2015a). All the respondents were asked to rank their interlocutors with whom they use English to communicate. They were also asked to rank potential interlocutors with whom they expected to communicate in the future. Possible interlocutors were categorized as Chinese speakers, NESs and other speakers of English. The figures for the rankings are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1. *Ranking of interlocutors with whom the respondents use English to communicate***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Chinese | NESs | Others |
| Students | 1 | 353 (70%) | 143 (28%) | 5 (1%) |
| 2 | 120 (24%) | 299 (60%) | 62 (12%) |
| 3 | 29 (6%) | 60 (12%) | 435 (87%) |
| Total | 502 (100%) | 502 (100%) | 502 (100%) |
| Professionals | 1 | 131 (49%) | 103 (39%) | 35 (13%) |
| 2 | 72 (27%) | 112 (42%) | 48 (18%) |
| 3 | 64 (24%) | 52 (19%) | 184 (69%) |
| Total | 267 (100%) | 267 (100%) | 267 (100%) |

As seen in Table 1, 1% of the students and 13% of the professionals ranked NNESs as the interlocutors they used English to communicate with most frequently. That is to say, the student respondents reported rarely having contact with NNESs, while the professionals had more contact with NNESs. The figures were surprising in that so few student respondents had the experience of using English to communicate with NNESs, given the context where they were situated in. The university under study had around 1,000 overseas students on the roll, most of whom were from NNES contexts, such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Korea, Japan and Nepal. On the other hand, the student respondents were recruited among English major undergraduates and non-English major postgraduates, who were supposed to have intention to use English in real life situations. The student participants’ rare engagement with non-native English speakers resonates to some extent with Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér’s (2011) study in a different context. Those researchers find university students are less motivated to engage with international communities than young adults. They estimate that university students in their study have not much opportunity to either engage with the virtual global community or identify with professionals who have the motivation to work in international communities.

A look at how the questionnaire respondents ranked their potential interlocutors in the future is more revealing regarding their belief in the possibility of communicating with NNESs in English (see Table 2).

**Table 2. *Ranking of interlocutors with whom the respondents expect to use English to communicate***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Chinese | NESs | Others |
| Students | 1 | 172 (34%) | 314 (63%) | 18 (4%) |
| 2 | 105 (21%) | 147 (29%) | 207 (41%) |
| 3 | 225 (45%) | 41 (8%) | 277 (55%) |
| Total | 502 (100%) | 502 (100%) | 502 (100%) |
| Professionals | 1 | 81 (30%) | 133 (50%) | 58 (22%) |
| 2 | 39 (15%) | 94 (35%) | 89 (33%) |
| 3 | 147 (55%) | 40 (15%) | 120 (45%) |
| Total | 267 (100%) | 267 (100%) | 267 (100%) |

Whilst 22% of the professional participants expected to use English to communicate mainly with NNESs who they would not share first language backgrounds, only 4% of the student participants expected so, and instead, 63% of them were expecting to communicate with NESs. That is to say, most of them continued to see NESs as their major interlocutors for their future international communication. This seemed to show a lack of awareness among university students of the issue “who speaks English today” and the emerging role of English as a common language for communication between those who do not share a first language. While the student respondents appeared to have much less contact with other NNESs than the professionals (see Table 1), they expected to engage with other NNESs with English as the medium of communication to a much less extent than the professionals did (see Table 2). Comparing the figures in the two tables seemed to suggest a tentative finding that less ELF experience was associated with less understanding of the role of English as the medium of communication between people who do not share a first language. This provides some general information about the participants’ views about English and its development. Yet, further look into the interview data will help to increase the understanding of ELF experience in relation to language attitudes.

