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Chinese university students' ELF awareness: Impacts of language education in China

Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate Chinese university students' ELF awareness, which is conceptualised with regards to language education. The study, based on 24 semi-structured interviews, demonstrates that Chinese university students are still framing their understanding of English with the affiliation to idealised notions of monolingual origin of native English, despite being situated in a changing world where multilingual speakers of English are becoming the majority of English users and ELF is becoming a prominent communicative phenomenon. The participants' account reveals the role of language education as the interface between language ideology and linguistic reality in China. Based on the study, this paper suggests ways of minimising the gap in ELF awareness. While this paper appreciates Chinese philosophy of education, the focus is on promoting awareness of English in relation to its sociocultural context and considering "imagined communities" in the learning so as to come to terms with sociolinguistic reality.

Keywords: ELF awareness, language education, China, imagined communities

中国的英语教育如何影响中国大学生的ELF意识形成

提要

本文从语言教育的角度探讨什么是英语作为通用语（ELF）意识，聚焦中国大学生群体，选取24个中国大学生进行半结构性访谈。研究者认为，中国大学生身处于英语语言日趋多样性的时代，身处于多语种英语使用者日益成为英语使用者大多数的背景之下，面临英语作为通用语正在成为以英语为媒介进行交流的主要用语模式的趋势。尽管如此，研究发现，中国大学生对于英语的理解仍然局限于以本族语英语一元模式为主导。通过受访对象的描述，我们可以了解到，在中国，语言教育在语言意识形态和语言现实之间充当介质，影响学生对语言现象的认识。根据研究结果，本文讨论如何填补ELF意识上的不足，从尊重中国教育哲学的角度，重点讨论如何提升对英语的社会环境的认识，以及如何借助于“想象共同体”使英语学习与时代接轨。

关键词 ELF 意识，语言教育，中国，想象共同体

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1. Introduction

Research into English as a lingua franca (ELF) has correspondingly set an agenda for 'a relationship that has to be mediated' between English as a subject matter and English as a sociolinguistic phenomenon (Widdowson 2003: 94). That is to say, traditional conceptualization of English, which is exclusively based on NESs' monolingual experience, is outdated and needs to be reconsidered in order to capture the changing phenomenon of 'this thing called English' (Seidlhofer 2011: 1). An ensuing challenge arises to English language teaching practice, which is traditionally centred on NES-oriented conceptualisation of English. The mediation is thus foregrounded by the awareness of ELF as distinguishable from a set of beliefs residing with the function of English as a foreign language (EFL). In Dewey (2012) and Sifakis (2014), this idea is central to teacher training programmes in respect of ELF perspectives, representing a transformative approach. In addition, it has become increasingly clear that ELF awareness is helpful in ELF pedagogy, which sees it impossible for teachers to feed students with fixed or stable forms of English and attaches the importance to accommodation and flexibility (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Seidlhofer 2011).

English has long been central to the discourse of foreign language education in China. However, the unprecedented spread of English highlights the lingua franca role of this language today and points to the limitations of understanding English revolving around its historical custody by native English speakers (NESs). This urges the evaluation of English language education as to whether the subject matter of English in education represents what is happening in real life situation where English is used. This article thus reports on a study, which examines Chinese university students' awareness of ELF, based on semi-structured interviews with 24 Chinese university students. The findings allow for the discussion of how teachers can 'mediate' and support students in learning English purposively in China today.

2. Background

In China, English is becoming more relevant and more accessible to Chinese university students as a lingua franca than a foreign language. This is accompanied by the vigorous spread of English along with the increase of Chinese engagement in globalisation and the Internet where English resources are available. Whereas English was mainly used by 'English talents'¹ in Chinese job markets for the purpose

¹ The term English talents (英语人才) was once buzz words in Chinese job markets, where there was strong demand for professionals who were good at English particularly. Those people often held degrees in English language study.

of communication with NESs (Wang forthcoming), English has become a language serving as the medium of communication between Chinese speakers, who have a wide range of English proficiency, and non-Chinese speakers, who are not necessarily from native English speaking contexts. While China has made successful bids for hosting various international events and conferences, Chinese university students are more likely to witness and experience the use of ELF than before.

