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## A critical review of ‘English’ in China’s English education: how far can Chinese teachers embrace ELF?

### Abstract

While ELF research offers implications for English pedagogy in non-native English contexts, research needs to be done to understand the feasibility of ELF-oriented classroom practices in specific local contexts to concretise a proposal for ELF pedagogy. We consider classroom teaching in the educational context where language policy interacts with language perceptions and practices, seeking to understand the extent to which Chinese teachers can embrace ELF. With a focus on teacher agency, the study explores language policy, classroom practice and teacher perspectives on English as a subject matter of English education. The findings point to the discussion the interaction between teacher agency and policy constraints. The article ends with the suggestion that the approach to English in China’s education policy should be reconsidered and that the debates on ELF in relation to Chinese speakers are necessary for possible changes in education policy.

### *1. Introduction*

Along with the spread of English around the world, research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) has foregrounded the changing nature of English and the changing role of English for non-native English speakers (NNESs), illuminating the limitations of the treatment of English as a foreign language (EFL) with reference to English used by native English speakers (NESs) in the changing context today (e.g. Jenkins 2000, 2006, 2007, 2015, Mauranen 2012, Seidlhofer 2004, 2011). As Widdowson’s (1994) question to the ownership of English reminds us, the spread of English urges the re/consideration of the right to be creative in the use of English by NNESs and the power relations between NESs and NNESs. The concept of ELF accepts NNESs’ rights of being creative and respects their needs and wants to variate from established norms, the norms that are often established on the use of English in native English-speaking communities. On the contrary, the notion of EFL stresses the norms and rules established among native English speakers, leaving no space to non-native English speakers’ agentive needs and associating NNESs’ variations from established norms with errors. Given the context that NNESs greatly outnumber NESs, the research on ELF has implications for the reconsideration of English pedagogy in NNES contexts (e.g. Dewey 2012, Jenkins 2006, Seidlhofer 2011).

China has a vast population of learning and using English. In the context of globalisation and internationalisation, the nation witnesses an increasing need

for intercultural communication at different levels. As a result, the use of ELF- as opposed to English as a foreign language (EFL)- is increasingly becoming relevant to Chinese speakers and learners of English. China is thus in a situation where the new role of English encounters the traditional practice of English teaching. On the one hand, the new role of English is conceptualised through the framework of ELF (see Jenkins 2000, 2007, 2014, 2015, Mauranen 2012, 2018, Seidlhofer 2011, 2018), which differentiates ELF itself from EFL or English as a native language (ENL). While ELF focuses on the global ownership of English (Seidlhofer 2004), EFL or ENL reinforces the exclusive ownership of English by NESs, or more concisely, a small number of elite NESs, whose use of English tends to be associated with Standard native Englishes (Widdowson 1994, 2003). On the other hand, traditional English language teaching tends to model Standard British English or Standard American English. As Wen (2012) points out, English education continues to be oriented towards native English norms, which provide references to users of EFL, in China. The contrast between the rising role of ELF and the existing English teaching practice urges us to explore the possibility for ELF to be reflected in English education in China.

Inevitably, language acquisition planning is an essential part of language policy in a community (Ricento 2000). The reconsideration of English pedagogy in non-native English-speaking contexts thus befits from the understanding of English language education policy in relevant contexts. In terms of China, in particular, research shows that EFL education has often been associated with national agendas and educational policies (Adamson 2004, Pan 2014). The consideration of the relevance of ELF for English education in China is thus necessary to be conducted within the framework of language policy.

Research has shown the importance of teachers in initiatives of bringing ELF into English language teaching, with the focus on teacher awareness of ELF (e.g. Dewey 2012, Sifakis 2014, 2017). A fundamental concern is that teachers are agents who work with the subject matter of English and support students through the learning of English. Teachers' awareness of ELF thus shapes their ways of approaching English and helping students address issues with English. For instance, how to treat 'errors' can be different on an ELF perspective and an EFL perspective respectively. Apparently, the concept of agency reminds us of the social environment where teachers are situated. Brown (2012) sees teachers as stakeholders of language policy, who react to language policy and decide the extent to which language policy is successfully implemented. Therefore, teachers not only perform according to what education policy requires them to do but also take into consideration what they hope their students to take away from the process of learning English. For this reason, this paper seeks to explore Chinese teachers' perspectives on the relevance of ELF for English education in

Chinese universities and to understand how Chinese teachers perceive the interaction between the new role of ELF and the current teaching practice in Chinese higher education.

We draw on Spolsky's (2012) framework of language management, seeking to understand the approach to English in respect of language education policy, language education practice and ideologies about English in English education. The purpose of the research is, firstly, to contribute to the ELF research in terms of the application of the ELF concept to local education and, secondly, to evaluate the extent to which the role of ELF is exploited in Chinese higher education to serve different internationalisation initiatives of China.

