

Teaching English as a lingua franca in China

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Hindrances and prospects

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a significant increase of research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) as today's world becomes progressively more globalized (Lei & Liu, 2018). However, studies on ELF in the Chinese contexts remain sparse although linguistic research in China has kept pace with the development of international linguistic academia. Moreover, many researchers studying ELF-informed teaching in China are either non-Chinese scholars or researchers working in countries other than China (Si, 2019). In other words, this newly emerged field of research has not yet been widely embraced by Chinese scholars, nor its paradigm has been promoted in English education while traditional native-English-based teaching has been challenged and initiatives have been taken to promote English education within the ELF paradigm in many countries in the expanding circle (see e.g., Sifakis & Tsantila, 2019). In this paper, we address the issue through identifying various hindrances to teaching ELF in Chinese classroom and analyzing the factors leading to the difficulties and problems with implementing the ELF-informed teaching in Chinese context. Following this, we explore the prospects for taking advantage of the pedagogical value of ELF research in the foreseeable future.

Hindrances to ELF-oriented teaching

It is only fairly recently that the concept of ELF was formally introduced to China by Wen (2014), who rightly suggests that tolerance should be given to forms of language that deviate from native language standards but do not affect the transmission of meaning. She also proposes a framework for teaching ELF from a pedagogical perspective, emphasizing the need for teaching

native language variants, non-native language variants and indigenous linguistic features (Wen, 2012), though it was criticized for failing to capture the ELF essence of 'de-entity' (Gao, 2015). While there are discussions about whether English in China should be regarded from the World Englishes (WE) or ELF paradigm (Fang, 2017), more doubts have been cast on the direct



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application at the level of curricula, teaching materials and pedagogy. Although Chinese researchers seem to have started to come to terms with the social reality of international use of ELF, they have never been courageous enough to reject native English as teaching standard, with native-speaker norms supplemented by well codified and successfully promoted features of China English (or another non-native English variety) being the boldest suggestion (He & Zhang, 2010; Wen, 2016). Indeed, there exists a number of potential sociocultural and pedagogical constraints on the adoption of ELF-oriented teaching. Some of the obstacles are related to cultural resistance, stakeholders' language ideology, Chinese educational and linguistic contexts and pedagogical practicality.

Cultural resistance

An important potential hindrance to the adoption of ELF-oriented teaching in the Chinese classroom comes from Chinese culture which emphasizes the vital importance of unified standard. Chinese insistence on standards is epitomized in the traditional Chinese saying 无规矩不成方圆 (*Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards*). Being deprived of authoritative standards upon which they have been relying, both teachers and learners may be confused about what to learn and what to teach, since ELF is not only divorced from the native speaker standard, but also from any English variant entity. How can learning and teaching be carried out if there are no norms and standards for learner and teachers to follow or imitate?¹ For Chinese learners who have been used to aligning their learning behavior with native speaker norms, they would lose their sense of security once authoritative standards are discarded. It can be said that the ELF idea of removing standards and rules of native English is subversive to the traditional Chinese culture of language learning, which is characterized by enthusiastic worship of authority and classic models. This traditional Chinese approach to language learning, either in mother tongue or foreign languages, has never been detached from memorization of structural patterns and even texts from classic writings. As far as English learning is concerned, classic writings typically mean masterpieces composed by native speakers of English. When Chinese English language learners and teachers are informed of the ELF conception that non-native English speakers are no longer required to adhere to native speaker linguistic norms, they must be at a loss as to what to learn and what to teach.

