

Bringing ELF into Chinese ELT Classrooms: A Focus on English Pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

With the development of globalization, the need of communication in English is increasing rapidly. One of the major concerns about whether English should be taught as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been widely discussed. While researchers suggest that English should be better taught as a foreign language (EFL) than ELF, and some believe non-conformity to native speakers' norms is a trend of future intercultural communication, the judgment of possibility of implementing ELF pedagogies cannot be divorced from sociolinguistic issues of a certain cultural context. This study introduces ELF as a sociolinguistic phenomenon which is different from EFL, aiming to indicate pedagogical significances in supporting and applying theories of ELF in the Chinese context and offer Chinese English language learners informed choice on their own decisions on choosing a language.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca; English pedagogies; ELT; native speakers' norms

able to make their own decisions on choosing a language without interferences.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, English is by far spread all over the world and used as the most important international language. In fact, there are around 150 million people receiving and exchanging information with English via English radio programs, and over 75% of the emails are sent in English. Moreover, English is set as one of the official language in over 88 countries, and among all of the international organizations in the area of Asia and the Pacific, 90% of them are using English as their working language [3]. Such facts comply with what Prodromou estimated, nearly 80% of English communications are made by non-native English speakers (NNESs) [8]. In another word, English now is more used as a lingua franca (ELF), "a contact language among speakers from different first languages" [5] while "the speakers of one language group to come into contact with the speakers of another and then to function at whatever level within the latter's linguistic environment" [15].

However, "little has been published with the focus on Chinese speakers specifically, despite the fact that native English speakers (NESs) communities are no longer the main communities that Chinese speakers aim to align with" [12]. "Almost all the students are still learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the traditional way based on standardized native speakers' norms and all the teachers teach this model of EFL, too" in the Chinese educational context [14]. This study aims to indicate pedagogical significances in applying theories of ELF in the Chinese higher education context. It attempts to offer the English language learners informed choice so that the learners are

2. ENGLISH IN CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

English in China has gained an unprecedented development ever in the history while English is set as a key subject in curriculums; as a medium of instructions for bilingual educations; as a gatekeeping practice for universities and as a crucial requirement for better jobs. In fact, English has been taught as the compulsory subject ever since the primary school. In some developed regions, English is even taught ever since the kindergarten. Almost all of the students would have at least 9 years of formal English education before entering into the university. As for tertiary schools, English is still a compulsory course for all undergraduates in China. There are College English, general English offered to non-English major students and specialist English offered to English major students. Generally, in the first two years of university, students are required to complete the compulsory English studies, while in the following years, English-based modules are offered to students as elective ones.

In the light of this, by now there are about 440 million people or even more in China who knows English. And if we count ELF users in intercultural settings in, the total number of English-knowing population whose L1 is Chinese achieved incalculably. Although the number of English speakers has increased to at least two billion worldwide, only around 329,140,800 are native speakers [1]. Chinese speakers of English, as non-native English speakers, have apparently outnumbered NESs with the global spread of English.

With the increasing number of English language learners worldwide, how a foreign language should be taught and learned has become one of the most popular issues of debate that emerges rapidly. Some linguists believe it is necessary to abandon outdated traditional approaches such as the grammar translation method, and adopt some advanced materials and pedagogical approaches from native-speaking countries. Some claim that it would be helpful to invite native-speakers' target languages to teach in front of the classrooms. Yet, even if recent researches on effectiveness of different language teaching approaches have been highly brought into debates, such approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) etc. are all "in one way or another, concerned with the same central pedagogic problem" [11]. Thus, teaching/learning English towards native speakers' competence is still the principal for ELT in China.

3. THE PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ENGLISH PEDAGOGIES IN CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Rao investigated into 30 Chinese university students' perceptions about CLT focusing on evaluating effectiveness of communicative activities. Although the aim was to explore the most effective and preferred ways of teaching/learning English based on communicative, it was still centered on communicating native-like English between teachers and students [9]. Jiao conducted an empirical study on acquiring vocabulary in China's ELT context. In it, she mentioned that "once patterns of non-native deviance have been discovered, students can be explicitly made aware of these patterns, and that, given time, motivation and the opportunity to practice, they will eventually be able to modify their linguistic behaviour into a more native-like direction" [6]. Such facts are in accordance with what Seidlhofer mentions, English is often taken granted as "the" English which is originated among native English speakers, the competence in which corresponds with what Chomsky describes as native speaker competence [11].

For example, in the following Table 1, to be able to produce native-like English has been put forward in China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE 2018).

Table 1. Understanding Oral Description

	Requirements
CSE Level 5	Can obtain key information from descriptions of large-scale activities (e.g. festival celebrations, sports events), when delivered at a normal speed.
	Can understand native English speakers' oral descriptions of their social status quo and compare it with that of his/her own society.