## *2. ELF, ELT and education*

Widdowson (2003) maintains that English educators should deliberate what the subject matter of English language teaching entails. A considerable body of literature has contributed to the knowledge of ELF and offered implications for the ELT practice (e.g. Baker 2015, Cogo and Dewey 2012, Grazzi 2015, Hyniinen 2016, Jenkins 2006, Mauranen 2012, Pitzl 2012, Seidlhofer 2011). Informed by the literature, we can summarise a few points that contribute to an ELF-oriented approach to the English subject. First, the target language should not be taken for granted to regard as native speaker English. Second, the target community should not be taken for granted to regard as native English-speaking community. Third, while English users are more than native English speakers, the cultures associated with English users should not be taken for granted to regard as native English speakers' cultures. Fourth, the pursuit of English learning achievement should not be taken for granted to be the mastery of a set of fixed codes or established norms. Instead, accommodation is essential for successful communication. Teachers should not focus on forms but functions, meanings and strategies of communication. Fifth, students should be encouraged to pursue the appropriateness of language, which is based on the interactive events where they are situated, instead of the correctness of language, which is based on established norms prior to their entry to the interactive events. In short, a top-down policy that prescribes the forms presumably used by NESs to be learned and taught in NNES classrooms does not help teachers and students to address real-life encounters with English much.

Education is a critical mechanism in language policy (Shohamy 2006). However, education should not be simplistically viewed as the tool of implementing language policy, as education is also a place where language policy interacts with education participants' ideologies about language. That is, education participants, including both teachers and students, have agencies, which, however, work in relation to various structural factors (Giddens 1984),

in their processing of language policies and requirements. While language policy seeks to affect language practice, the success or failure of language policy is not only related to ideologies but also projected into language practice (Recinto 2006, Spolsky 2012). It is therefore constructive to review Spolsky's (2012) framework of language policy, which explains the relationships among language practice, language ideologies and language management.

Language management, which is one component in Spolsky's (2012) framework, entails the process of planning and taking measures to impose certain forms of language or enforce the change of language in a way. As Spolsky (2012: 5) notes, those in authority would have the power to make some forms legitimate but could not guarantee the 'observance' of the legitimate use of language by all those who are managed. The observance or failure to observe relates to another two components in Spolsky's framework, as discussed in what follows.

According to Spolsky (2012), language practice involves not only deliberate language behaviours and choices but also those behaviours and choices of which language users are not aware. That is, language users might not be aware of their conformity or non-conformity to language requirements in real-life practice. In the same vein, Shohamy (2006) refers to language practice as *de facto* language policy, namely, the situation that language policy is actually realised among language users, though there is often a gap between language policy and *de facto* language policy. This reminds us of Kachru's (1986) discussion of Indian English users' attitudes where some Indian English users do not acknowledge their English as 'Indian English' but assume their English to British English.

Language ideology is a complicated concept (Blommaert 2006, Silverstein 1998, Kroskrity 2004). In Spolsky's (2012) framework of language policy, language ideologies refer to values attached to languages. While language policymakers ascribe values to specific languages and promote the values, language users might accept the top-down prescription or resist by attaching different values to specific languages. While Spolsky (2012) focuses on values of languages, it is constructive to adopt a broad sense of language ideologies, which refer to ideas, beliefs, attitudes, interpretations and representations of languages. In the language ideologies scholarship, language ideologies are unanimously regarded as a battlefield for power struggle (e.g. Kroskrity 2004). In this sense, the process of implementing language policies involves the process of promoting dominant language ideologies and marginalising minority language ideologies. Nonetheless, research (e.g. Kroskrity 2004) often shows that minority language ideologies do not necessarily die out but sometimes co-exist with dominant language ideologies or become hidden. The competition

between different language ideologies thus has impacts on the process of language management.

In short, the interactions among language management, language practice and language ideologies suggest a two-way process in language policy implementation, that is, a top-down process, where efforts are made to deliver policies, and a bottom-up process, where language users perceive languages and practise languages. In this sense, the investigation of policy requirements, language users' practice and perceptions of language will help to understand the extent to which certain language forms and norms are to be maintained or challenged. It follows that we would benefit from Spolsky's framework in understanding the possibility of ELF to be reflected in English education in China.