What makes this confusion even more intense is that ELF is not one specific codifiable variety, but a series of communicative strategies, as it cannot really be encased in a well defined, standardized model (Sifakis, 2019). Therefore, in terms of English learning, it would be a long shot for Chinese stakeholders to willingly accept ELF which fails to provide a fixed model to imitate or memorize. So it is little wonder that a leading Chinese linguist also believes that it is better to have a norm than not, and a variety with a historical tradition (such as British English) is better than one subject to complex multilingual influence (such as Indian English) (Gui, 2015). After all, the ELF-informed 'post-normative' (Dewey, 2012: 161) perspective represents radical conceptual changes in the Chinese cultural context and is in conflict with traditional Chinese beliefs about language learning. Many Chinese teachers of English may find English teaching highly evasive and unmanageable, even threatening, because they lose grip on almost every aspect of teaching when English is no longer defined as a 'fixed set of codified forms', but 'a dynamic means of communication' (Dewey, 2012: 161) depending on context. As a teacher interviewee in Luo's (2017: 8) study responded, 'I don't know how to teach something that is not standard to students.' Furthermore, the ELF teaching model is at odds with the typical Chinese expectation that a good teacher is the one who has all the correct answers at all times. While insistence on standardized English is in line with teachers' psychological needs of self-affirmation and professional identity (Wu, 2014), ELF paradigm detracts from teacher authority through challenging the necessity of meeting native speaker norms. Clearly, the post-norm ELF approach, which goes beyond any norm-based teaching, may encounter great resistance in China due to culturally rooted perceptions and practices.

Language ideology

The second obstacle to implementing ELF-informed teaching lies in Chinese people's language ideology in which the standard varieties of British and American English (i.e. Standard English) have been upheld as the only internationally acceptable models in learning and using English. Zheng (2014) might not be exaggerating when she asserts that Chinese learners revere the ideal image of a native speaker to the extent that it has almost become a phantom that speaks with a perfect accent and never makes mistakes, and a phantom they have to do battle with whenever

they try to use English. Chinese learners are so hunted by the phantom that they prefer not to maintain their local accents in English even if they believe that their Chinese accents are intelligible and acceptable (Ren, Chen & Lin, 2016). The native speaker bias was further reinforced by Chinese teachers who would like their students to acquire native-like pronunciation and conform to native-speaker grammatical norms (He & Zhang, 2010). That is why the attraction of private English training schools is often based on the number of hours of instruction offered by a native teacher. The price of a lesson with an Asian English tutor (e.g., a Philippine teacher) is half that of a British or American one. The Chinese deference to Standard English is also accompanied by low recognition of other World English varieties including the variety of Chinese English (Gao & Lin, 2010; Yang & Zhang, 2015). It was documented in the literature that Chinese college English teachers and students would mind if someone spoke with a distinct Chinese accent (He & Li, 2009; Zhang & Du, 2018) and feel ashamed if they themselves used English with Chinese characteristics or China English (Wu, 2014; Pan, 2019). Chinese scholars do not necessarily feel it would be something to be proud of that Chinglish like *add oil*² (meaning *go on!* or *go for it!*) was included in Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Rather, they do not encourage learning such localized varieties of English simply for the reason that the vast majority of English users in the inner circle are not familiar with these exotic expressions (Wang, 2018). Clearly, they tend to believe that Chinese learners learn English mainly for the purpose of communicating with native speakers and understanding the native speaking culture. It also strongly relates to the Chinglish stigma traditionally attached to China English, which results not necessarily from its inability to serve communication needs of speakers, but from its ‘lack of recognition as symbolic capital for negotiating upward mobility’ (Wang & Fang, 2019: 8). Although some Chinese students have become more accepting of Chinese English than ever before (Xu, He & Deterding, 2017) and see themselves as primarily ‘language users’ in the presence of other non-native speakers of English as a result of their gradual developing the ideology of English as a tool, they tend to perceive themselves as ‘language learners’ in ELF communication contexts involving native speakers of English (Sung, 2017). Apparently, the ideology of nativeness is still deeply entrenched in the mind of many a Chinese learner.

What makes the native mindset more difficult to change in China is that the entrenchment of native speaker model is not only subjected to educational mechanisms, but also deeply rooted in the popular discourse of language ideology held by the general public. Wang & Fang (2019) recently reported Chinese netizens’ reactions to a Chinese reporter’s interview with a Zambian official, a typical instance of ELF communication. The study reveals the netizens’ overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the reporter’s non-standard English based on conformity to native speaker norms. Any use of English deviating from Standard English norms and conventions is perceived as shameful and disgraceful for damaging the image of the institution and humiliating the nation in front of the rest of the world, if the social and professional background of the English speaker is deemed to represent the institution or even the nation-state – a reporter from Chinese Central Television (CCTV), for example. As such, native-like English has been widely recognized as an indicator of individual prestige, professional ability and social mobility (Wang & Fang, 2019): in short, the symbol of social identity and status.

