

# A phantom to kill: The challenges for Chinese learners to use English as a global language

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Why should we encourage a bilingual user identity of global English?

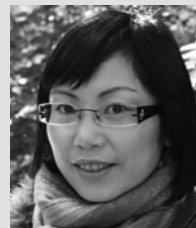
## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Very recently, the former spokesman of China's Ministry of Education launched a public attack on the national fervor for English learning in his personal blog (*Xinhua News*, 2013). He forcefully argued that too much time and energy has been spent on learning English as a foreign language, which has seriously jeopardized Chinese citizens' first-language education, and called for the cancellation of English lessons in the primary school curriculum. Following this, the Beijing municipal commission of education announced its plan to reduce the English section of the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam (or *gaokao*) from 150 points to 100 points in major cities by 2016 so as to downplay the importance of English in the education system. A further report states that education authorities are also considering scrapping mandatory English lessons before the third grade. Shandong and Jiangsu provinces, as well as Shanghai, may remove English from the *gaokao* entirely (*The Guardian*, 2013).

This adjustment in language policy is quite peculiar considering the prevalence of English learning in China. English has become the dominant foreign language in China's educational system since the open-door policy was initiated in 1978 (Lam, 2002; Bolton & Graddol, 2012). It has been a compulsory subject in the secondary and tertiary curricula since the early 1980s, and has been a compulsory subject from the third grade of primary school since 2001. The most recent national survey puts the number of English learners in China at around 390 million (Wei & Su, 2012), roughly one third of China's population. In the meantime,

the fact that the English language training market accounted for 10% of the total value of China's training market in 2010 (Bolton & Graddol, 2012) attests to the astounding popularity of English teaching and learning in China.

Although the reasons behind the policy change are complicated and even politically driven, the underlying discourse of English as a threat to Chinese language and culture implicit in the adjustment to the policy (see Pan & Seargeant, 2012 for details) suggests a zero-sum scenario between both languages, that is, the gains in English learning are offset by the losses of Chinese learning. This either-or dichotomy imposed upon English and Chinese, as the present paper argues, is probably caused by a conflict inherent in the practice of teaching English as a native speakers' variety in



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the non-native Chinese context with the expectation for the learners to be like a (monolingual) native speaker of English, irrespective of the spread of English as a global language in today's world (Crystal, 2003). The discrepancy between what is learned at school and what is to be used in the future may breed discontent. The following sections first reveal the different targets of learning implied by teaching English as a native speakers' variety versus as a global language. Then, I discuss the native speaker image ingrained in China's English language teaching (ELT) practices, and, finally, I analyze the challenges encountered by Chinese learners if they are to perceive themselves as bilingual users of English as a global language.

### **English as a *lingua franca* or as a native speakers' variety**

Unlike the post-colonial contexts where English has a long history, the unprecedented growth of English in China in the past decades is closely connected with its role in the internalization and globalization processes. Chinese policymakers began to stress promoting English mainly to gain international stature, and to widen and deepen China's participation in political, economic and cultural activities in the international arena (Lam, 2002; Bolton & Graddol, 2012). In the official discourse, Chinese citizens' English competence is held as a valuable resource for China's modernization drive and as the key cornerstone of China's sustained development during globalization. This position implicates an inherent linkage of promoting English language education with China's and its citizens' participation in the international arena, which necessarily highlights the use of English as a global language (Crystal, 2003).

Indeed, globalization has made the English language undergo fundamental changes. It is now a global language, a *lingua franca* used among speakers of different first languages in the international community (Seidlhofer, 2011), including in Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The majority of English users are non-native speakers (Crystal, 2003), and most of the interaction in English takes place between non-native speakers (Graddol, 2006). It has increasingly been associated with a global culture, and has gradually become detached from its Anglophone cultural bases and traditionally defined ethnicity and nationality (Graddol, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011). It follows that when Chinese learners choose English as a means of intercultural communication, they will use it with both native speakers and

(mostly) non-native speakers, highlighting the function of English as a *lingua franca*.