### *3. Methodology*

This paper is based on three sets of data retrieved through three research tools respectively. The three instruments were used in parallel, without particular design for the sequence. The first data set includes various documents issued by the Ministry of Education in China for national guidance on ELT and those circulated within universities for institutional use. In particular, the former group of documents entails the College English Teaching Requirements (2007) and the Examination Syllabus for CET Level 4 and Level 6 (2004). The latter group is comprised of university website information, profile documents of English-related modules and handbooks, and other visual materials that serve to guide teaching and learning activities. The second data set consists of 23 periods of classroom teaching and learning. Each period was defined on the basis of the universities' timetables. In general, each period lasted 90 minutes, which include two sessions. There were times when one period lasted more than two sessions, due to students' particular disciplinary arrangements. In order to avoid any interruption of the class teaching and show respect to the teachers, the observer stayed in classrooms for entire periods arranged for particular teaching loads instead of selecting a fixed period of time for each observation event. The third data set comprises interviews with 21 English language teachers working in three universities in the same city in southern China. Interview with each teacher participant lasted around 45 minutes in general. Two teachers were met twice for whole interviews because of the interrupts during the interviews. Mandarin Chinese was used as the medium of communication during interviews. The analysis of interviews was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and translated into English during the process of writing up the paper.

The participants were recruited in departments of English in three universities. Some teachers were teaching content-oriented English classes, such as business

English and western culture, while others were focused on the teaching of English language skills, for instance, writing and interpretation (see appendix). All participants defined themselves as English teachers during the process of recruitment. The purpose of the research was to examine teachers' perceptions of English, which is the subject of teaching and learning. In light of this, no distinction was made between different teachers.

#### *4. Data analysis*

The data were coded with the purpose to answer the central question of the article how far English teachers can embrace ELF. With Spolsky's framework in mind, three data sets were analysed individually. Document analysis serves to find out how English is approached in language policy; classroom observation offers insights into how English is approached in teaching practice; teacher interviews allow for the understanding of how teachers perceive English for pedagogic purposes. A coding system is thus established on the basis of these research objectives. More specifically, we are interested in whether English is perceived or approached as a foreign language for Chinese speakers or a *lingua franca* for them and how teachers consider the possibility of 'teaching ELF'. Admittedly, a lot more themes were found to emerge in the data than we report here. The findings we report here serve the purpose of the article to contribute to the discussion of the feasibility of teaching ELF in China.

After the analysis of different sets of data, we were able to see a holistic picture of attitudes towards English in China's English education, which help to answer the question how far Chinese teachers can embrace ELF. As seen in what follows, data analysis reveals a cleavage between policy requirements and classroom practice, a blurring boundary between ELF and EFL within classrooms, and a diversity of views on the feasibility of 'teaching ELF'.

##### *4.1 Document analysis*

Given the space of the article, it is not possible to provide an extensive analysis of documents we examined. The focus here is on the illustration of the top-down policy process, which contrasts with the bottom-up reactions that we are to discuss in section 4.2. In general, the data did not present a clear prescription of the target language of learning in English education in China. Occasionally, however, 'British English' or 'American English' is mentioned in different documents to offer a reference or to give examples of reference Englishes. The requirements for accuracy, correctness and conformity to 'English-speaking' peoples' use of English is frequently and explicitly expressed across different documents being examined.

Notably, language education policy in China's English education not only designates what to teach and learn in language classrooms but also how to teach

and learn in teacher-student engagement. Prominent evidence is the provision of uniform lecture slides equipped with textbooks. The slides highlight the points that textbook writers expect teachers to spend time going through in-class time, with the content focusing on vocabulary and grammar. Figure 1 was a picture taken in classroom observation, offering a typical example of uniform lecture slides put in use to guide teachers' classroom practice.

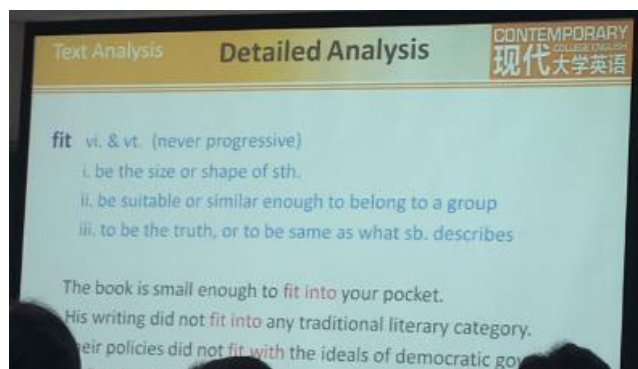


Figure 1 An example of uniform lecture slides equipped with textbooks

The above picture shows how texts are expected to be engaged in language classrooms. The word 'fit' is picked up from a text for 'detailed analysis'. The presentation looks like an entry in a dictionary, with the speech part of 'fit' together with three definitions and meanings as well as three full sentences illustrating the three meanings of the word 'fit'. Presumably, the slide highlights what teachers and students are expected to note. The prescription makes it explicit that the word 'fit' can 'never' be 'progressive'. Although the word 'fit' is presumably identified in a text for analysis, the illustration of the word is not connected to the textual context where the word is based. The process of learning the text is thus rule-driven and de-contextualised, suggesting that the process of teaching and learning is the one that embraces established norms of English, which are likely to be native English norms.