**5.2 The interview data**

The interview data presented a complex and ambiguous profile of the participants’ attitudes towards native English norms. Inconsistent and contradictory statements were often found in the interviews. Such a general picture resonated with Jenkins’s (2007) study on attitudes towards NNESs’ accents of English. According to Kvale (1996), ambiguity and inconsistency in the interviews should not be simply understood as faulty communication; rather, they might manifest how the interviewee makes sense of the genuinely existing contradictions in the real world. To put it differently, the participants’ contradictory comments on issues pertaining to NES norms might give evidence to their concern with mutually conflicting factors, which feed into their decision as to whether to look at NES norms for reference in language use (Wang, 2013).

Contradictory statements made by the same participant were examined separately in different categories. For example, some participants embraced NES norms sometimes but questioned the necessity of following NES norms at other times of the interviews. While this paper focuses on the participants’ narratives of linguistic experience in relation to their linguistic attitudes, it is necessary to point out that the participants were likely to draw on either their own first-hand experience or other ELF users’ experience that they observed.

The analysis reveals four themes as to how ELF experience impacts the participants’ positions regarding whether Chinese speakers should model on native English exclusively or accept their own way of using English. What follows illustrates the themes with examples.

1. **The lack of ELF experience leads to the lack of confidence in non-standard Englishes.**

The interview data revealed that the participants who had little ELF experience held on to the assumption about native English as the exclusive reference for non-native English speakers to model on. In contrast, those who had or witnessed ELF-medium encounters tended to be more critical of the exclusive reference to native English. Still other participants appeared to be uncertain or hesitant in evaluating the role of native English as the exclusive reference points for NNESs. Our focus was on those participants who explicitly drew on linguistic experience in explaining their decision or hesitation as to whether it was necessary to follow NES norms. In general, their narratives demonstrated a link between ELF experience and confidence in non-standard Englishes. More interestingly, intelligibility emerged in their narratives as an operating factor in establishing this link.

Take S1 for example. During the conversation between the interviewer and S1, the latter was explicit about his view that intelligibility was a primary criterion of acceptability of certain linguistic forms. Simultaneously, he expressed in an indirect way his uncertainty regarding the acceptability of variations from native English:

*Example 1*

S1: The English that is intelligible should be acceptable (.) But I don’t have much experience of using English to communicate with foreigners. I don’t know whether the English like this is intelligible for them.

As seen in this example, intelligibility is a major concern that S1 has when considering the acceptability of certain linguistic forms. However, his lack of intercultural experience keeps him uncertain about the intelligibility of non-standard Englishes. A link was apparently established by S1 between real-life practices and knowledge about English. He was cautious not to be judgmental as a person without much experience of intercultural encounters. This showed certain challenge to NES ownership of English, in that he did not simply evaluate the acceptability by drawing on established norms as the taken-for-granted benchmark. His critical thinking was visible in his argument that only real-life experience could test the intelligibility of certain forms. However, the lack of real life experience kept native English a myth which he had to observe, in that there was not a way for him to test whether non-native-like English was intelligible.

1. **ELF experience helps to question a monolingual focus on native English**

In some interview participants’ view, an exclusive connection exists between intelligibility and nativeness of English. Their narratives of their experience or observation of ELF use, however, suggests that ELF experience helps to challenge the belief in such an exclusive connection and, in turn, leads to the question to presumably exclusive focus on native English. S2, for example, gave an account of his observation of ELF use. His narrative revealed how his observation undermined his assumption about communicative effectiveness and “nativeness” of English.

*Example 2*

1. S2: Sometimes I think, for example during the days of the Olympic Games, or of World Expo, many people, their grammar might be erroneous, but they could roughly express their ideas, they DID communicate.
2. Interviewer: Hmm, do you accept their way of using English?
3. S2: (.) To be honest, I don’t accept their English within my heart. But their English really worked. Why?

