

## The Attitudes of Chinese ELT Stakeholders toward Different English Language Varieties

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### Abstract

The globalization of the English language has produced various indigenized English varieties, posing a challenge to the conventional monolithic view of English, particularly the traditional practice of upholding Inner Circle English as the gold standard in English language teaching (ELT). Against this backdrop as well as the current gigantic size of English as a foreign language (EFL) education in China, a large scale study was conducted via questionnaire survey and interview to investigate the attitudes of Chinese ELT stakeholders toward different English language varieties. This article reports on part of the findings of this study based on the data collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 students, 14 teachers and eight EFL program administrators from six Chinese universities. The analysis of data reveals that the three participants groups as an entirety regarded Inner Circle English as being (more) standard, authentic and intelligible, and upheld this English variety as the teaching model and learning target. The vast majority of the participants were also found uncognizant of the discrimination against Outer and Expanding Circle English initiated by the promotion of Inner Circle English in English language teaching (ELT). Although a certain proportion of the teachers and administrators displayed critical awareness on this issue, they argued that the discrimination is inescapable or inevitable. All these findings indicate the prevalence of the conventional pro-nativeness ideology among Chinese ELT stakeholders and by extension the tenacity of native-speakerism across the terrain of EFL education in China.

**Keywords:** attitudes, Chinese ELT stakeholders, English language varieties, teaching/learning model, linguistic discrimination

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### Introduction

In the past few decades, a plethora of studies on World Englishes (WE; Kachru, 1985; Seargeant, 2012), English as a lingua Franca (ELF; Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011) have been conducted, displaying ever-increasing variations of the English language in contemporary world and debunking the long-standing myth on the ownership of English (Widdowson, 1994). In the meantime, many other studies have been uncovering the inequalities between English and other languages (Phillipson, 1992), the unequal status of different English language varieties (Tupas, 2015), the ideological nature of Standard English (StE) and the sociopolitical essence of the native speaker (NS) construct (Bonfiglio, 2013). Inspired by and interconnected with these sociolinguistic studies, much scholarship on English language teaching (ELT) has been advocating an epistemic break from the conventional monolithic view of the English language and its concomitant practice in support of Inner Circle as the teaching model and learning target (e.g., Canagarajah, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2016).

Despite these scholarly efforts, a strong pro-nativeness ideology still prevails in ELT, as is evident from the perceptions of ELT stakeholders on different English language varieties (Jenkins, 2015). Matsuda (2003) conducted a study in Japan, finding that most of her student participants regarded native speakers (NSs) from Inner Circle countries as the owner of English and viewed their English as StE, with Japanese English depreciated as being incorrect or inauthentic. A similar mentality can be observed from a great number of EFL teachers and students of other Expanding Circle countries (e.g., Choe, 2007; Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). At the same time, Inner Circle English has been found upheld generally as the pedagogical model and NS accent as the learning target (e.g., Timmis, 2002). Recent studies disclose the continuity of this pro-nativeness mindset among ELT stakeholders. For instance, Ahn (2014) found that most of her research subjects (204 South Korean English teachers) declared not to adopt Korean English as a pedagogical variety, arguing that Korean English is incorrect English created by non-native speakers of English" (ibid., p. 213). Similar voices were articulated by students and teachers in other Expanding and even Outer Circle contexts, such as Hong Kong (Chan, 2017) and Thailand (Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2020) and Fiji (Hundt, Zipp, & Huber, 2015).

The endorsement for Inner Circle English, particularly Anglo-American English among ELT stakeholders is also shown in studies focusing on EFL education in mainland China (henceforth, China). For instance, all the participants (1,261 undergraduate students from different disciplinary areas) in Hu (2004) regarded Anglo-American English as StE; 64.8% of the 171 undergraduate students (English majors and non-English majors) in

Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) expected to acquire NS accent. Similar attitudes reverberate in recent studies (e.g., Fang, 2016; Wei, 2016). However, the study of He and Zhang (2010) suggests that 43.4% of the 795 non-English major students – an unneglectable figure – preferred accented intelligibility. More recently, Si (2019) found that most of his student participants expected WE-informed materials to be included in ELT curriculum, though perceiving NS-based materials as being essential. These findings seem to show that the conventional standpoint on the pedagogical model and learning objective starts to change on the part of students, an issue that warrants further study.