The top-down language policy is thus visible in the process where teachers are expected to use the uniform slides to support their teaching of language within classrooms. While no guidelines and requirements relate to the target language of learning, the exclusive focus on native English norms, which are illustrative of British English and American English, is telling.

#### 4.2 Classroom observation

Classroom observation data were analysed in terms of what to teach and how to teach. The 'what' question seeks to look into the subject matter of language education within classrooms, while the 'how' question seeks to look into ways of dealing with the subject matter. The general picture of classroom observation data reveals an interesting and overwhelming phenomenon that teachers use ELF to teach EFL.

Regarding the subject matter of language teaching, teachers are observed to focus on grammar teaching and spend time illustrating the rules and norms of native Englishes presented in the textbooks. It was common to observe teachers' emphasis on the idiomaticity of native Englishes across different classrooms in different universities. The following quotes- which are included in one extract for the ease of presentation- are sourced from different teachers' engagements with students on the idiomaticity of English, pointing to the reproduction of native English ideology.

Extract 1

T1: This is an idiomatic phrase, a regular collocation that you have to remember...  
(16/11/2016, *Academic Writing*)

T2: It cannot be explained with linguistic knowledge. They speak in this way... (07/11/2016, *Interpreting*)

T3: Fixed expression cannot be explained logically. There is no other way around but to memorize... (27/10/2016, *English Listening & Speaking*)

T4: You did it wrong because you chose the answer in the reference of regular grammatical rules. Generally, you are right, this is good...but this one is an idiomatic phrase.  
(14/11/2016, *Communicative English*)

All the above teachers emphasise the 'must' of conforming to the idiomatic use of English and explicitly prohibit any challenge to it. The word choices in the teachers' discourses unanimously point to the absoluteness in memorising idiomatic usages. In particular, teacher 1 uses the model verb 'have to' to indicate what must be followed, while T2 and T3 use the model verb 'cannot' to indicate what must not be violated. Teacher 4 appears to be more considerate and conducts some reasoning with the student to whom she talks, though she indirectly makes the point that no reasoning but memorising is helpful in terms of idiomatic usages.

In contrast with the adherence to English as a foreign language in teaching the subject matter, teachers' engagement with the subject matter, however, shows the application of ELF strategies in full swing. Previous work on ELF practice helps to identify a number of communicative strategies that ELF users adopt in various communicative events (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Mauranen 2012). In the observed classrooms in the current study, 'errors' and ELF strategies were found to be adopted in the teaching of grammar and native Englishes. In particular, three strategies were able to be easily identified in the observation data, which are to be illustrated with examples in what follows.

The most commonly used strategy can be summarised with Cogo's (2008) notion that 'form follows function'. All classroom teachers focused on meaning-conveying and tended to let go 'errors' in their own English-medium

instruction on native English usages. For example, when making comments on a student's presentation, T5 was observed to focus on the message that she intended to deliver and used some forms which could be identified as 'errors' with reference to Standard Englishes.

#### Extract 2

T5: Well-structured speech. But a quick suggestion. Next time, try not to bring a piece of paper and read it. It'll increase your nerves, and remind you all to rely on the paper. You will forget some of the pronunciations. You've got your points, speak out with your own words, the ones you are familiar with, it will be more fluency. (01/11/2016, *Business English 1*)

Extract 2 presents examples of T5's use of English, which is different from Standard English. The string *It'll increase your nerves and remind you all to rely on the paper* well illustrates the creativity that bears traces of Chinese language expression. In the context of instruction that the teacher was offering feedback on student performance, it was not difficult to understand what the teacher meant to say. The shared culture between the teacher and the student certainly helps to make the communication easier.

Translanguaging is another commonly used strategy observed in classroom teaching. Teachers use images, gestures, and transgress boundaries between English and Chinese in their teaching activities. This is not a surprising finding, as similar phenomena have been reported or described in the literature. For example, García and Li (2014) have illustrated how Spanish teachers blur the boundaries between Spanish and English in teaching Spanish students. Extract 4 seeks to offer a flavour of Chinese teachers' translanguaging practice in classrooms.

#### Extract 3

T6: Ok guys, I see er some of you is reading, is reading right now, er, so let's, let's adjust our reading strategies, 调整一下阅读策略 (adjust our reading strategies), Ok? (17/10/2016, *Educational English*)

T7: Your line manager, someone above your position, on the top of you. 就是我们平时说的什么呀, 顶头上司, 对, 顶头上司 (How do we call it in our daily life? Supervisor, right, supervisor). (18/10/2016, *Business English 2*)

In Extract 3, T6 is clarifying her point and makes sure that her message can effectively be delivered by repeating and mixing codes. The mixed codes have delivered the same message to have an effect of emphasising and enhancing understanding. T7 is explaining the meaning of line managers in the analysis of a text. After explaining in English, she switched from English to Chinese to check student understanding and bring up an equivalent expression in Chinese, that is, supervisor. The mixing of codes has an impact of reinforcing understanding.