Language education and testing have undergone frequent change and reform in China. This is visible in numerous media reports and academic discussion that revolve around English education and testing in the Chinese context (e.g. 王守仁 2006, 张尧学 2003, unknown 2003, unknown 2013, unknown 2014, Wang 2007). The discussion concerns to improve Chinese university students' communication skills, to bring in new technology into language classrooms, and to reconsider the weighting of English in relation to other subjects of learning. Nonetheless, while the change in the role of English from a foreign language to a lingua franca has a lot to offer to language education and testing (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins and Leung 2013, Seidlhofer 2011), such change remains to be addressed in English education and testing in the Chinese context. That is to say, ELT principles remain to be exclusively oriented towards NESs in China. On the other hand, the Eighth International Conference of English as a Lingua Franca, which was recently held in Beijing, brought Chinese ELT professionals and researchers together and witnessed the discussion of what ELT practitioners should and could do in response to the rising role of English as a lingua franca in China. Chinese university students thus encounter language education, which seems to be open to change and, simultaneously, receives the legacy of EFL.

3. Previous research

A wealth of recent research on ELF attitudes has led to the notions of *awareness of ELF*, *ELF awareness*, or being *ELF-aware*. In a broad sense, these notions capture language attitudes which show some knowledge of English playing the role of lingua franca arising with the globalisation of English. As widely accepted among linguists, the role of English as a lingua franca departs from that of a foreign language (e.g. Jenkins 2006, 2015a; Seidlhofer 2011). Wang (2012) investigates Chinese speakers' attitudes towards their own English in intercultural communication and divides their attitudes into EFL-oriented and ELF-oriented beliefs by drawing on Jenkins's (2006) distinction between EFL and ELF. In her study, EFL-oriented beliefs align with the focus on the framework of reference to native English and fit in what Jenkins (2006) describes as modern languages system, which includes English, French, Chinese, Spanish and many other languages within different geographical boundaries. On the

other hand, ELF-oriented beliefs share some common ground with the multilingualism in English, with those participants evaluating the value of Chinese speakers' English in its own right and accepting the forms that would have been expected to conform to 'the' established norms as provided by monolingual native English speakers. Although the term *ELF awareness* is not used in her thesis, Wang's (2012) analysis of Chinese speakers' language attitudes focuses on the knowledge of ELF in its sociolinguistic context and the willingness to accept ELF users' Englishes as legitimate, which are both primary in the study of ELF awareness (as seen in Dewey 2012, Sifakis 2014, and Wang 2015a).

A few other studies engage the notion of ELF awareness and offer implications for the conceptualisation of ELF awareness. Dewey's (2012) work focuses on how much the teacher participants are aware of the phenomenon of ELF, leading to his argument that being ELF-aware is not enough but action needs to be taken to implement the recognition of the phenomenon of ELF in ELT practice. His point resembles what Seidlhofer (2011: 69) describes as "a conceptual gap" between "an awareness of the existence of ELF on the one hand, and a denial of its legitimacy as a use of language". Sifakis (2014) goes further to consider explicit knowledge about English and its development to be useful in developing ELF awareness. He also suggests a transformative approach in promoting teacher awareness of ELF (Sifakis 2014). That is to say, teacher participants on the training programmes should be transformed to the persons who are willing to influence their future students and develop their students' acceptance of ELF. Wang (2015a) proceeds from the points made by Dewey (2012) and Sifakis (2014) respectively to explore what ELF awareness is and how to raise student awareness of ELF in educational settings. She (2015a) accepts that the knowledge about ELF is a crucial part of ELF awareness and further considers what the scope of the knowledge about ELF is. While suggesting some literature as sources of the knowledge about ELF (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins 2015a, Mauranen 2012, Seidlhofer 2011), Wang (2015a) emphasizes the need to understand how ELF works today to suit its users' purposes in current sociolinguistic contexts. In addition, Wang (2015a) sees the appreciation of ELF in its own right as another important factor in ELF awareness, which implies the challenge to the exclusive reference to native English. In short, despite various depths and different focuses, the research touched upon ELF awareness takes the common position that ELF awareness involves, but is not limited to, the knowledge of ELF. As those studies claim, ELF awareness is also about applying the knowledge of ELF in current ELT profession to challenge the predominance of native English orientation and to influence real life practice in English-medium communication or education.