All of the aforementioned studies aimed to investigate the viewpoints of students and/or teachers on different English language varieties and on which variety or varieties should serve as teaching model and learning target. However, none of them has moved further to explore their perceptions on the inequalities between Inner Circle or NS English and other English language varieties. As with students and teachers, ELT program administrators (henceforth, administrators) are engaged in everyday ELT practice. Yet, few attitudinal studies has taken them as research subjects. More limited in quantity are the studies that investigate simultaneously the viewpoints of students, teachers and administrators. In light of these limitations and the seeming shift from the conventional pro-nativeness stance among Chinese EFL students, a large scale study has been conducted to explore the mentality of three groups of Chinese ELT stakeholders – students, teachers and administrators – in relation to native-speakerism. This article will report on part of the findings of the large scale study in line with three questions presented as follows.

1. How do Chinese ELT stakeholders (students, teachers and administrators) perceive different English language varieties?
2. What variety or varieties do they expect to take as the teaching model and learning target?
3. In what way do they view the inequality between Inner Circle or NS English and other English language varieties?

### **Participant and Instrument**

Data related to this article were gathered through semi-structured interviews with three groups of ELT stakeholders at six Chinese universities, including 26 students and 14 teachers and eight administrators. When this study was conducted, the participants were all engaged in College English education – an EFL program for non-English-major undergraduate students in China. Based on national university rankings in the past few years, it can be said that the six universities represent to a great degree many Chinese universities of different academic levels. Moreover, the universities are located in different regions of China and differ in disciplinary background. In addition, the students come from different disciplinary areas; the teachers and administrators vary in respect of professional title, academic degree, age and length of work. All these factors contribute to the representativeness of the participants.

Three sets of interview questions were designed to investigate the perceptions of the three participant groups on different aspects of native-speakerism. Each set consists of about ten questions. Of the questions in each set, three or four items are targeted at exploring the perceptions of each participant group on the relative status of different English language varieties, the ideal English variety or varieties to serve as the teaching model and learning target, and the inequalities between NS English and the English of nonnative speaker (NNS). Each interview lasted about one hour, conducted individually via face-to-face conversation and/or email exchange at the convenience of the participants. Presented in the following section are the findings appertaining to the three aforementioned research questions.

### **Findings**

#### Perceived status of different English language varieties

The analysis of the data reveals the vibrancy of the native-speakerist ideology in support of Inner Circle English as being superior to Outer and Expanding English. Specifically, 88.5% (23) of the 26 students, 85.7% (12) of the 14 teachers and all of the eight administrators contended that Inner Circle English is StE or more standard than any other English language variety. In justifying this stance, most participants resorted to the construct of grammaticality. As Student-19 put it,

With English as the native language, native English speaking countries have the authoritative resources of the English language. *The grammar* [of their English] *is surely more precise and standard*. However, the English language of nonnative English speaking countries is transmitted from native English speaking countries. In the process of transmission, it is inevitable for English to collide with or to be integrated with local languages. *An idiosyncratic way of speaking English with local characteristics* is thereby formed. *It is ungrammatical* (Student-19; Emphasis added)

As with many other interviewees, Student-19 realized the indigenization of English, but considered the indigenized forms a sign of ungrammaticality. In evaluating NNS English, those interviewees took the grammatical rules of NS English as the benchmark, arguing “*These [syntactic] changes are ungrammatical in terms of the grammatical rules of the StE*” (Administrator-1).

At the same time, 65.4% (17) of the 26 students, 64.3% (9) of the 14 teachers and all of the eight administrators asserted that Inner Circle English is of authenticity and justified this standpoint by resorting mainly to the notion of historicity. In the words of Teacher-2.

[NNS English] is not normative as far as the English language itself is concerned. *It can only be said to be a derivative from NS English.* I only feel that English is an orthodox language belonging to Great Britain and America. *This transformed English is just a branch [...]* (Teacher-2; Emphasis added)

The “*source-derivative*” or “*root-branch*” metaphor in this excerpt displays the generally perceived status of different members within the family of Englishes and the degree to which different English language varieties are perceived as being authentic. Obviously, a hierarchical relationship between Inner Circle English and the other English varieties existed in the mind of Teacher-2.