While different cultures form valuable cultural repertoires that ELF users bring with them in ELF communication, teachers in observed classrooms were observed to draw on Chinese expressions and cultural practices in order to teach cultural practices in native English-speaking contexts. Many teachers were observed to have strong interests in how native English speakers behave and tend to spend time illustrating their behaviours for learning purposes. In analysing a text, for example, teacher 8 draws students' attention to the practice of walking barefoot in an American home.

#### Extract 4

T8: This is...for example, in China, when we are visiting our friends, we will change our shoes' but we won't walk bare feet. However, in the United States... (20/10/2016, *Academic English*)

T8 extends from the description of a character's behaviour to an assumption that people living in the United States like to walk barefoot at home. By referring to some Chinese people's practice of being guests, T8 has delivered a message that it is a cultural practice in the United States that people tend to walk barefoot at home or when being guests. Although it is hard to judge whether the assumption is appropriate, what is interesting is that T8 is trying to activate students' Chinese culture repertoires when teaching American culture.

In a nutshell, the subject matter of English language classrooms is in remarkable contrast with the medium of instruction in English language classrooms. While the former aligns with English as a foreign language for Chinese speakers, the latter appears to resemble the nature of English as a lingua franca. That is, teachers tend to explicitly align with nativespeakerism by defending the approximation to NESS' use of English on the one hand; they turn to ELF-related strategies to give instructions and deliver lectures in English. The data thus reveal a striking discrepancy between what teachers aspire and how they behave in terms of the use of English.

#### 4.3 Teacher interviews

Teacher interviews show a complicated picture of attitudes revolving around ELF, allowing for our understanding of the extent to which ELF awareness is available among teachers and the extent to which English can be reconsidered as a subject of matter in English education. Apart from the 'digging out' of teachers' ideas, the interviews provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching experience and their prior understandings of English. As a result, interviewed teachers were found to provide inconsistent comments on English and show conflicts in their own arguments or claims. Despite the complexity, a

few predominant themes were identified with the focus on what teachers' ideas of ELF are and what implications their ideas can offer for English education.

It is common to see in the data that teachers have little awareness of ELF in terms of how ELF researchers interpret ELF. A few teachers appeared to be confused with the notion of ELF, conceiving it as the same as EFL or ENL. Another few teachers responded to the notion of ELF by making a link to different varieties of English, who, however, tend to discuss varieties in principle and see no implications for Chinese speakers' creativities. Among those who claimed to know about ELF, the notion of ELF in the data stands as a label for the phenomenon that English is a widely used language in the world by people from different L1 backgrounds. For the interviewed teachers, the spread of English around the world does not invoke any reconsideration of the ownership of English by NESs exclusively and any re-evaluation of creative use of English in international communication by NNEs. Those interviewed teachers tend to associate ELF with the use of English that is less good, less effective and lack of official recognition.

In the very minority showing some awareness of ELF, one teacher was able to explain the disconnection between English and its original home but was cautious about the sensitivity of ELF in terms of its incompatibility in China's education system.

#### Extract 5

Interviewer: Have you heard of English as a lingua franca? Would you mind sharing your opinions?

T12: In my own opinion, an emphasis on (the link between) language and identity will defocus the role of place in defining a language, the only benefit (of the emphasising) is to encourage them (i.e. Chinese speakers) to use Chinese English. It is not easy to say yes, we want Standard English or no, we shouldn't (want Standard English). ELT in China should be guided by mainstream English rather than the royal English, especially in college English teaching classes. I strongly believe in it. I think your "lingua franca" should be interpreted differently in the context of the UK and China. Because it is entirely political, it is different from traditional means of language teaching.

Interviewer: Can you explain what you mean by defocusing the place of a language?

T12: Well, there is just no need to claim the legal status, for example, Chinese English. It can only bring about critics as the majority are refusing it.

Sixteen teachers have explicitly or implicitly indicated the idea that ELF is less good than mother-tongue English. T4, for example, was explicit on this point:

#### Extract 6

T4: It is quite difficult for us (to learn English)...I mean we lack opportunities for practising and using English in reality.

Interviewer: Do you mean practising English with native speakers? How about non-native speakers?

T4: Oh? This is quite unexpected! I always think only speaking English with native speakers can improve our language abilities.

Interviewer: Why? What's wrong with non-native speakers' English?

T4: Er... What's wrong? Obviously, mother-tongue speakers are better than other language speakers.