In this extract, S2 draws on what he saw happen to other users of ELF and indicates his puzzle why ELF users’ English did help the users to communicate. When the question (in Turn 2) about the acceptability of “erroneous” but communicative English is thrown to S2, it becomes clear in S2’s response (Turn 3) that communicative effects of “erroneous” English is a shock to S2. As seen in Turn 3, S2 hesitated for a while before he spoke; he started by confessing his rejection of the kind of English, which he described as “erroneous” but helpful in communication (Turn 1); he then made a follow-up point giving emphasis on the function of variations from Standard English. The contrast between what he assumed and what he observed is brought foreground and followed by his question “why.” This seems to suggest a transition within S2 from unawareness to awareness of the value of non-standard English, that is, “erroneous” English in S2’s words.

It might be useful to take into consideration S2’s narrative about ELF experience. His observation of other ELF users’ intercultural encounters triggered his reflection on language forms in terms of communicative effectiveness. His narrative about others’ ELF use seems to suggest that S2, as a student, had little first-hand experience of using ELF. In this sense, it is possible to infer that S2 did not know the communicative function of “erroneous” English until he witnessed that ELF users did communicate for intercultural purposes. The question he raised might suggest his puzzle upon the discovery of the communicative effects of “erroneous” English, which conflicts with his assumption. Whereas the lack of ELF encounters maintains the myth of English regarding intelligibility, it is possible to argue that ELF experience helps to break the myth and the presumably exclusive bond of native English with intelligibility. To put it another way, ELF experience helps to raise the awareness of Englishes in plural and question a monolingual focus on native English.

1. **ELF experience helps to challenge the relevance of native English for ELF communications.**

The theoretical consideration of the irrelevance of native English for intercultural communication motivated us to look at what the participants thought of the relationship between native English and ELF communication. While some participants believed that native English was key to any English-medium communication, other participants attached less importance to the pursuit for native English. The curiosity rose in terms of what might make such a difference and a few participants’ narratives of their ELF experience allowed for some understanding.

P1 was a businessman when the fieldwork was conducted. He referred to his own experience while the interviewer was asking about his attitude towards some instances of variation from native English. Interestingly, his elaboration on his attitudes towards variations resonated with many linguists’ description of the changing role of English followed by their criticism of native English monolingualism in intercultural encounters.

*Example 3*

P1: I should explain it this way. Why I keep saying “as long as you make yourself understood”? Because we are doing foreign trade. You don’t really have many encounters with British or American speakers. British and American, you see, their international influences keep dropping. We are now in the situation, to be specific, that the business partners are most likely to have come from Middle East, South America, and Asia. Each of them speaks English with the influence of his dialect, with his accent. If so, you will think it is fair enough as long as you can make yourself understood. You can’t require each of them to speak the way British or American speakers do.

P1 shows a good awareness of English in relation to its contexts. The situation that not NESs but NNESs were primary interlocutors he communicated with in English had an impact on his belief as to what kind of English was appropriate. While he observed NNES interlocutors’ non-conformity to Standard English, he made a strong point that the conformity to native English was not a reasonable pursuit (*you can’t require each of them to speak the way British or American speakers do*). He can be described as what Ehrenreich (2009) regards as content-focused users of English. His claim of the tolerability of variations from native English demonstrated his evaluation of the intelligibility of variations and his focus on the function of language. While this extract clearly exhibits P1’s dismissal of the necessity and the reasonability of striving for native English competence for the sake of intercultural communication, P1 clearly learned from his ELF experience, which seemed to account for his rebellious voices.

Many other participants indicated similar ideas of the irrelevance of native English for ELF communications, drawing on their first-hand experience or other people’s experience. For example,

*Example 4*

P2: Their English might be, if we compare their English with the standard, I mean the authentic English, their English is very bad. But they have no problem in communication at all.

This example demonstrated P2’s awareness that the same linguistic phenomenon was considered differently in different frameworks of reference, that is, the presumed rules based on “the authentic English” and the practice of ELF communication in reality. His evaluation of his colleagues’ English apparently revealed his forsakenness of traditional exornormative orientation to English and reconsideration of an emerging criterion, which was related to the issue whether certain linguistic forms made communication successful. From his confirmative tone on his colleagues’ non-standard English (*But they have no problem in communication at all*), we can see his belief that native English is not a relevant frame of reference for his colleagues’ English but the ELF users’ performance in intercultural encounters speaks for the value of their English.