Nonetheless, the challenge arises as to what should be covered in terms of the knowledge about ELF for the purpose of raising ELF awareness in the discourse of English education. With the ever-expanding frontier of ELF research, the knowledge about ELF grows. A considerable body of research into ELF has allowed for our understanding that ELF users adapt their way of using English to suit their own purposes and this leads to their ELF not conforming to established norms of native English and to the complexity, hybridity, fluidity, and super diversity of ELF. While I am writing this paper, Jenkins (2015b) has ushered in the third phase of ELF theorisation following her revisiting of the first two phases of ELF conceptualisation. According to Jenkins (2015b), the first stage of ELF research shares a World Englishes paradigm, while in the second stage of ELF research, the focus moves from the notion of varieties to the notion of variations. She proposes the conceptualization of ELF by addressing the multilingual nature of ELF and foresees the future scenario presenting the third stage of ELF. Apart from the focus on the nature of ELF itself, other issues related to ELF also contribute to our understanding of ELF, including social, educational, political, cultural and ideological issues (e.g. Baker 2015, Jenkins 2007, 2014, Wang 2012, 2013). In Wang's (2012, 2013) study of Chinese speakers' language attitudes, some Chinese speakers who reveal ELF-oriented attitudes towards English continue to prefer the conformity to native English norms and view it as their ultimate goal, due to their concern for the institutional policy, which serves as the device to maintain the predominant position of EFL in China. That is to say, the understanding of institutional influence allows for the insight that Chinese speakers' ELF awareness is undermined by the institutional policy but their EFL preference is enhanced by the institutional factor. This is mirrored in Jenkins (2014), which provides strong criticism on institutional policy regarding language practice in an international university. While we should applaud the fruitful research into ELF, it would be reasonable to focus on the knowledge about ELF in relation to language education in order to understand the issue of ELF awareness in language education. This paper will focus on Chinese university students' ELF awareness in the discourse of language education and explore how their ELF awareness can be developed or impeded in their educational context.

4. ELF awareness in ELT classroom

This section discusses what constitutes ELF awareness with regards to the implication of ELF research for English classrooms. This paper proposes to examine classroom ELF awareness in three aspects: the sociolinguistic context of language education, the subject of language education, and the learner in language education.

The sociolinguistic context of language education includes both the educational environment within the classroom and the larger social world beyond the classroom. Pennycook (2001) criticises that language education is often conducted within the classroom as detached from the wider outside world. From applied linguists' perspective, supporting students in learning English purposively requires the subject of learning within educational settings to reflect the object being observed regarding how it works as sociolinguistic phenomenon (e.g. Leung 2013, McKay 2002, Seidlhofer 2011, Wang 2015b, Widdowson 2003). It is not difficult to understand that the awareness of what is happening with the use of English in real-life world will help to prepare students in the classroom for their potential English-medium encounters outside the classroom. Nonetheless, it deserves deliberation where the focus should be directed to in respect of the larger social world. Take corpus for example. Corpus-informed language teaching does allow for the reflection of how English is used in real-life encounters. While native English corpora reflect the use of English in monolingual settings, ELF corpora reflect the use of English in multilingual settings. As observed in the larger social world, the unprecedented spread of English has led to the changed makeup of users of English. That is, the number of NNEs increases drastically and goes beyond that of NESs. This is accompanied with the rising role of ELF for both NNEs and NESs in contrast with the traditional role of English as a foreign language (EFL) for NNEs and that of English as a native language (ENL) for NESs. The research into ELF in response to this phenomenon reveals that the different roles imply different ways of using English and that different approaches to English are required to understand how English plays those different roles (e.g. Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins 2007, Mauranen and Ranta 2009). The traditional establishment of English education in NNE contexts receives the legacy of traditional SLA research and thus revolves around the exclusive reference to NESs' English, which is core to the assumption about EFL but irrelevant and even problematic in real world ELF practices. Given that ELF is a newly noticed phenomenon² in the wider social world, the above-said linguists have cautioned the gap between what is taught within the classroom and what is happening outside the classroom. It is thus high time to investigate the extent to which the ELF phenomenon is realised and reflected in learning settings so as to seek solutions to the gap, if it remains. In particular, this paper undertakes the investigation in the Chinese context of higher education.

The subject factor regards the understanding of "English" in English education. The development of ELF research has urged the reconstruction of "the thing that is

² Jennifer Jenkins makes this point in her live discussion on the 2015 MOOC Understanding Language: Learning and Teaching /Global Englishes. As she notes, the phenomenon of ELF has long existed but researchers did not start to study it until quite recent.