In response to the interviewer's question whether they (i.e. those who T4 referred to) use English to communicate with NNEs, T4 showed his surprise by reacting with a short question 'oh?', which is then followed by a claim that practising English with NNEs cannot serve the purpose of improving English. With the interviewer's question into why, T4 shows a taken-for-granted answer that mother-tongue speakers are better than non-mother tongue speakers. T4's responses to the interviewer twice imply that he is naturalised with the idea that mother-tongue speakers are better than non-mother tongue speakers. The naturalisation is visible in his surprise with the interviewer's questions and his word choices of 'unexpected' and 'obviously', both of which emphasise common sense ideas.

Six teachers show some concerns with the uncertainty of the communicative effectiveness of ELF. For them, the use of established Englishes is a precondition for effective communication. While standard native speaker English is associated with the guarantee for effective communication, ELF is not. T9, for example, explicates the importance of the conformity to rules and grammar for communication.

#### Extract 7

T9: There is a problem if you don't have a standard...your aim is communication, but based on what can you tell that this is effective communication? Don't you need a standard to tell? Like how much percentage of your speech is delivered.

Interviewer: Do you mean we need a common ground? Something we all accept and follow?

T9: Yeah, it is difficult to do without Standard English. Especially under the environment of globalization. If an Italian is talking to a Chinese, how can you ensure that we can understand each other if we are all influenced by our L1?

For T9, the judgement of 'an effective communication' is based on 'a standard' instead of the communication itself. This is a myth that many ELF researchers have pointed out. First, ELF has been proved to serve the purpose of communication effectively (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Mauranen 2012). Second, the conformity to particular norms and rules does not guarantee the effectiveness of communication, but the accommodation to particular communicative events is key to effective communication (e.g. Jenkins 2015, Seidlhofer 2011). The effectiveness of communication needs to be judged in terms of the result of communication, that is, whether the interlocutors can manage to get meaning across or get the job done (e.g. Seidlhofer 2011). Third, the pursuit for particular forms sets a limitation on linguistic choices suiting the

function of English and thus side lines ELF. The relationship between form and function has been discussed widely in a body of research on ELF. Cogo (2008) argues that ‘form follows function’. That is, linguistic forms should serve the function of language. Overlooking the role of ELF in communication would lead to a bias over the role of NNEs in the development of English and reproduce Standard English ideology in China.

Associated with the ideas that ELF is less good and less effective than NESs’ English, the idea of teaching ELF is criticised as ‘unprofessional’ and low quality of teaching. A few teachers, explicitly or implicitly, associated teaching ENL with a high-end objective and teaching ELF with underachievement. For example, T11, a writing teacher, was implicit on this point.

Extract 8

T11:[...] Well, students nowadays, they are, their assignments are always full of grammatical errors. I really don’t want to read [their assignments]

Interviewer: So, have you ever considered not to evaluate their assignments by referring to native [English] norms?

T11: If you do not expect them to meet the high requirement, how can you guarantee the quality of teaching? They are not native, not that you can teach them writing, only teach writing skills, they are not that level, so, if you teach creative writing, you can have some room for interesting stuff to be brought (into teaching), this [i.e. teaching writing in general] is REALLY boring.

Extract 8 offers a vivid explanation of how the conformity to ENL is the top priority in English education. T11 was not happy with her students’ performance in writing and complained that those students make a lot of grammatical errors. The conversation with the interviewer implies that T11 tends to focus on grammatical issues during teaching. She compares teaching in general with creative writing and finds the latter more interesting than the former. She makes it explicit that the teaching of creative writing gives her the room to bring interesting stuff to engage with, implying that the teaching of writing in general has to focus on students’ language skills because those students are not advanced enough for her to talk about writing skills. The focus on language issues points to a preference to native English norms, which she connects with high requirement and quality teaching. Apparently, she prioritises language forms over other aspects of writing, which include writing skills and content.

However, the interviewer’s invitation for the interviewed teachers to consider the implications of the spread of English for English education seems to have motivated a few teachers to reconsider English. In this direction, four teachers changed their attitudes from negativity to positivity through the interviews. They turned to welcome the idea of bringing ELF into classrooms in response to the interviewer’ challenge to traditional thinking about English. An extreme example

is T3, who welcomed the idea of ELF, showed his/her intention to introduce the idea to the students, and asked the interviewer to recommend some literature:

Extract 9

T3: I found this (the concept of ELF) is interesting. If (.) ah (.) we could all benefit from it. Both teachers and students. I'm actually considering to introduce this to my students in the class. It is also a good research area. Can you recommend some literature for me?

Another interviewed teacher, T4, has reflected on the interviewer's brief introduction of ELF and started to critically evaluate the under-representation of NNES in textbooks, which provide references for learning and use of English.