Educational and linguistic contexts

The third obstacle comes from China’s exam-oriented education system in which teachers and students strive to obtain more marks in high-stakes examinations. Teachers are trained around the native speaker model and their performance is still evaluated against their students’ performance in various native-English-based tests. Nested in such an English language teaching ecosystem, where native English has been serving as both a learning goal and teaching model for learners and teachers, individual teachers are left with no choice but to continue to do what they have been doing even if they are aware of the unprecedented spread of English as a global language and willing to accept it as an alternative teaching mode. After all, in a Chinese exam-driven context, it is inevitable that the way English is tested affects how English is taught in classrooms, not vice versa (Si, 2019). Moreover, English tests in China, to a large extent, act as gatekeepers for better employment and education rather than serving a role in evaluating people’s English level. That is to say, English has become what Bourdieu (1991) called ‘linguistic capital’, which can be easily converted to other forms of capital, such as cultural capital (educational qualifications) and economic capital (better employment and career development) (Pan

& Block, 2011). When English, as a valorized form of capital, is ready to help one to gain access to various economic, educational and professional opportunities and resources, the learners are under great pressure to conform to native speaker norms. It therefore would be unrealistic to ask Chinese learners to ignore such instant benefits that high-stakes English tests could bring to them in pursuit of the purposes of learning English for international and intercultural communications. In effect, English in China is commodified, and people's motivation for learning English largely lies in its social and economic advantages.

What makes ELF-oriented teaching even more difficult is the fact that English is still regarded as foreign language and learned as a subject in school, as English has no official status in China. In such an essentially monolingual context, English remains only marginal in Chinese learners' actual English-using experience. Although English as a medium of instruction (EMI) was introduced to Chinese universities at the beginning of the 21st century, and English has been increasingly adopted as the natural academic lingua franca in Chinese tertiary education (Song, 2019), EMI in its true meaning in higher institutions has not yet been popularized in China, and has primarily been adopted by a limited number of top-tier universities and Sino-foreign cooperative regional universities (mostly offshore branch campuses of English-speaking countries). It means that the vast majority of Chinese students, having very few chances to use English outside the classroom, fail to see the connection of English with their real lives (Zheng, 2014). Even in institutions that adopt and implement EMI, language policies are often grounded in native-speakerist ideologies that favor the use of inner-circle native speaker English in the classroom (Fang, 2018; De Costa, Green-Eneix & Li, 2020). Additionally, there is an official tendency to retain some control over English in the public sector. For example, the use of foreign languages alone for signboards has been prohibited in Shanghai public places since 2015 and the use of foreign place and personal names has been forbidden in Henan province since 2013. Chinese learners' lack of actual bilingual experience makes it very hard to convince them of the need to learn English as an international language for communicative purposes. Despite the fact that Chinese-English mixed-code communication is gaining popularity on the Internet among China's netizens (Zhang, 2012), realizing the ideal of teaching English as a tool (rather than a target) or teaching what is actually

used in the classroom remains somewhat fanciful, when the curriculum, textbooks and examinations all hinge upon Standard English (see Zheng, 2014 for details).