called English” (Seidlhofer 2011: 1). Traditional approach to English, which resembles the treatment of languages as linguistic systems constituted of discrete forms, becomes obsolete. ELF research leads to the view of English as practice-based, evolving, fluid and multilingual (e.g. Baker 2015, Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins 2015b, Mauranen 2012, Seidlhofer 2011). While an all-around understanding of this reconstructed concept certainly points to the far-reaching implications for English education, I would like to highlight two features of the nature of ELF, which are particularly relevant to the goal in English education. One feature resides with the diversity of English resulted from its lingua franca role. It is an increasing consensus that English is no longer ‘the’ English but Englishes in plural. The global spread of English has led to the global ownership of English, with NNEs making English their own and creating Englishes that are different from ‘the’ English generated in its historical home (Widdowson 2003). Another feature is the fluidity of English in playing the role of lingua franca. ELF users adapt their way of using English and draw on communicative resources available to them to suit their own needs and wants. This leads to the non-conformity to established norms of English and challenges the assumption that NNEs should conform to native English in intercultural communication. Thus, the sociolinguistic reality of English diversity and fluidity raises the tension with the representation of English in current language education where English is often treated as an entity from a monolingual perspective, which defers to NESs’ English and excludes other possible ways of using English. The awareness of ELF thus raises a series of questions regarding language choices in English education: what kind(s) of English represent the nature of English today? What kind of English should be learned and taught today?

Given the focus on Chinese university students’ ELF awareness, this paper sees the learner factor as central in English learning and investigates the extent to which learners’ awareness in relation to ELF is developed in learning process. Before I proceed to explore the learner factor, it is useful to bring up the point that ELF functions as an additional language, which should be learned by both NNEs and NESs in order to succeed in intercultural communications (e.g. Seidlhofer 2003). However, mainstream research on second language learning is likely to focus on the target language as native English and hold the assumption that L2 learners become engaged in native English culture through the learning process. This is problematic in the world where English spreads to function as a lingua franca today. ELF research offers implications to the reconsideration of issues discussed in second language learning. For example, the pedagogical goal is to enable NNEs to develop intercultural competence and awareness from an ELF perspective rather than native speaker competence theorised by Chomsky (Baker 2015). Research also shows that ELF users do not intend to claim the membership in the native English speech

community but they are interested in becoming global citizens (e.g. Jenkins 2007, Wang 2012). Therefore, whilst traditional approach to second language learning is native English oriented, adjustment is needed to re-approach second language learner in response to the sociolinguistic development revolving around the rise of ELF.

In this paper, the concept of learner is considered in terms of learning practices in educational settings. Given the well-observed predominance of native English as a goal in current ELT profession in non-native English speaking contexts (e.g. Jenkins 2007, Seidlhofer 2011, Wen 2012, Widdowson 2003), I see the importance of agency and critical engagement, which allows for the challenge to the status quo, in the learning, for the purpose of ELF awareness-raising. As van Lier (2008: 163) points out, "learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner, more so than on any 'inputs' that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook", although the emphasis on learner agency does not deny the role of the teacher and textbooks in "mediating" the learning. In addition, van Lier (2008: 163-164) sees agency as "a social event" that posits "a contextually enacted way of being in the world". Following this, I consider learner factor with the focus on the understanding of how learners enact their identities in the learning process in response to the context they are situated in. Adopting an ELF perspective, I do not mean to suggest the replacement of ELF for EFL but argue for the space of ELF as alternative paradigm in Chinese ELT. That is to say, I do not object L2 learners' option for native English as their goal of learning or their desire to affiliate with native English speaking communities. Yet, it would be problematic that L2 learners conceive native English speakers exclusively as their interlocutors with whom they would like to align. It is necessary for L2 learners to be aware of the suitability of language choices for different contexts of language use. This involves L2 learners' critical engagement with different language choices available in the learning. That is, the resistance of or the challenge to what is imposed upon L2 learners or what is taken for granted regarding their learning (Pennycook 2001). In Canagarajah's (2006) work, second language learners project themselves as active agents in the learning by negotiating their local identity in their second language practice. In the case of Chinese students who are situated in the language classroom that is situated in the ELF-relevant environment, a few questions deserve thinking: whose voice, culture, language and community are represented in the learning process? Do the representation suit purposive learning for the future use of English in real-life situations? These questions guide my exploration into identity enactment in language education in Chinese universities.

5. Empirical inquiry into ELF awareness in Chinese education

This paper focuses on Chinese university students' awareness of ELF as to how it operates within language education in China, by looking at the students' language attitudes in response to the ELF phenomenon. The data reported here were retrieved through 24 semi-structured interviews with Chinese university students. Interview questions were not used but prompts were used (see Appendix 1). These participants were recruited from a university in China, including 12 students from the English department and another 12 students from other disciplines. Each interview lasted for at least 45 minutes, while some participants tend to speak more than I expected and the longest interview lasted for 90 minutes. Mandarin Chinese was used in the interviews, in that I, as the interviewer, shared the first language background with the participants so as to create the conversation easy for both parties. Transcription and data analysis were undertaken in Chinese, while the presented data were translated into English for the purpose of this paper.