Extract 10

Interviewer: Well, I noticed that in the textbooks, and some classroom teaching materials, conversations between characters often have native speakers of English present. How about non-native speakers of English (except for Chinese)?

T4: Indeed. This is a part we have missed. We usually choose what is considered as authoritative or native English. We used to have conversations among speakers of Chinese and UK or US people. But now-

Interviewer: -used to?

T4: Yeah, before the revision of our textbook. Right, you have reminded me of it. I didn't pay attention to it. I think you are right, they (non-native speakers) should be considered, it is globalization now.

Twelve teachers were hesitant upon the idea of teaching ELF, despite their willingness to take the interviewer's point that ELF can be an alternative for the subject matter of English education. Two concerns arise to explain their hesitation. One concerns with the global power structure where NESs and NNESs are situated. T8, one of the two teachers who have explicitly explained their reasons for hesitation, stresses that the integration of ELF into English classrooms would not happen overnight and owes the development of ELF in China to the development of Chinese speakers in the power structure revolving around English in the world.

Extract 11

Interviewer: As non-English speakers, we are using English, we are changing English. Do you think we have the right to change?

T8: Your language can deliver your thought. As for whether it is Chinese English or Cantonese or native or non-native like, it doesn't matter. Your thoughts matter, your research matters. But it will be a process.

Interviewer: A process of what?

T8: Power and influence. If you have the strong power, you can change the language in your own way. (...) Chinese English will be the next lingua franca. Back to the old times, Great Britain has the power, so we learn British English, but now we write articles of science and technology in the reference of American English. After our Chinese...when our Chinese people's publication has increased, because they need to learn our research, they have to accept our Chinese English.

In response to the interviewer's question whether NNEs 'have the right to change' English, T8 conveyed the message that language forms serve ideas and meanings before he indicated a conservative position on the issue of the right to change. His further explanation of his position shows a belief that the right to change is related to the power to change and the influence of variations. As a teacher of academic writing, he focuses on the use of English in academia and points out that the influence of Chinese researchers in international academia could help to increase the recognition of Chinese speakers' way of writing English, which he labels as Chinese English, in international communities.

Another concern relates to the local power structure where institutions set requirements that Chinese teachers and students are expected to meet. Nine teachers see the concept of ELF as incompatible with current education policy and appear to be reluctant to treat ELF seriously. Language education policy provides a reference for teachers and students to decide what makes acceptable English to be taught and learned. By contrast, ELF is not known as a legitimate form of English in language education in China. T4 is one of the nine teachers and her reflection on the interviewer's brief introduction of ELF offers an example of those teachers' views:

Extract 12

T4: I think your research brings a new perspective, and it is a really good idea. Save a lot of time and effort for students. But...you have to be prepared with difficulties, unless the policy orientation has been changed, it would be really hard to change the situation.

T3 was one of the very few teachers who were excited with the concept of ELF and tried to take the idea of ELF into the classroom. She shared her frustration with the interviewer in the second round of interview with her.

Extract 13

T3: After our meeting last time, I told my students in the class that there existed a lot of Englishes except that what we usually referred to, like British and American English. I also selected NNS Englishes as listening materials for them to do practices.

Interviewer: And how do they react?

T3: They complained that the material was pirated.

T3 admitted that she was inspired by the concept of ELF that the interviewer introduced to her in an earlier meeting with her – when the interviewer was recruiting participants and giving information about what she was researching. While she tried to integrate ELF into teaching practice, the students reacted to her changes by complaining about the materials that T3 took to the class. The materials showing ELF elements and setting NNEs as models of learning were misunderstood as 'pirated' materials. The 'pirated' stuff is often related to

something that does not have official recognition in China. The complaint reflects a rejection to teaching materials that are not recognised by the authority in English education in China. Despite that the materials were adopted by T3, who is the teacher of the students and thus has some authority in classroom teaching, the students complained about the materials, showing disbelief in the role of NNEs as references of English and subsequently a rejection to T3's idea of ELF.

To sum up, teacher interviews reveal teachers' engagement with the idea of ELF and the views of the spread of English in relation to ELF. Although they are all teachers in the disciplinary of English studies and linguistics, a very few teachers can make sense of the idea of ELF, though they remain to be uncertain about the feasibility of ELF in the educational context in China. The data show an outdated view of English that emphasises the authority and superiority of NESs in English and, subsequently, a change in the views as a result of the co-construction of meaning between interviewees and the interviewer. The change can be seen as an indicator of emerging ELF awareness, which was raised through the engagement with the discussion of the spread of English and the concept of ELF. Nevertheless, the emerging positivity towards ELF is often frustrated by the concerns for the global power structure and the local power structure, both of which set NESs as the references for English and ascribe unrecognised status to NNEs' creativities and non-conformities to NESs' English.