Pedagogical practicality

With China's possible intention to foreground Chinese and concomitantly deemphasize English in high-stakes English tests, it was assumed that it would be time for Chinese learners and teachers to move away from the repetitious and tedious imitation of native English and highlight the instrumental role of English as a global lingua franca (Si, 2019). However, implementing ELF-oriented teaching in the classroom can be overwhelmingly challenging, especially when it comes teaching materials. Research shows that English syllabuses, curricula and textbooks in China are still dominated by native variety and native English speakers' culture (Yu, 2016; Zheng, 2014), as no one has explicitly stated what should be included if native varieties are abandoned. Many ELF researchers (e.g., Kohn, 2015; Pedrazzini, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2019) propose to design ELF-informed teaching materials using well developed ELF corpora which are based on data collected in naturally occurring speech and reflect the authentic use of ELF in multilingual settings. Ideal as it may sound, it is not feasible to put into practice in Chinese schools or universities where teachers are not free to teach whatever they want in the classroom; instead, they are expected to cover the curriculum developed by the government using limited sets of textbooks and teaching materials which have gone through censorship and are nationally uniform. Theoretically, teachers are not forbidden to offer some supplementary materials to students; however, they run the risk of violating relevant provisions if these uncensored English materials happen to contain certain information which is deemed harmful or incorrect. Therefore, teachers are normally very cautious about using self-selected materials in the classroom as well as recommending extracurricular reading materials to students. Moreover, the censorship of the Internet known as the 'Great Firewall of China', originally targeted at material ranging from pornography to popular social networking sites and meant to 'function as a filter of cultural, and consequently, ideological flow' (Simpson, 2017: 342), unavoidably prevents access on the Internet to a number of appropriate teaching materials for ELF instruction.

Even if the globally oriented ELT materials are available, there is a lack of ELF-aware teacher education in China. The vast majority of in-service Chinese English teachers are graduates from the English department (usually majoring in linguistics, literature or translation), trained in programs that particularly emphasize the legitimacy of native English. These teachers have a negligibly small amount of knowledge, if any, of what ELF-informed teaching is. Recent study shows that Chinese teachers are uncertain about the nature of ELF and therefore unable to know what to teach about it (Gao, 2015; Luo, 2017), let alone fulfil the tasks of selecting ELF teaching materials and organizing ELF-g geared tests. Considering the crucial role of teachers in closing the gap between ELF implication and ELF application in classroom, the major problem in implementing ELF-g geared teaching would appear to be the lack of teacher training programs which aim to expose teachers to the principles and criteria of ELF and prompt them to reflect critically on their traditional teaching and ultimately transform their convictions. Moreover, successful implementation of ELF instruction requires teachers to have knowledge of local contexts and related cultures of an English variety in addition to that of Standard English (Young & Walsh, 2010), which is beyond most English teachers' reach. In other words, few teachers could present realistic models of proficient users for students to reasonably aspire to and learn from in order to manipulate unpredictable conversations in various ELF situations. It is therefore impractical to carry out ELF instruction in China without tackling such issues as the availability of teaching materials, and teacher ability.

Future prospects

The above discussion shows that the implementation of ELF-informed teaching can be daunting task for teachers due to various contributing factors including educational, linguistic and pedagogical contexts as well as sociocultural and language ideological influences. Moreover, it is argued that ELF is more an illustration of clearly defined perspectives, attitudes and beliefs than a theoretical model that can be applied directly to language teaching (Gao, 2015). As a burgeoning sociolinguistic construct, ELF faces enormous challenges on the theoretical level (see O'Regan, 2014 for a critique of ELF). Indeed, recent orientation of ELF, grounded in the need to theorize ELF within the complex context of multilingualism, translinguaging³ and multimodality, weakens not only

the specific language 'E', but also the general language 'L' in ELF, sending itself into communication studies in a broad sense (Gao, 2015). All this poses challenges for applying ELF theorizing to classroom English language instruction. In other words, ELF research so far bears more theoretical significance than practical pedagogical implications. It does not mean, however, that the development of the ELF construct fails to provide pedagogical enlightenment to English education in China and other expanding-circle countries with similar educational and sociocultural traditions. On the basis of findings in recent studies and decades of experience in teaching English and understanding Chinese learner needs, we now point out some directions for integrating ELF in ELT in China.