In comparison with the participants who appeared to have little confidence in the intelligibility of variations from Standard English, the participants who emphasized the function of variations drew heavily on the experiences in their daily life and work. That is to say, ELF experience increases the understanding of the intelligibility, which has long been the myth in the way of embracing non-standard English.

1. **ELF experience helps to raise the awareness of intercultural communication strategies.**

A few participants in the current study believed that conformity to native English could ensure “smooth” communication, while variations, though admittedly intelligible, slowed down the process before the interlocutors reached communicative goals. This assumption motivated our pursuit of those participants’ illustration with some life experience and we found that no participants among those drew on ELF experience. By contrast, positive comments on intercultural communication strategies were made among those who drew on their life-experience when illustrating their views of English.

Example 5 manifests ELF users’ “overuse” of certain forms in English in order to make the communication comfortable for the hearer.

*Example 5*

1. P2: We’re often in such situations where they [i.e. our interlocutors] are non-native speakers of English, their (English), their (English), if compared with native speakers’ English, is more practical and simplified. We would think, this word, the interlocutor wouldn’t like to use another word, because he only knows this word, for example, the word *confirm*, he would use *confirm* all the time, not any other word, he would, for example, if you use *ensure*, he would be very annoyed, he would possibly not understand it.
2. Interviewer: So in such circumstances, you would choose-
3. P2: -Right, the word we all feel happy with. I know what *confirm* means, he knows it too. So we *confirm*.

P2 showed a good awareness of what kind of English was more readily acceptable for his interlocutors who were NNESs. With his focus on interlocutors, his concern was with certain linguistic choices in terms of their intelligibility. The interesting point is that his decision on the intelligibility was based on his judgment of his interlocutors’ reaction rather than any pre-set norms, for example, *confirm* and *ensure* as synonyms in P2’ linguistic repertoire meant the same thing. In other words, the traditional view of intelligibility as exclusively associated with native English was irrelevant for P2, who regarded on-site communicative practice as the testimony of intelligibility. For P2, accommodation is a necessary means to project solidarity between interlocutors.

Another participant, P1, clearly indicated his focus on communicative effectiveness, acknowledging that different means of communication were practical. Cross-reference to Example 3 can help to better understand P1’s experience in relation to his view that native English was irrelevant for ELF encounters:

*Example 6*

1. P1: I think Chinese speakers’ English is quite intelligible, not like Arabic speakers’ accent, wow, theirs is just difficult (to understand).
2. Interviewer: So difficult, how do you manage to understand then?
3. P1: So @@
4. Interviewer: So?
5. P1: repeat [P1’s own word in English]@@
6. Interviewer: So they “repeat”?
7. P1: If we can’t manage (to communicate orally) after all, email, @@
8. Interviewer: You mean you would try different ways in order to achieve the communication with them? Do you find that interesting?
9. P1: If you cannot understand or be understood, “pardon” [P1’s own word in English] is needed of course. Otherwise, what shall we do? There must be nothing to do with being “pleasant” [P1’s own word in English], “unpleasant” [P1’s own word in English] or “impleasant” [P1’s own word in English]. That’s communication, although none of us is a good speaker of English. We are just communicating.