My focus was on the content of the participants' utterance, although attention was paid to some discursal features, such as, emphasis, pause, and laughter, to help confirm or rethink the interpretation of their meaning. The rich data allowed for some insight into ideologies underneath their utterance, the sources of ideologies, and the challenges and difficulties in the participants' understanding of English in relation to its sociolinguistic reality. Among the interesting findings, language education appears to be a major factor influencing the participants' perceptions of English. In what follows, I shall present this influence in details.

5.1. Language education as a source of language attitudes

Language education appears to be a major factor on the participants' perception of English and serves as an interface between linguistic realities and language attitudes. The participants' view of English shows a strong relevance to their learning experience in the educational context of China. When I prompted in different ways in order to find out their understanding of English, the participants unanimously framed their response with their understanding of language learning and therefore established a link between English and 'the language' in their learning experience. As seen in extract 1, the relation between Lili and English was established through learning.

(1)

Interviewer: [...] Do you hope the [variant] usages of English frequently found among Chinese learners and users to be accepted and then to become our own norms?

Lili: Hard to say. In my personal view, I still hope I can, I mean, I hope [them] not to be accepted. Although I can't achieve [the goal for native English], I don't want [Chinese speakers' usages of English] to be accepted.

Interviewer: Why?

Lili: If they were accepted, I wouldn't believe that the language (based on those usages) for me to learn is English. I don't know how to describe that kind of feeling.

While I was asking whether the usage of English by Chinese learners and users were acceptable, Lili made response by automatically framing her association with English in making sense of what learning language meant for her. Lili explicitly indicated her rejection of Chinese speakers' usages and showed a strong belief that native English should be maintained regardless the unattainability of the goal for native English. When the interviewer attempted to pursue the reasons behind her rejection, she simply rephrased and emphasised her belief that Chinese speakers' own usages of English will change the content of the thing labelled as English. She was unremitting in defence of native English, regardless possible benefits of accepting Chinese speakers' own English. She admitted that it was difficult giving reasons to support her language preference. Lili's utterance presents the 'myth' of native English. As Kramsch (2009: 9) notes, "it is when subjective beliefs are made to look as if they were natural, that myth distorts and manipulates". The analysis of Lili's utterance seems to point to a link between English learning and "myth" of native English in Lili's context. This motivated me to look further into the influence of language education on students' language attitudes and examine the extent to which ELF awareness was indicative among the participants.

5.2. Impacts on ELF awareness

Three aspects of ELF awareness were examined, following the framework established in section 4. The first aspect was the influence of language education on language choice, dealing with the issue what kind of English was preferred. The second was the influence of language education on learners' identity and the learning. The third related to the reflection of external sociolinguistic reality within educational settings. In this respect, however, the influence of language education can be described as non-influence or failure to influence. The data showed the incapability of language education in helping students make sense of the sociolinguistic phenomenon that happens around them. While the data revealed the impacts or non-impact, it also allowed for the understanding of how the influence took shape. I shall use examples to illustrate these impacts or non-impact in what follows.

5.2.1. On language choice

The data demonstrated that language education guided the development of language preference among the participants in two ways. In one way, language education developed the myth of native English; in another way, language education maintained the authority of native English in the use of English. Language preference in educational policy found its way into the participants' language attitudes. Examination and university requirement emerged as the major devices of implementing the top-down influence on language preference. As seen in extract 2, examination serves as a perceived reference regarding what kind of English is acceptable: while native Englishes are accepted, other Englishes are excluded.

(2)

Interviewer: [...] So why should we follow their [i.e. NESs'] norms? Why can't we have our own norms?

Yulin: NORMS? I think this involves the essence of language. After all, their countries are where English originated. We can stipulate our norms. But if so, we are making it (English) pointless.

Interviewer: What do you mean by the point of English?

Yulin: I mean, for example, examination. I am tested English. I am tested American English or British English. What you suggested is obviously China English.

Yulin's articulation reveals very similar view of English as that made by Lili in extract 1. That is, English showing Chinese speakers' own norms should not be considered as English, while the quality of English is closely associated with the historical home of English. When asked to elaborate what makes English English, Yulin turns to language education for reference. For him, the answer is obvious, dependent on what is accepted and excluded by language testing. This evidences Shohamy's (2007) view that education and testing influences choices of language codes.