Zheng also finds that learners of English in China tend to "construct the ought-to and ideal L2 self around native-speakers' norms", mostly because native English model is taught and learned in ELT classroom, and the spread of native English cultural products all over the world. Thus, she calls for a re-consideration of the predominate native-speakers' norm in the current ELT settings in China [16]. Similar results has been noticed in a study of students' perceptions about the English taught in current ELT classes in China by the researcher. The following statements has been collected in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions

	Perceptions
1	I want to be able to communicate with you in English as I am talking to you now in Chinese. But English is more like a compulsory module for us instead of being a language for communication
2	Grammar plays an irreplaceable role and huge portions of percentage in our classroom learning.
3	The English that we acquired in class is different form the one we use for daily communication
4	I don't care what kinds of English will be taught in school, as long as people understand me.

The gap urges consideration of what can be done to make 'English' in education reflecting 'English' in real life. Wang summarizes the background image of language educational system in China, and investigates into different groups of Chinese English users about their perspective of NS norms in her research by comparing university students and social professionals. She finds the fact is that English as a native language as socially preferred English was accepted by the majority and draws a conclusion that Chinese EFL learners can be very non-conformities and what the students want to learn from the class should let them decide by themselves [12]. Hu also examines teachers' implementation of English as a medium of instruction in the Chinese universities through questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. It shows that ideologically, English is considered as important for many teachers to become native-like. But in practice, communicative effectiveness is the premier consideration rather than aiming at native speakers' norm. She further suggested that, China's English education should take into considerations of students' real needs so as to catch up with the global use of English [4].

4. DISCUSSION: BRINGING ELF INTO CHINESE ELT CLASSROOMS

Given what has been discussed, native English speakers are not a consideration as a majority of English conversations take place among speakers of different first languages. English now can be seen as an international language, which is not a property of native-speaking individuals any more, instead it is co-owned by speakers from both outer and expanding circles [11]. Therefore, speakers with different L1 should not be judged by NS norms any more in intercultural communications. In fact, English is “a dynamic, locally realised enactment of a global resource”, as “a highly variable, creative expression of linguistic resources” [2]. It is thus “unrealistic” for NNEs to be native-like, which is also pointless to force NNEs to achieve NS proficiency in their social interactions neither [11].

As an emerging sociolinguistic phenomenon, ELF provides us with more up-to-date implications for China’s English education in the era of globalization. The term “Lingua Franca”, in its original meaning, “referred to a variety that was spoken along the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean between appr. the 15th and the 19th century”, which was based on “some Italian dialects in its earliest history, and included elements from Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Turkish, Greek and Persian” [7]. Later on, the explanation of the term has developed as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” [11].

Seidlhofer also mentions that the assumption about “E” in ELT/EFL remains “curiously unaffected by momentous developments” [11]. It advocates learners to act as a native, to identify themselves as members of the community that speak the same native-like English, to accept native-English authority and its superior status as distributors to non-native English speakers. However, the perspective of ELF argues for the necessity to “make use of the only language shared by all interactants, the Lingua Franca, in order to achieve the fullest communication possible” [11]. In another word, to facilitate successful communications, it requires NNEs to acknowledge that they are the co-owners of English who have the global ownership of English to redefine what was mentioned by native and non-native speakers’ norms, and to challenge Standard English Ideology, where native speakers’ English are considered as the whole meanings of “English” with ELF perspectives.

Wang further mentions that the major gap between current ELT and ELF is that “English lies in the isolation of learning from the world outside the classroom”, which impacted on students’ language choices, students themselves, and students’ capability in explaining sociolinguistic phenomenon. Thus, she indicates that knowing ELF theories might get the learners’ confidence increased, and offer them informed choice to allow themselves to decide on their own [13]. As the learners, student should “receive ELF instruction as a basis for

learning, which they can later fine-tune to native or non-native varieties if required” [10].

5. CONCLUSION

Spreading English across the global is to stratify human’s need for communication within the environment of globalization. The emerging of ELF is a natural evolution of language development. While the increasing number of speakers of English around the world and particularly from expanding circles has accelerated forming of different language varieties bonded by not only linguistic features but also the features of different cultural context, native speakers of English from inner circles, find it is appropriate to conform to “their” standard native English norms in local domestic areas, but “their” standard native English norms become incomprehensively with their interlocutors internationally. Since most of communications with English take place among NNEs, NESs, as the minorities are no longer the privilege ones, instead, they are the disadvantaged ones in ELF communications. It needs to further consider about “how and to what extent old concepts of language varieties, and in particular English, can co-exist with new ones” [11].

It is undeniable that how to enhance students’ ability of managing a language through course syllabus, pedagogical approaches and classroom activities is still an open and local question for both language educators and linguists to explore. However, the most easily neglected obstacle is that what actions should be taken so as to consistently link these ideas with official institutional requirements. It is undeniable that following the benchmark of Standard English ideology is the most convenient, and secure way of measuring one’s language ability, as it is approved by authority, and most widely learned and taught by the general public. But some changes should be made when such ideology has prevented us from the valid thinking about pedagogic principles and social realistic in the field of communication.

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