Notwithstanding the changed status of English in the international arena, the standard varieties of British and American English (i.e. Standard English) have long been upheld as the only internationally acceptable pedagogical models in the ELT practices in most non-native contexts around the world, including China (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Bolton, 2003). This is commonly known as the native speaker model. Native speakers of English have secured the central position in this model, serving as both a goal and model for non-native learners of English. However, this assumption, criticized as the 'monolingual native-speaker bias' by some scholars (Cook, 1999; Jenkins, 2012), tends to regard non-native learners as failed native speakers instead of as legitimate and competent bilingual users. By contrast, it has been argued that in the contexts where English is mainly used to communicate between non-native speakers of English, effective communication should not depend on conformity to native speaker norms, and that the ultimate goal for this *lingua franca* model, as opposed to the native speaker model, is to achieve an expert level but not to become like a native speaker (Jenkins, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2006). It has been suggested that a non-native learner becomes 'a fluent bilingual speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker' (Graddol, 2006: 87). In this sense, to rethink English in terms of a global language instead of the native speaker variety is highly conducive to non-native learners' construction of a bilingual user identity. It then becomes imperative to closely examine the Chinese context and to take note of the challenges for Chinese learners if they are to self-perceive as bilingual users of English as a global language.

### **Challenges to self-perceive as a bilingual user**

Although the language policy makers' efforts to promote English are closely linked to its function as a global language, Standard English and the Anglophone cultures are held as the goal of learning for Chinese learners throughout secondary and tertiary education. For example, the *Curriculum Requirements at the Compulsory Education Stage (below age 16)* and the *Curriculum Requirements at the Senior High Education Stage (age 16–18)* of 2003 prescribe learners' knowledge about the

history, social customs, political systems, mass media and religions of major English-speaking countries. The English textbook *Go for It* (新目标英语),<sup>2</sup> which is stipulated in the curriculum in China's primary- and secondary-school English classrooms, boasts 'pure English and standard pronunciation' on the book cover. It is a similar case in the tertiary level ELT curriculum. The following quotes are excerpts from the learning objectives prescribed in the *Syllabus for English Majors in Higher Education* (henceforth, the *Syllabus*):

**Listening:** Being able to comprehend English conversations in real communicative situations, being able to understand the radio and television broadcasts (such as CNN) from English-speaking countries . . .

**Reading:** Being able to comprehend editorials, book reviews published in British and American newspapers and magazines (e.g. the *Times* or *New York Times*), being able to understand historical biographies and literary works published in English-speaking countries . . .

**Cultural knowledge:** Being familiar with traditional Chinese cultural traditions, being familiar with the geography, history, developments, cultural traditions and customs of English-speaking countries . . .

(Translated from the *Syllabus*)

In alignment with the learning objectives stipulated in the *Syllabus*, most of the English major courses recommended are 'British/American Literature', 'Introduction to English-speaking Countries', 'British/American Society and Culture' and so forth. In the total of 118 books recommended to the English majors on the reading list prescribed in the *Syllabus*, 106 books are selected works from British, American, Australian and Canadian literature (Qu, 2012). The learning materials, objectives and courses provided in the curriculum collectively reflect the fact that the English prescribed in the curriculum is the 'English' as found in Standard English, automatically and unquestionably.

Following the curriculum requirements, the native speaker model is prominent in the requirements of the high-stake examinations. On the one hand, the national *gaokao* stresses correct and standard forms in spelling, grammar and vocabulary usage in accordance with the Standard English model in the national ELT syllabi. On the other hand, international English proficiency tests, such as the IELTS and TOEFL, invariably aim to assess students' communicative abilities in terms of Standard English, although they are allegedly 'international' ELT examinations

(Jenkins, 2012). Considering the high stakes of these English tests in China,<sup>3</sup> it is only natural that Chinese learners would align their learning behavior with native speaker norms.

Teachers' preferences have also played a role in reinforcing the native speaker bias. Even if ELT teachers may be aware of the macro-level spread of English as a global language and are willing to accept it as an alternative teaching mode, most of them continue to adhere to the native speaker model in actual practice (Ranta, 2010). Chinese college English teachers tend to believe that their students should conform to Standard English in learning and using English, and both teachers and students would mind if someone spoke with a distinct Chinese accent (He & Li, 2009). To be fair, if the curriculum, textbooks and examinations all hinge upon Standard English, individual teachers nested in the ELT ecosystem may have very little left to do, especially when most of them have been trained around the native speaker model and their performance is still evaluated against their students' achievement in the national entrance exam. With the pressure to conform to native speaker norms, learners embedded in their pedagogical context may find themselves unsupported if they are to imagine an alternative image of a bilingual user of English as a global language.