69.2% (18) of the 26 students, 85.7% (12) of the 14 teachers and all of the eight administrators also argued that Inner Circle English has standard pronunciation or bear no local accent and is therefore (more) intelligible and applicable to a wide range of communication contexts. In addition to making broad comments on the intelligibility of Inner Circle English as most students and teachers did, the administrators turned to concrete examples to elaborate on this stance. For instance, Administrator-3 resorted to her personal experiences in America to prove the low intelligibility that NNS English is claimed to possess.

In the United States, many professors working at universities come from different parts of the world. For example, one of my teachers comes from Columbia. It is so difficult to understand his English. *When he delivered a lecture, I had to listen to him with my ears up.* It was really hard ... *But when listening to American English, I felt much more comfortable.* (Administrator-3; Emphasis added)

Administrator-3’s depreciation of NNS accent is represented in her exaggerating expression “*with my ears up*”. However, she “*felt much more comfortable*” with American English. Normally, these two phrases can evoke contradicting sensual and emotional reactions, which in turn represent and justify her pro-nativeness stance. Obviously, s/he failed to see that it is not the perceived problems of Columbian accent but his/her unfamiliarity with this accent that leads to his/her comprehension difficulties.

#### The ideal teaching model and learning target

Compared with the general agreement of the three participant groups on the perceived superiority of Inner Circle or NS English, the viewpoints of the three groups on teaching model and learning target are more complicated. 88.5% (23) of the 26 students expressed a desire to take Inner Circle English as the teaching and learning model; 73.1% (19) expected to acquire NS or NS-like pronunciation. All of the 14 teachers stated that they would like to follow NS norms in teaching English and 78.6% (11) expected their students to acquire NS accent. Reasons stated by those students and teachers are aligned with the popular claim that Inner Circle English or NS English is (more) standard, authentic and intelligible than any other English language variety. It is, however, noted that 71.4% (10) of them argued for the addition of China English to EFL curriculum, though insisting Inner Circle English as the essential component.

The eight administrators all stated that they do not require their fellow teachers to teach any certain English variety, particularly Inner Circle English, and pose no requirement for their students to learn certain English varieties. However, a pro-nativeness mentality was found reverberating underneath this seemingly liberal claim. As Administrator-5 stated, “*it is the ultimate objective to teach British or American English*”. This is also true of the remarks of Administrator-8. Although claiming that “*English is just a tool of communication*”, s/he stated that “*we need to follow this [NS] standard, which is what we pursue*”. It is evident that in the innermost part of his/her mind, Inner Circle English is the English proper and learning ideal. As s/he put it at length,

I often tell my fellow teacher that the concept of learning English is changing. It may be comparatively strict if we are required to teach English according to the [English language] standard of English speaking countries. *Well, we need follow this standard, which is what we pursue.* But it doesn’t matter if we are not able to reach this standard. [If thinking in this way], you will not feel our English is worse than theirs. If feeling the English we speak does not reach NS standard, students will be afraid of speaking English. This will affect the efficiency of our language learning. *English is just a tool of communication.* (Administrator-

8; Emphasis added)

#### Viewpoints on the inequality of different English language varieties

As regards whether the promotion of Inner Circle English in ELT entails discrimination against Outer and Expanding Circle English, all of the 26 students, 64.3% (9) of the 14 teachers and 75% (6) of the eight administrators provided a negative answer. In elaborating on this standpoint, most of them resorted to the superior merits that Inner Circle English has been assumed to possess, namely, Inner Circle English is (more) standard, authentic and intelligible. In the words of Student-25,

It entails no discrimination ... the reason for referring to the English language of [traditionally] native English speaking countries lies in that *their English is more acceptable, more standard and intelligible. [It is] easier to understand* due to the correct pronunciation, and it can help to *avoid misunderstandings* out of mixed pronunciations. Your interlocutors can understand what you say exactly. However, since nonnative English speaking countries do not have a perfect understanding of the English language, *their English has many ambiguous expressions and is not convenient for communication.* (Student-25; Emphasis added)

The traditional dichotomy between Inner Circle English versus Outer and Expanding Circle English is represented explicitly in this excerpt. For Student-25, it is linguistically correct and educationally sound to follow Inner Circle English. This is evident from his/her hypothetical future, namely, with NS pronunciation, “*it can help to avoid misunderstandings*” in communications.