P1 spontaneously drew on Arabic speakers’ English for comparison when making comments on Chinese speakers’ English. While it is inferable from Example 3 that P1 dealt with customers from Middle East successfully, it is worthwhile to investigate how he managed to communicate with Arabic speakers whose English was difficult for him to understand. As seen in his response, P1 seemed to be embarrassed with the question raised by the interviewer. His utterance was very short and filled with laughter in Turn 3. Being pushed by the interviewer (Turn 4), P1 made a brief response in English followed by laughter again (Turn 5). When the interviewer sought his confirmation with what he said, P1 stopped dodging and gave an example of the strategy that he and his Arabic customers would adopt in extreme situation that oral communication did not work at all. The interviewer’s question about his feeling of the communicative strategy that he used (*Do you find that interesting?*) seemed to be irritating for P1, who started to defend accommodation in Turn 9. By playing with the word “pleasant,” P1 seemed to suggest that linguistic forms should sever the purpose of communication rather than sticking to established forms for the sake of conformity.

The process thus reveals P1’s attitude towards accommodation. While he felt a little embarrassed for having to ask for repetition (“*pardon” is needed*), he was irritated by the doubt about the value of this strategy and further emphasized his view of communicative process, which prioritizes function over means. His view corresponds with Kaur’s (2009, p. 119) observation of her subjects: “While such [accommodation] practices to some extent disrupt the smooth flow of talk, it appears that what is of greater importance to the participants is the achievement of shared understanding.”

In short, without theoretical knowledge about intercultural communication that linguists have developed in literature, the participants who were in the field were seen to have developed certain intercultural communication strategies in linguistic practice in order to engage their interlocutors successfully. The participants’ use of real-life experience to explain how the game was played in intercultural encounters provides evidence of the influence of the participants’ ELF experience on their perceptions related to ELF.

**6. Discussion**

Intelligibility has been an issue constantly debated in terms of the acceptability of variations from Standard English (e.g., Bamgbose, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Li, 2009; Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979). As Bamgbose (1998, p. 10) notes, traditional concern for intelligibility is often associated with “a one-way process in which non-native speakers are striving to make themselves understood by native speakers whose prerogative it was to decide what is intelligible and what is not.” While the concept of intelligibility is complex and subject to the discussion by many linguists (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979), which is beyond the scope of this paper, the one-way defined intelligibility is problematic with a few issues being neglected. First, the focus on one-way process motivates the question why NNESs are supposed to take the full responsibility of making the communication successful while their NES interlocutors are free from the responsibility but act as the judges of the NNES counterparts’ Englishes. This brings home the issue of linguistic equity between NNESs and NESs. As Seidlhofer (2003) argues, NESs should learn to use ELF in order to cope with intercultural communication in that ELF is different from English used in NES communities. Lippi-Green (1994, p. 187) also argues that “communicative burden” should be shared by both parties in the communication in order to make it successful. Second, the one-way process seems to treat the hearer of the message sent by the speaker as a passive receiver who, however, would possibly interact with the hearer and use some strategies to engage the communication. As a body of research shows, ELF users interact with each other, negotiate and co-construct meaning (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2000; Mauranen, 2012). Third, considering intelligibility on the basis of NES-NNES communication overlooks the cases of NNES-NNES communication. A frequently asked question (Jenkins, 2000) seems to be relevant: why NNES interlocutors need to worry whether their Englishes are intelligible for an ideal NES hearer who is absent in the on-site communication between NNESs? In one way, the answer points to NNESs’ linguistic rights, which become even salient in the sociolinguistic reality that NNESs greatly outnumber NESs. In another way, the focus on the imaginary NES hearer regardless who is actually the hear on the communicative site points to the negligence of the context.

With the development into the research on NNESs’ use of English, predominantly by the researchers in the fields of World Englishes and ELF, the discussion of intelligibility is seen in literature to challenge the adherence to native English for the sake of intelligibility. Jenkins (2000), for instance, has proposed the concept of Lingua Franca Core, which highlights a few pronunciation features that influence mutual intelligibility among NNESs and excludes some typical native English pronunciation features which cause no intelligibility problems. She further argues that intelligibility is largely an attitudinal matter (Jenkins, 2000, 2007). This is echoed in Seidlhofer’s work (2011). As Seidlhofer (2011, p. 35) puts it, “numerous studies in anthropology, sociolinguistics, and social psychology conducted since the mid-20th century have demonstrated how attitudes influence perception and can lead to a different ‘reading’ of linguistic forms used, depending on who the speakers/writers are thought to be.” That is to say, attitudes towards users of certain forms can influence the evaluation of the forms in terms of their intelligibility. It is therefore implausible that intelligibility is exclusively tied up with native English.