While participants like Lili and Yulin simply accepted or rejected certain language choices according to what education accepted or rejected, some participants were able to form their own judgement and evaluate the acceptability of usages of English that do not conform to native English, with the focus on intelligibility or communicative effects. However, their positive attitudes towards non-conformity did not motivate their choices for other forms than native English and they came to terms with the authority of native English. Extract 3 echoes those participants' voice, revealing how the choice of Standard English was made and how the bias over other forms of English was maintained:

(3)

Yifei: I think it's all right as long as my English can make me understood. I don't mind how close my English is to Standard English.

Interviewer: Hmm, then will you seek-

Yifei: -HOWEVER, the reality is that we're required to use [Standard English] [...] the criteria that the university uses, that teachers use, give no space to what we said just now, that the English is all right as long as the user makes himself understood. So, me and other students, until the reality has been changed, we'll work towards the standard, I'll aim for the standard.

Yifei indicates the conflict between her personally prioritized rationale and the socially accepted norm. Her articulation suggests that her choice should not be interpreted as one about language but one about the consequence of obeying or disobeying the rules upheld in the educational context where she was situated.

5.2.2. On the learner

The data also showed the influence of language education as to how the participants perceived language learning process and their role in learning. Extract 4 exemplifies a typical view of English learning among the participants and offers some explanation of how this typical view took into shape.

(4)

Dapeng: Those errors often occur and we often correct them. So it is easy to identify when I see them.

Interviewer: why to correct them?

Dapeng: We think they are errors. It is our habitual thought that they are errors.

Interviewer: Habitual thought?

Dapeng: We're learning English. That is, we're learning their language. We should learn [English] in respect of THEIR culture and THEIR language. So we say they [i.e. variations from ENL] are errors in our subconscious mind.

Interviewer: Habitual thought, subconscious mind, how did this happen?

Dapeng: We've been learning English for so many years. Teachers have been teaching us this all the time.

Dapeng recalled his learning experience to illustrate what language education offered to students in learning contexts in China and how the habitual thought about errors was developed. He owed to his teachers in developing the beliefs that English meant to 'their English' and that learning English meant copying 'their' voices in 'their' positions. What he says reminds us of the assumption about language learning that "non-native speaker is an empty receptacle for the rules of usage and

the rules of use that govern the language practices of native speakers” (Kramsch 2009: 28). The data shows none of students’ critical engagement in language and culture represented in formal language learning process (c.f. Canagarajah 1999, Pennycook 2001).

5.2.3. Incapability in explaining sociolinguistic phenomenon

What students learn about English in formal education cannot explain what they observe or encounter regarding the use of English in real life situations. All participants mentioned life experience or observation of successful use of English that does not conform to native English. Some of them were reluctant consulting the norms that they learned in formal education, holding the view, which resembles what Ranta’s (2010) participants claim, that English within classrooms is different from English out of classrooms. Some of the participants tried to find a compromise, for example, by labelling the successful use of non-conformity as ‘tolerable errors’. Still others were confused, struggling to make sense of the gap between what is learned about English in formal education and what is happening to English in real life encounters. Jin, for example, explicitly expressed his confusion:

(5)

Jin: Sometimes I think, for example during the days of Olympic Games, or of World Expo, many people, their grammar might be erroneous, but they could roughly express their ideas, they DID communicate.

Interviewer: Hmm, do you accept their way of using English?

Jin: (.) To be honest, I don’t accept their English within my heart. But their English really worked. Why?

Jin noticed that “erroneous” English enabled communication and he emphasised this point, which, as he admitted, he did not like to accept. There was some hesitation before he responded to the interviewer’s question. He then expressed his confusion why what he observed happened to English did not fit in what was implanted in his mind.

5.3. Discussion

Language education is evidenced in this paper to serve as a prominent factor in developing language attitudes of the educated in the Chinese university context. It is native English-oriented and finds support in the philosophy of learning which emphasises the accumulation of skills and knowledge on the receiver’s end. It follows that language learning means copying forms of language generated in monolingual native English speakers’ speech communities, with years being spent

enhancing the “habitual thought” or influencing the “subconscious” mind (in the participant’s word, see extract 4) regarding what is “correct” and what is “wrong” with the reference to native English norms. The data reveal that testing and university requirements are devices to drive students to conform to native English norms. This seems to align with many researchers’ observation of how language is manipulated in various contexts (e.g. Lippi-Green 1994, Shohamy 2006). With the focus on educational context, this paper leads to the question how to address the issue as established in this study that the changing status of English is neglected in China’s English education. I will discuss this by considering the Chinese philosophy of learning in general and the subject of learning in particular.