In addition, the six administrators resorted to one neoliberalist construct, i.e., personal freedom, to deny the discrimination associated with the prioritization of Inner Circle English in ELT. For them, learners have the freedom to choose whatever English variety they like. As Administrator-1 put it,

*No, there is no discrimination.* That I don't choose a variety does not mean I hold discrimination against it. *I choose a variety because I like it.* I only have more preference for it, but it has nothing to do with prejudice. I can choose any one from A, B, C and D. I choose the one with which I am satisfied. I choose the one that I like best. This does not mean that I am prejudiced against the one that I do not choose. *That is what things are.* (Administrator-1; Italicized, my emphasis)

Implied in his/her logic, to choose whatever English language variety to learn is natural and value free. However, she seemed to be unaware what sustains “*That is what things are*”, particularly the social, political and economic factors that prop up personal choice or decision.

Although most of the interviewees denied the discrimination against Outer and Expanding Circle English, five teachers and two administrators provided affirmative answers but deemed it irresistible or inevitable due to the historical-present hegemony of the English speaking West as well as the global pro-nativeness practices wherein Anglo-American English and/or NS accent plays the gate-keeping role. Teacher-5 illustrated the irresistibility or inevitability with some concrete cases to do with different types of English pronunciation.

I think they [different English varieties] are not treated fairly. Sometimes, for example, when there is a speech contest or an examination for selecting news anchors, it is impossible [for you to succeed], if you have some accents. Normally, *[they] select those with authentic British or American pronunciation, [because] they are considered the best ...* if a person comes from India, the chance is quite narrow for him to succeed. (Teacher-5; Emphasis added)

Despite the awareness of linguistic discrimination, Teacher-5 and other ELT stakeholders still take Inner Circle English as the teaching/learning model. This psychological complex, i.e., “schizophrenia” (Jenkins, 2007) is prevalent among many ELT stakeholders, who subjugate themselves to Inner Circle English, despite their knowledge of the current pluralization of the English language and the equal communicative functionality of different English varieties.

#### **Discussion**

Findings presented in the preceding section are indicative of the vibrancy of the traditional pro-nativeness ideology among the three participant groups of this study.

With regard to the relative status of different English language varieties, most of the participants maintained that Inner Circle English is superior to Outer and Expanding Circle English. Specifically, it was claimed to be (more) standard due to its conformity to NS grammar, (more) authentic owing to its origin and long-term historical trajectory in Inner Circle Countries, and (more) intelligible because it is unaccented or bears no particular local

accents. As for whose/which English to learn/teach, most of the participants were inclined to uphold Inner Circle English as pedagogical model and NS pronunciation as learning target. The most obvious reason they maintained is aligned with the conventional belief in the superiority of Inner Circle English. In terms of whether the promotion of Inner Circle English in ELT entails discrimination against Outer and Expanding Circle English, the majority of the participants provided negative answers, contending that Inner Circle English is superb in (socio)linguistic terms and therefore entitled to promotion. Personal freedom is another perspective from which many administrators justified their stance. Although a certain proportion of the teachers and administrators were aware of the linguistic discrimination, they asserted that it is irresistible or inevitable due to the historical-present hegemony of Inner Circle countries as well as the pro-nativeness convention.