Necessarily, acknowledging the impacts of attitudes on intelligibility does not imply that any forms are intelligible. The crucial point, however, is that intelligibility can be achieved through different ways. As Jenkins (2000, 2006, 2007) claims, accommodation strategies are needed to promote intelligibility. In this respect, empirical data has provided evidence to the successful utilization of different strategies in communications via ELF as opposed to EFL by NNESs (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Kaur, 2009). Those strategies include, for instance, repetition, code-switching, intercultural awareness and signaling misunderstanding (e.g., Baker, 2011; Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2006). In this sense, intelligibility does not link to the conformity to native English but lies in the adaptation to different communicative contexts and variable communicative purposes (Seidlhofer, 2011).

The current study implies that the participants had an overarching concern for intelligibility of English and that their perceptions of intelligibility moved away from the traditional covet for native English to challenge the assumption that non-standard Englishes threaten intelligibility. It also becomes clear in the data that ELF experience has impacts on the participants’ views of intelligibility in relation to linguistic creativity. As many researchers state, experience plays an important role in attitudinal development (e.g., Byrnes & Kiger, 1997; Garrett, 2010; Jay & Willis, 1992; Wang, 2015a). This point converges with Garrett’s (2010, p. 22) claim that “attitudes are learned.” According to Garrett (2010), personal experience is an important source of attitudes and observational experience also helps to shape language attitudes. The processes of “learning of attitudes” involve “noticing the behavior of other people and the consequences of that behavior” (Garrett, 2010, p. 22). That is, the observation of other people’s experience provides opportunities to develop certain perceptions related to that behavior. In the current study, intercultural experience is seen to have effects on the participants’ perceptions of English. While intelligibility appeared to be a major concern that fed into the participants’ acceptance or rejection of certain linguistic forms, intercultural experience was drawn on to give evidence as to whether certain forms of English worked at all in real life situations. Those who had little ELF experience for reference were likely to emphasize the assumption that conformity to native English is crucial in order to achieve intelligibility. By contrast, those who had or observed successful experience of using ELF were suspicious about the assumption and were even confident of the communicative effects of Englishes that were different from native English. In this sense, linguistic experience in intercultural communication helps to demythologize the exclusive link between nativeness and intelligibility.

The study thus sheds light on the understanding of English for Chinese speakers in the future. The on-going globalization has promoted and will continue to promote the “interconnectedness” (Cogo & Dewey, 2012) between China and other countries, with English playing a role of global lingua franca in developing the interconnectedness. China has thus witnessed the increasing engagement of Chinese speakers in intercultural encounters and the growing use of English by Chinese speakers in multilingual contexts at home and abroad. To put it differently, Chinese speakers and learners will have more ELF experience or observe more ELF interactions. This will help Chinese speakers and learners to develop the understanding of what makes intelligibility in using English and foster positive attitudes towards Englishes, which go beyond native English. It is therefore possible that Chinese speakers will develop greater confidence in their own English and claim their ownership of English in the future.