First, ELF can hardly be perceived as a variety (or a collection of varieties) that will be amenable to teaching in the same way that Standard English is (Sifakis & Tsantila, 2019), given its inherent flexibility, fluidity and hybridity as a communicational medium. For this reason, current research on the interface of ELF and classroom instruction has been limited to an ELF-awareness approach (Yu & Liu, 2019), deliberately avoiding talking about the teaching of ELF per se when it is not teachable. In view of these research insights, we recommend Kirkpatrick's (2012: 135) 'ELF approach', which targets successful use of English in multilingual contexts by interculturally competent users. In practice, we can demonstrate to students how users of English are capable of effective communication without conforming to the norms of native speakers of English, taking the example of, say, former Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon who is 'surely a role-model for any learner of English' (Widdowson, 2015: 15). We may also design listening and oral tasks allowing students to select and explore Englishes salient to their interests, focusing more on 'language events and experiences' (Blommaert, 2010: 100) rather than linguistic forms. We may even empower students to develop their own ELF-specific creativity, tolerating 'errors' that do not hinder comprehensibility, if language learning is redefined as a creative construction and communicative success as speaker satisfaction (Kohn, 2019).

Second, ELF awareness does not characterize a unique instructional approach to teaching and learning, but integrates the learner/learning-centred 'English for specific purposes (ESP) approach' developed in the 1980s (Sifakis, 2019). The predominant ingredients of the 'ELF approach', such

as context, target situation and learners' needs/wants, are also the components that form the backbone of the 'ESP approach'. As such, the 'ELF approach' can be understood as an embodiment of the 'ESP approach' (ibid). That is why Widdowson (1997: 144) states that 'English as an international language⁴ is English for specific purposes'. We thus agree with the proposal that ELF-informed teaching should start with prospective ESP users, such as students in China's Business English program (Si, 2019). We also suggest a trial implementation of ELF-oriented teaching in EMI programs to explore its feasibility and suitability on Chinese learners in Chinese higher education. The ESP-ELF kinship perspective also enables us to reflect on the traditional mode of cultivating students' communicative competence dominated by a normative mindset, making students realize that it is the ability to use 'expert English' rather than native-like English that largely determines our position in the international community (Yu & Liu, 2019). After all, the purpose of most English learners is specific, namely, to learn the language which enables them to become members of expert communities and to communicate with other members from different cultures, rather than becoming a native speaker of English.

Third, there is a need for awareness of the psychological significance of updated understanding of ELF for intervening in learners' English learning and communication anxiety (Xia, Yu, 2018). Chinese learners' anxiety largely comes from the fear of speaking English with others, especially native speakers of English. It is only natural that Chinese learners as non-native English speakers experience a weakening of their self-assurance when interacting with native English speakers within the frame of reference of Standard English. Indeed, many of the reported reasons leading to anxiety, such as *fear of losing face*, *fear of making mistakes*, *fear of negative evaluation* (He, 2018), can also be derived from the mentality that effective communication depends on conformity to the norms of native English. Being deprived of the right of creative use of English they deserve, Chinese learners tend to align their English use with native English norms and conventions, falling into a battle that is lost before it has begun (Cook, 1999). All this consolidates Chinese learners' perception of themselves as inferior speaker of English, and traditional stigmatization of deviance from native English standards results in negative consequences for people's confidence in learning and using English. Furthermore, Chinese learners intend to identify with homogeneous native

English speaking communities, failing to project their identities associated with their home cultures. We therefore need to raise the students' awareness of the importance of home culture in the process of intercultural communication as 'effectively understanding other cultures requires adequate comprehension of one's own home culture' (Liu & Fang, 2017: 33). Additionally, Chinese students need to be reminded that all those benefits brought about by learning English are not only connected to English, but associated with bilingualism or multilingualism. That is, home language and culture are valuable resources to be exploited in ELF communication with multicultural characteristics. Such ELF conception can be integrated into students' self-regulated affective strategies to alleviate their English communication anxiety and boost their confidence in international communication. We may also expose students to successful instances of ELF communication to show that real-life use of English is more connected to apt use of communicative strategies than to unconditional adherence to native norms. In this way, we help students kill the native speaker 'phantom' that causes rampant sentiments of frustration, and raise their confidence as legitimate users of a global language.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above discussions, it is by no means easy to bring about ELF-oriented changes in ELT in China, as scholarly deliberations 'will have to confront the realities of English in the classroom' (Prodromou, 2007: 48). Realizing that pedagogical decisions should depend on a particular linguistic and sociocultural milieu, we argue against any kind of pedagogy 'simply presenting models of language use' (Sung, 2013: 352) without taking careful account of motivating learners and meeting their aspirations. Situated in specific educational and pedagogical contexts, it is understandable that Chinese learners tend to align their learning goals with the norms of Standard English. We concur that the native speaker model should serve as a complete and convenient starting point⁵ and it is up to the learners in individual contexts to decide to what extent they want to approximate to that model (Kuo, 2006).