This paper accepts that the philosophy of learning needs to be appreciated on the basis of different contexts. While it is well recognised that there is not a single way to teach, various conceptions of learning suit different purposes (Seedhouse, Walsh and Jenks 2010). The learning and the learner’s role in the Chinese context could be understood as culture-specific and purpose-driven, if taken Confucian philosophy as part of Chinese culture into consideration, with the reference to the social and educational context in China. While many teachers are often worried that Chinese students are “quiet” and “shy”, Chinese students are active and engaged learners in Chinese culture (Peng 2014, Wang 2015b). The recent BBC programme “Are our kids tough enough? Chinese school” (BBC, 2015) is controversial, attracting comments from different backgrounds. Whilst Chinese way of teaching is horrifying for British students and British audience of the programme, Chinese teachers are proud of their way of helping their students become competitive in the global job or educational market.

What is maintained within this language education system, however, is now calling into questions. While English as a school subject is treated as detached from its social dimensions, the omnipresent spread of English has ushered Chinese students into the times when they have the opportunities of experiencing or observing how English works in social encounters. Jin’s articulation (see extract 5) is an example of students who are confused by what is informed through language education and what is observed in life experience. Some students (e.g. Lili and Yulin, see extracts 1 and 2) are obsessed with the myth of native English, while others (e.g. Yifei, see extract 3) compromise on their language belief to suit the educational requirements, which reify the exclusive reference to native English that is no longer relevant for Chinese students today. In short, language education as a major source of Chinese university students’ perceptions of English has offered little to develop a good awareness of ELF. Or even worse, current language education hinders the development of ELF awareness. That is, English language realities are not reflected

in English language education, which however helps to feed the myth of native English into the participants' language attitude.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Chinese philosophy of learning in relation to the attitudinal development, I would like to focus on the issue, as identified in this paper, of the disconnection between what is presented about English in the Chinese university context and what is happening to English in the wider sociolinguistic context and discuss what can be done to improve Chinese students' ELF awareness. In light of this, attention needs to be paid to the native English-orientation in language education, which is detached from Chinese students' own identification in the context where they encounter English. While the pursuit for native English or Standard native English complies with the desire to get integrated into monolingual native English communities, we need to bear in mind that Chinese students are situated in the sociolinguistic change, which opens up opportunities for them to engage in multilingual communities of practice, where there are various other possibilities of using English than sticking to native English as the norm of communication. This will in turn invite our reflection on language education and deliberate what teachers can do to make students' learning experience more relevant to their real-life language experience.

6. Pedagogical suggestion

This paper establishes the mismatch between English in the Chinese university context and English in the sociolinguistic environment. Language education plays the role in maintaining this mismatch, by accepting the myth of native English or constraining language choices. It thus follows that language education needs to change to address the sociolinguistic reality. This is certainly an enormous task and requires us to think where to start.

Researchers have explored various ways of making English language classrooms more ELF-relevant in terms of different aspects of language learning. Among publications featuring this development (e.g. Baker 2012, Cogo and Dewey 2012, Galloway and Rose 2014, Suzuki 2011), Bowles and Cogo (2015) provide a collection of works by international researchers from different local contexts, suggesting ELF-informed enactment of teaching materials, syllabus, language awareness, teacher education and teaching approach. Jenkins and Leung (2013) address issues of language testing and propose the notions of "educated speaker of English" and "competent user" in place of "native speaker". Hall (2014: 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 in terms of their purposes. These works, mostly

focusing on the educator's engagement, are certainly useful for the English educational profession to borrow ideas to integrate an ELF perspective in language classrooms in China. This paper allows for some suggestion with the focus on the learner in the learning. What follows will discuss this aspect in particular.

Given the low awareness of ELF among Chinese university student, an urgent task for teachers as mediators in the learning process is to consider how to help students realise the myth of native English and their linguistic rights. As identified in Wang (2015a), explicit knowledge input, analysis of authentic ELF data and exploration of ELF experience would help to promote ELF awareness. While the study foregrounds the impacts of language education on students' language attitudes and the teacher's role in reifying the focus on accuracy, it also reveals students' voice questioning what is taught about English and their dissatisfaction with the constraints on their choice of English forms. This urges teachers to address the issue as to how to understand English in today's world and reflect on their own language attitudes in terms of the sociolinguistic change. This also evidences the agency of Chinese students in learning English and undermines the stereotype of Chinese students as "submissive" receivers of authoritative instruction (e.g. Wen and Clément 2003: 19). In turn, we can foresee positive possibilities of Chinese university students' achievement through language awareness development.