Beyond the pedagogical context, while English has secured its dominant position in China's foreign language education scheme, it is only marginal in Chinese learners' actual linguistic experience. Perhaps because English has no official status in China, it is not surprising that only about 30% of the Chinese with English learning experience report often or sometimes using it in their daily lives (Wei & Su, 2012). English is rarely spoken in the average Chinese household and its use is confined to certain professions such as finance, international business and trade, and mainly to education (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Among the 260 respondents in Wei's (2010) survey in Shanghai, arguably the most developed cosmopolitan city in China, 24–33% know English but rarely use it in activities such as reading, watching TV or listening to the radio despite the readily accessible online or printed materials and multimedia resources. In short, among the total number of people who study English as a subject in their school, the fraction of those who actually use it in a significant way remains very small. The deprivation of the actual English-using experience discourages Chinese learners from seeing the connection of English with their real lives, except for its paramount importance as a school subject.

The one-way distribution of Anglophone cultural products may have strengthened Chinese learners' preference for the native speaker image. English-language popular culture products, including newspapers, books, TV/radio programs and movies, are readily available, and the majority of Chinese learners regard these resources as helpful learning materials. However, it is worth emphasizing here that these cultural products unanimously come from English-speaking countries, and therefore the life and language represented are imprinted with the native speakers' lifestyle. One Chinese student participant in Zheng's (2013) study pointed out that what is represented in the English movies does not match the context of her own life: 'All those scenes are very typical in Britain or America, but for me, I really can't relate them to my own life' (355). By contrast, there are practically no cultural products of English as a global language, such as English-speaking programs from non-native English countries. The particular absence of global English cultural products has long-term ramifications in the sense that learners can barely realize that English is not necessarily used only with native speakers and that the goal of learning English is not necessarily to become like a native speaker.

### The native speaker phantom

Situated in specific pedagogical and sociocultural contexts, Chinese learners revere the ideal image of a native speaker to the extent that it has almost become a phantom. Understandably, Chinese learners tend to align their own learning goals with the norms of Standard English. For example, 64.3% of the respondents in Kirkpatrick & Xu's (2002) study believed the goal of learning English was to communicate with native speakers of English but not with non-native speakers. Most Chinese student participants wanted to sound like native speakers in pronunciation. The teacher would also like their students to have native-like accent and grammar mastery (He & Li, 2009; He & Zhang, 2010). The deference to native speakers is epitomized in a quote from one of Zheng's (2013: 349) student participants: 'If I suspect a certain expression is translated from Chinese, I would not like to use it. But if I've heard or seen native speakers using it, then I won't hesitate to use it.' In short, the entrenchment of the native speaker model and the prevalence of the native speaker image are mutually reinforcing each other, which leaves little room for the reconceptualization of English as a global language and of Chinese learners as legitimate bilingual users.

The ideal native speaker image is intimidating. Chinese learners perceive themselves as error-prone learners of Standard English, and are haunted by a lingering fear of making mistakes and being unidiomatic when they try to initiate a conversation in English (Ryan, 2006; Zheng, 2013). They lose confidence and even withdraw their investment in long-term English learning and thus show marked regressions in English proficiency (Zheng, 2012). Perhaps because of the need to study English as a compulsory school subject to pass the entrance exam, some learners lose interest in English studies when they enter university, and demand English teaching cater for the practical needs stemming from the job market but this carries the risk of undermining the academic rigor of English studies in general (Qu, 2012).

On the other hand, varieties other than Standard English do not receive their due recognition in the learners' minds. For the Chinese students who volunteered in the Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, despite their extensive contact with non-native speakers through the use of English as a *lingua franca*, they continued to hold overt preference for Standard English and a rather low evaluation of 'non-standard' varieties such as Italian English or Indian English (Lin & Gao, 2010). Although not necessarily so, the exclusive deference to Standard English is apparently followed by a stigmatization of other World English varieties, including the variety of Chinese English. It has been found that English spoken with an identifiable Chinese accent is perceived as 'arrogant' and 'aggressive' compared with Standard English accents (He & Li, 2009). When a learner tries to use English, he/she may have to do battle with a certain phantom, a phantom who speaks with a perfect accent and who never makes mistakes.