Observed from all these findings, the perceived linguistic superiority of Inner Circle or NS English serves as the basis for their pro-nativeness ideology among the three participant groups. However, the three constructs, standard, authenticity and intelligibility, are far more complicated than what they seem to be. According to (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008), standard language is a product of power; it is a linguistic variety used by a small group of social elites, but imposed upon the public as a prestigious norm. The construct of authenticity is adopted to describe the linguistic output assumed to possess the language features of a community (Eckert, 2003, p. 392). It entails an inseparable tie between language and location, such as nation, country or community (Lowe & Pinner, 2016, p. 32). Since each English language variety bears the culture of the particular setting where it operates, it should be regarded as authentic English. In addition, the interpretability of linguistic codes relies on the degree to which a person is familiar with those codes. Usually, “the greater the familiarity a speaker (native or non-native) has with a variety of English, the more likely it is that s/he will understand ... members of that speech community” (Smith, 1992, p. 76). Notably, the pervasive claim made by most of the participants that Inner Circle English is accentedless runs counter to the fact that “everyone speaks a language with a particular accent” (Rajadurai, 2007, p. 91). Following these arguments, it is evident that most of the participants failed to see the nature of these three constructs due to the following reasons.

Firstly, the pro-nativeness tradition of ELT in China and beyond provides the conditions for Inner Circle or NS English to gain legitimate supremacy among these participants because people tend to follow the practice of most others (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 109). Secondly, the strong support of Inner Circle English by most of the participants could be ascribed to the pro-nativeness ELT policies of China. For instance, *College English Course Requirement* provides that advanced English learners are expected “to be able to understand the TV programs of English speaking countries, grasp the main idea and catch the gist, and to be able to understand personnel from English speaking countries when they speak at norm speed” (MOE, 2007, p. 7, my translation). Thirdly, much scholarship of applied linguistics advocates the attainment of NS linguacultural competence as the ultimate goal (see Mahboob, 2005). This formulates another cause for the pro-nativeness mindset of the stakeholders, as the traditional Chinese culture that values authority makes individuals vulnerable in mind and in action to those who hold a higher social status, including experts. Fourthly, the EFL context of China contributes to reproducing the pro-nativeness ideology among ELT stakeholders. In accordance with the Kachruvian paradigm (Kachru, 1985), China is categorized as a norm-dependent Expanding Circle country, where contact with the English language takes place mainly in the classroom. In this case, learners and even teachers have insufficient chances to use English outside the classroom, with the indigenization of English in China severely hindered, though China English is emerging. Even in classroom, they have few chances to learn other English language varieties, as the adherence to NS norms is considered normative in EFL education (Holliday, 2015; Jenkins, 2015). It is thereby not surprising that most of the participants in this study expressed a strong preference for Inner Circle English.

In addition to the pro-nativeness ideology shared among the three participant groups, this study displays some inter-group differences. In terms of percentage, the administrator group seemed more supportive of Inner Circle English than the students and teachers. Given the small number of the administrator participants in this study, this finding needs to be validated by future studies that incorporate more administrators as participants. With regard to which English to teach/learn, most of the students and teachers argued for the addition of China English to ELT curriculum, but upheld NS pronunciation as the learning target. For them, it seems that China English only exists at the lexical or even syntactical level. However, it remains a question how far away China English is different from Inner Circle English in lexicon and syntax that is still acceptable to those students and teachers (see Yang & Zhang, 2015). In this same vein, it is worthwhile to explore the acceptance range of those students and teachers regarding the phonological deviation of China English from Inner Circle English.

## Conclusion

Despite the glocalization of the English language and the abundance of its concomitant scholarship, Inner Circle or NS English still enjoys popularity among Chinese ELT stakeholders, particularly students, teachers and administrators. Similar findings are observable in many other studies focusing on different ELT contexts (see Introduction). This discrepancy between theory and reality suggests that there is a long way to go before the



establishment of an equal and equitable ELT world. Since the participants in this study are engaged in frontline ELT practice, their attitudes, cognitive, affective and/or behavioral, exemplifies to a great degree the influence of national ELT policies, in addition to macro language ideology. It would therefore imperative for policy makers to see the fallacy of native-speakerism. Meanwhile, researchers of applied linguistics and ELT are expected to renew their efforts of criticality to help ELT stakeholders make the epistemic break from the conventional pro-nativeness ELT paradigm. Given the ideological (re)production of national ELT policy and school-based ELT practice, future research may need to explore the interplay of these two variables with the mentality of ELT frontline stakeholders, i.e., students, teacher and administrators. It is also suggested that ELT stakeholders at other educational levels in China be incorporated as research subjects in order to enrich the findings of this study and provide a broader picture of China's EFL education in relation to native-speakerism.

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