With China's active participation in globalization and concomitant increasing opportunities to communicate with the world for the Chinese public, they should have their own agendas in using English and understanding ELF. The enforcement of mainstream academic ideology needs to take into consideration bottom-up realities, which

include ‘class size, times allocated for teaching, the broader institutional and local classroom “climate”, staff profiles, target situation analysis, and, needless to say, attitudes (expressed or otherwise) towards ELF’ (Sifakis, 2019: 296). Failing to do so may run the risk of turning seemingly liberating pedagogies into a form of operation for both the instructors and the students (Lu & Ares, 2015). We therefore suggest a prudent attitude towards the pedagogical effectuation of ELF conception in classroom instruction before the ELF construct has been more fully configured and the ELF-oriented teaching approach sufficiently delineated. For the time being, the ELF-aware perspective can be better used for personal and professional growth and for embracing the post-modern opportunities of global communication.

That said, it needs to be pointed out that while there are undoubtedly clear hindrances to the adoption of ELF in China, these are not insurmountable as China is increasingly integrated into today’s globalized world and developing a willingness to accept a pluricentric view of English which emphasizes linguistic and cultural diversity and highlights pragmatic sensitivity. As a matter of fact, recent studies have demonstrated that Chinese people are beginning to show more tolerance towards expressions and accents that deviate from native norms both among teachers and students in the educational context (Wu, 2014; Xu et al., 2017) and the general public in the popular discourse (Wang & Fang, 2019). In addition, these non-standard forms are found to be adopted due to mother tongue transfer, facilitation of communication or exploitation of language resources (Ji, 2016), which lends support to the argument that ELF needs to be understood as an adaptable and creative use of language in its own right, and not as a deviant or erroneous version of native speaker English (Seidlhofer, 2011). More importantly, misunderstandings do not occur due to the non-standard forms, according to a study focusing on the lexicogrammar features of ELF by Chinese speakers in China-ASEAN communication contexts (Ji, 2016). All this not only promises a future identification with ELF in China, but opens up an ideal space for exploring the future construction of classroom ELF realities in China and other similar contexts in the expanding circle.

Notes

1 A note in 说文解字 (*Explanation of the Sayings and Explanations of the Characters*) reads: ‘To teach is to give from above and to follow from below. . . by means of imitation’.

2 As a literal translation of the Cantonese phrase *gayau, add oil* is used by Hong Kong residents as an exclamation expressing encouragement or support. Its official inclusion in the OED in 2018 shows that the expression has had sufficient independent examples of use over a reasonable amount of time.

3 Translanguaging is a linguistic practice and process that involves different languages and language varieties. The most recent conceptualization of ELF sees translanguaging as a key feature of ELF communication, meaning, ELF users are oriented not only to English but also to the other languages in their multilingual repertoires. Thus, ELF is a dynamic process of ‘translanguaging’ (Li, 2016).

4 We see English as an international language (EIL) as a superordinate term that encompasses ELF, which specifically focuses on the Expanding Circle (Sifakis, 2019). EIL, incorporating the use of English in the Inner Circle, Expanding Circle and Outer Circle, is viewed as a more comprehensive term reflecting the current situation of English use in the global community, and more suitable for language teaching (Yu & Liu, 2019).

5 According to Wen (2012), the ELF-informed teaching of language includes native language variants, non-native language variants and indigenous linguistic features. We insist on native language variants as the core of our pedagogical input at least during the initial stages of learning, because we are not free from the concern that ELF may lose its basic function as a means of communication between different mother tongues if native language variants are completely abandoned. We suggest that non-native language variants and indigenous linguistic features be learned to improve comprehension and be tolerated or accepted during communication.

Acknowledgements

This study is partially supported by Tongzhan Research Program (2020XZTZ-08) of SWUPL and the National Social Science Foundation of China (19BYY017).

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