This study also offers some implications for applied linguistics. An issue of concern emerges as to what can be done in language classrooms. As this study reveals, key to this question lies in the increase of ELF experience. In this respect, ELF corpus research provides rich data of ELF (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2001; Mauranen, 2012), which can serve as classroom resources for students to observe the use of English in intercultural encounters. Importantly, however, teachers should be aware that although ELF corpora demonstrate how English is used in ELF communication and enable us to understand the fluidity of ELF, corpus descriptions are not intended to be used for the purpose of prescribing a new set of English norms (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2007; c.f. Saraceni, 2008). That is to say, teachers need to guide students in attending to *how* English is creatively and flexibly used to achieve various purposes but avoid making students focus on *what* particular forms are generated in ELF encounters. It is also useful to have teachers from different L1 backgrounds who do not share L1 with the students so that the teacher-student interaction can resemble ELF interaction. Students can benefit from teachers’ deliberate use of certain intercultural communication strategies as mentioned earlier. Clearly, teachers can encourage students to communicate with people from different L1 backgrounds so as to increase their ELF encounters. In this way, formal instruction can be assisted by activities out of classrooms.

**7. Conclusion**

This study adds evidence to the impacts of linguistic experience on language attitudes (e.g., Kalocsai, 2009). The participants made sense of the role of English for intercultural communication with or without ELF experience as a source of learning. Those who made no reference to real life ELF experience in their narratives appeared to be firm with conformity to native English and judged variations from native English to be “erroneous” with reference to native English norms. Those who drew on ELF experience made sense of how variations worked and emphasized the communicative effectiveness of variations. While the study allows for the understanding of how ELF experience impacts beliefs about intelligibility of English, it is yet to be explored the correlation between ELF experience and ELF attitudes. This might suggest the direction for future research.

Incontestably, experience is one of many factors that exert influences on attitudes (e.g., Byrnes & Kiger, 1997; Garrett, 2010). The focus of this paper on the participants’ narratives of experience does not deny that the influence of experience might be reinforced or reduced by other factors, which might have certain impacts on language attitudes as well. While, as this study reveals, experience helps to resolve the issue of intelligibility in relation to native English, clearly there are many other issues associated with Chinese English speakers’ attitudes towards native English and other Englishes, for example, the belief in “pure” English, a notion closely associated with native English, and the aspiration for symbolic power in native English (Wang, 2012, 2013). The current criticism of the exclusive reference to native English aligns with the questioning of the authority of NESs in English (Wang, 2015b) or, in Widdowson’s (2003) words, the NES ownership of English. It is in line with the reconceptualization of English in intercultural communication (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011), adding to the voices for NNESs’ linguistic rights and for the evaluation of NNESs’ use of English in their own terms (e.g., Ammon, 2000; Jenkins, 2007; Wang, 2013).

While it can be useful for teachers to foster students’ awareness of ELF in formal education by introducing the research on ELF and facilitating the evaluation of the relevance of native English for Chinese speakers’ own needs and wants through their use of English (Wang, 2015a), increasing students’ encounters with ELF use will serve this purpose. We are aware that a major challenge for many ELT practitioners to talk about ELF in language classrooms is that native English is *the* English that enjoys symbolic power and attracts Chinese speakers’ interest to conform to it (Wang, 2013). While it is certainly a personal choice whether to fit in the status quo regarding norms of English, it is necessary to let students understand the criticism of the exclusive focus on native English. With the expanding and deepening intercultural communication in ELF between Chinese and non-Chinese speakers in different spheres of China, the irrelevance of conformity to native English for Chinese speakers and learners will become increasingly self-evident. And with the increasing experience of ELF use by Chinese speakers, it is fair to be optimistic that Chinese speakers will claim their ownership of English in the near future.

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**Appendix: Transcription conventions for interviews (adapted from Jenkins [2007])**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| S1,S2,S3,etc. | Participants who were selected from students |
| P1,P2,P3,etc. | Participants who were selected from professionals |
| Full stop  | To indicate termination |
| [...]  | Authors’ gaps |
| (.)  | Pause of less than a second |
| CAPITAL | In a louder voice |
| (Chinese speakers’ English)  | Guess the words in contexts |
| [authors’ commentary]  | Authors’ commentary |
| -  | Interruption, the beginning of interrupter’s turn |
| Utter- | Abrupt cut-off, unfinished utterance |
| @  | Laughter |