In addition, the focus on the learner implies that teachers need to appreciate students' needs and wants through the learning. As identified in this paper, the gap in the understanding of English lies in the isolation of learning from the world outside the classroom. Given this, Norton's (2001) reconceptualisation of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) can be extended to language classrooms in China so as to make Chinese students' learning experience more relevant to various contexts where they possibly use English for real-life purposes.

The notion of "imagined communities" originally comes from Anderson's (2006: 6) definition of nations as "imagined communities" of "sovereign" within boundaries. According to Anderson, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (2006: 6); and members of communities are in association with each other in their imagination. Norton (2001) introduces the term "imagined communities" to applied linguistics and uses it to explain second language learners' identity establishment through their affiliation with their potential interlocutors across time and space. Norton's (2001) work has inspired many followers (e.g. Kanno 2003, Norton and Toohey 2011, Pavlenko and Norton 2007, Ryan 2006, among others) with the focus on the relationships between the learner and the community where the learner imagines

participating in communication, and between the learner and the potential interlocutors with whom the learner imagines speaking. Norton's work (2000, 2001, among others) also lends support to the understanding of ELF identities. Jenkins (2005, 2007) considers the development of ELF as dependent on how ELF users perceive their English in the future: that is, how ELF users associate their use of English in particular ways with desired achievement will influence their choice of language forms. Subsequently, Jenkins (2014) further discusses the relevance of the concept of "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006) for ELF concept. Her main idea is that ELF members are associated with each other in "psychological spaces" where English is the common language through which members can communicate (Jenkins 2014: 37).

It is therefore meaningful that the learner can benefit from the learning and teaching based on the concept of "imagined community". In response to the global spread of English, the learner should be encouraged to image different possibilities that s/he would use English. While China is becoming increasingly relevant to the research on ELF (Crystal 2008, Jenkins 2015c, Wang 2015c, forthcoming), Chinese speakers are increasingly engaging in various international work and activities. Chinese university students should be encouraged to discuss where they hope to work and whom they would encounter to communicate with English. Based on the discussion, the teacher could urge students to think what kind of English they might encounter and how they would react. It would be useful to use some real-life ELF data and examples to trigger the discussion. While the focus is on what the learner desires to do in "imagined communities", it is equally important for the learner to imagine, for example, what s/he would do with her/his own English, whether s/he can pretend to be a native speaker, whether s/he would like to project her/his own non-nativeness that s/he shares with the interlocutor from other non-native English speaking contexts³. To conclude, "English language teachers in different parts of the globe may consider the ways in which our own multilingual classrooms can be reimagined as places of possibility for students with a wide range of histories, investments, and desires for the future" (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 678).

³ These questions are used for examples. A body of research on ELF identities offers the inspiration, for example, Cogo and Jenkins (2010), Jenkins (2007), Nogami (2015), Wang (2012), among others.

Key to transcription conventions

,	Continuing pitch contour
.	Pause shorter than three seconds
[...]	Material omitted
UTTERANCE	Emphatic utterance (i.e. with raised pitch or volume)
[utterance]	Author's clarification or elaboration
@	Laughter
<@>utterance<	Speaking with laughter
@>	
Utterance-	Utterance being interrupted
-utterance	Interruption
R	Researcher

Appendix 1: Interview design

1. Opening topics:

- The feeling about the questionnaire survey
- The feeling about the research topic as described in the information sheet
- Any question about the research

2. Issues to be explored:

- Experience of using English
- Social context of English for Chinese speakers
- Social context of their attitudes
- The function of English for Chinese speakers
- Attitudes towards English, towards their own English, and towards native speaker English
- Awareness of ELF, awareness of different Englishes
- Attitudes towards Chinese speakers' English in intercultural communication
- Native-like or Chinese-like?
- Would you like to be recognized as a Chinese speaker of English or be misrecognized as a native speaker of English?
- Do you consider yourself as a user or a learner?

3. Closing question:

- Any free comments stimulated by the project

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Acknowledgement

Thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and thank the editor for her time, effort and patience in the production process of this paper.