## *5. Conclusion*

The current research shows the implications of language education for understandings of English and views of English. It supports Wang's (2015) report on the impacts of language education on Chinese students. While this study focuses on teachers, the impacts of language education policy remain predominant, given the top-down policy requirement which teachers are expected to follow. What has been found to influence Chinese students in Wang's (2015) study consolidates the findings in this project. What has been taught in classrooms have limits on choices of English forms and identity choices associated with English available to Chinese students, disconnected from the sociolinguistic reality of English (Wang 2015).

The current study provides explanations for the limitations of English teaching from the teacher perspective. Chinese teachers follow English policy and emphasise a monolingual native English variety, which is well-known as British English or American English. Despite that Chinese teachers use ELF for instruction themselves, teachers overlook the mismatch between what is idealised and what is actualised in real-life situations. Chinese teachers tend to use the uniform teaching materials and even lecture slides, which are designed

to deliver course content in the ways that textbook developers intend, who are indeed working within the framework of language policy at the national level. The implementation of education policy seeks to regulate teachers' practice of teaching and thus limits teachers' creativity in engaging with the course materials. Teacher identity is strongly affected. Even though teachers would like to make changes, students who are affected by language policy join the language policy to question teachers. Chinese teachers are in a situation where their professional identities are contradicted by language policy and education environment. The adherence to prescribed teaching material and prescribed teaching process shows a lack of agency in teaching practice. While the uniform lecture slides can serve as a part of teaching resources, it might be problematic that Chinese teachers are offered with them as the exclusive resources or the authoritative resources.

However, teacher agency is seen when they came across the concept of ELF during the conversations with the interviewer. Notably, an emerging number of teachers attempted to try to integrate the idea of ELF in classroom teaching. Another number of teachers show the awareness of the conflicts between their agency and power structure where they are situated. While it is hard to say that teachers choose to follow the power structure, those teachers who explicitly commented on the conflicts show their willingness or wish to bring the issue up. In a sense, the willingness to engage with the conflicts between new ideas of English and existing education policy suggests a good start to debate the feasibility of teaching ELF. Therefore, it would be constructive to communicate with teachers to increase teacher awareness of ELF and enable them to reflect on the current teaching practice that endorses a monolingual native English speaker norm.

Nevertheless, more needs to be done to engage with language policy in China. It has become clear that engagement with education policy is necessary to raise ELF awareness in the Chinese context. It might be limited to conduct teacher training to increase teacher awareness of ELF when education policy remains to embrace a monolingual native speaker model of English. In Spolsky's (2010) framework, language management, language ideology and language practice form a circle and interact with each other. Language policy is dynamic but not unchanged but interacts with language ideology and language practice. While the use of ELF is predominant among Chinese speakers including those Chinese teachers of English in the current study, the pursuit for standard native Englishes is common. The discrepancy between the actualised practice and the idealised practice requires a reconsideration of whether the actualised practice needs to be changed or the idealised practice needs to be changed. ELF research provides theoretical foundations and empirical evidence that an idealised model of English based on monolingual native speakers' use of English is not realistic

and unnecessary (Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins 2007, 2014, Mauranen 2012, Seidlhofer 2011). Wang (2012, 2018, forthcoming) proposes the concept of Chinese English as a lingua franca (ChELF) to suggest that Chinese speakers use English for their own purpose of engaging with intercultural communication while seeking to maintain connections with an imagined Chinese community. That is, the connection between English and China together with Chinese speakers can be strengthened by accepting Chinese speakers' own way of using English. It is therefore not the actual practice that needs to be criticised but the idealised model of standard native Englishes that needs to be reconsidered. As debates are necessary for language ideologies process (Blommaert 1999), open the debates on ELF in relation to Chinese speakers will open possibilities for education policy revolving around English to embrace ELF.

#### Appendix: Teachers' profiles

| Teacher | Gender | Courses they teach           |
|---------|--------|------------------------------|
| T1      | M      | Academic Writing             |
| T2      | F      | Interpreting                 |
| T3      | M      | English Listening & Speaking |
| T4      | F      | Communicative English        |
| T5      | F      | Business English 1           |
| T6      | F      | Educational English          |
| T7      | F      | Business English 2           |
| T8      | M      | Academic English             |
| T9      | F      | English Audio-Visual         |
| T10     | F      | Communicative English        |
| T11     | F      | Writing                      |
| T12     | F      | Translation                  |
| T13     | F      | College English 3            |
| T14     | M      | Advanced English             |
| T15     | F      | Interpreting                 |
| T16     | F      | College English 1            |
| T17     | F      | Comprehensive English        |
| T18     | F      | English Audio-Visual         |
| T19     | M      | Comprehensive English        |
| T20     | F      | Western literature           |
| T21     | M      | Introduction to Linguistics  |

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