The native speaker phantom is frustrating and even dangerous. If one gives up trying to self-perceive as a legitimate user of English (as a global language), how will he/she be willing to invest in English learning, especially when English has no transparent relevance to their real life, not to mention using English to negotiate their identity as a valued member of the international community. While China's language policymaking intends to promote English to enhance the nation and people's global participation, highlighting the fact that the English to be taught is the one functioning as a global language, what has been implemented in reality has always been the English as found in Standard English. Most Chinese learners seem to be caught up in an unwary conflation of the

prospect to acquire English as a global language to participate in the international community and the reality of learning English as a native speaker variety in school. In the latter case, English is imposed as an unrealistic and unattainable goal to achieve with its linkage to people's real lives severed. It is little wonder that they may find it hard to 'kill' the native speaker phantom and even harder to self-perceive as competent bilingual users.

## Conclusion

When we reconsider the debate to downgrade English in the *gaokao*, there seems to be a hidden conflict as to whether to become like a (monolingual) native speaker of English at the cost of Chinese learning or to become a competent bilingual user of both languages. In the former scenario, one could suspect that if a learner tries every means to become like a native speaker in learning Standard English, it is likely that the time and resources spent on first-language learning is traded off, not to mention the fact that the battle to become a native speaker is lost before it has begun (Cook, 1999). This may help in understanding the rampant sentiments of frustration and hostility provoked by English learning. In the latter scenario, it has been suggested that in the new globalized world order, the pressure for most young people is to come up with a bicultural identity, consisting of a local identity with their first language and a global identity with English (Kramsch, 1998; Arnett, 2002). If one could conceive of English as integral to the global culture and use it to participate in global culture, the Anglocentric cultural loadings of English could be somewhat neutralized, and an element of 'foreignness' and 'threat' removed (Ryan, 2006). There is little reason to impose an either-or dichotomy between Chinese and English in the sense that the pertinent issue for today's Chinese young people is to develop a bicultural identity, one being a Chinese national and the other a valued member of the global village. Through the use of both languages, they are able to develop both local and global voices.

The case of English is unique inasmuch that the inexorable spread of English as a *lingua franca* stimulates the rethinking that the ownership of global English is no longer tied up with a geographically defined community of speakers or specific Anglophone cultures (Widdowson, 2003). That said, it needs to be admitted that it would be a long shot to completely replace Standard English with English as a global language with the tenacious entrenchment of the native speaker model

in the Chinese context as well as in the world's most non-native contexts. However, one should first note the incongruity between the English intended and the English implemented, and the hidden forces of the native speaker phantom. From the pedagogical perspective, if we want to help Chinese learners truly perceive themselves as legitimate bilingual users, it is advisable to raise their awareness of the developments of English as a global language in the world today, of the implicit and unquestioned deference to native speaker norms in their own learning, and of the possibility to approach English as an additional language resource to be part of the globalization processes. If teachers can provide sufficient global English teaching or learning materials, and introduce competent bilingual users as role models into the classroom, among other things, learners can hopefully begin to envision themselves as competent bilingual world citizens with one foot in the international community where global English is the linguistic channel, and the other in their national Chinese community. ■

## Notes

- 1 This study is partially supported by Shanghai Pujiang Program (12PJC097) and the China Ministry of Education Humanities and Social Sciences Research Fund (12YJC740150).
- 2 The textbook *Go for it* is published by the People's Education Press, the only authoritative press that publishes textbooks for students involved in the compulsory education stage. It is recommended as the English textbook in the nationally prescribed ELT syllabus, and has been adopted by more than 1 million learners, by rough estimation.
- 3 According to the British Council's 2011 report, Chinese test-takers already make up the world's largest group of IELTS test-takers. In 2011, 166,000 Chinese learners took the TOEFL test, amounting to the fifth largest group of test-takers worldwide, according to an ETS report.

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