

Investigating perceptions of English as a lingua franca in Hong Kong: The case of university students

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Insights into the complexity of ELF perceptions in the era of globalization

Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) has received a great deal of attention in the field of applied linguistics in the last decade or so (Jenkins, 2007, 2014; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). As is currently conceptualized, ELF refers to the common language of choice among speakers from different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF does not imply a single, unified variety of English but primarily refers to language in *use* in contexts where multilingual speakers are involved (Cogo, 2010). In other words, ELF can be understood as social practice, with an emphasis on meaning-making processes. Much of the earlier research focused on identifying linguistic features characteristic of ELF communication (see Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001). But with the increased recognition of the variability and fluidity associated with the use of ELF, researchers have recently turned their attention to investigating communicative strategies which multilingual speakers employ to achieve mutual understanding and negotiate meaning in ELF interactions (see Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). Furthermore, there exists a growing body of research into attitudes and perceptions of ELF communication (see Cogo, 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Kaloscai, 2009), given the impact of ELF perceptions on ELF-related communicative practices, especially with respect to issues relating to (non-) conformity to native-speaker norms.

ELF communication is commonplace in Hong Kong, as a result of increased intercultural

encounters. However, with strong exonormative norms towards the use of English in Hong Kong (see Sewell, 2009; Tsui & Bunton, 2002), it would be worthwhile to investigate whether exonormative orientations to English may give way to more accepting attitudes towards the diversity of Englishes in ELF communication in the era of globalization. To find out whether change is underway, the present paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong from the perspectives of local students at a university in Hong Kong. It aims to contribute to our understanding of the perceptions



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of ELF in Hong Kong and shed light on the complex sociolinguistic reality of ELF communication in an Asian context.

ELF communication and perceptions of ELF use

As a sociolinguistic phenomenon on a global scale, ‘ELF has taken on a life of its own, independent to a considerable degree of the norms established by its native speakers’ (Seidlhofer, 2004: 212). As ELF interactions often take place in highly variable socio-cultural networks, the norms of ELF communication are likely to emerge from the use of English among ELF users (Cogo & Jenkins, 2010). Even when native speakers of English take part in ELF interactions, they are unlikely to set the linguistic agenda (Jenkins, 2015). It is therefore argued that ELF communication should be described on its own terms, rather than by comparison with the yardstick of English as a Native Language (ENL) (Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Accordingly, what seems to matter in ELF communication is multilingual speakers’ capability of exploiting the flexibility of the language for effective use, rather than their ability to conform to native-speaker norms (i.e. ENL) (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011).

With an increasing interest in ELF in the era of globalization, there is a growing body of research devoted to investigating attitudes and perceptions of ELF for intercultural communication over the last decade (e.g., Cogo, 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Kalocsai, 2009; Kontra & Csizer, 2011; Peckham et al., 2012). Kalocsai’s (2009) study looked at the perceptions of ELF among a group of Erasmus students in a university in the Czech Republic and revealed that they defined successful ELF communication with reference to accommodative and co-operative strategies, as opposed to conformity to native English. In a related study, Peckham et al. (2012) investigated the ELF perceptions of a group of Erasmus students in Hungary and the Czech Republic and identified their tendency to deemphasize the dominant position of native speakers of English in ELF contexts. Another recent study conducted by Kontra and Csizer (2011) examined the views of ELF speakers in Hungary. It was found that while most of the participants recognized the importance of achieving communicative purposes in ELF, some participants still expressed a preference for native-speaker varieties of English. In another context, Cogo’s (2010) study examined the perceptions of ELF speakers

from different first language (L1) backgrounds in the UK and found that they gave priority to effective communicative skills in ELF use, rather than ‘native-speaker correctness’. While Cogo discovered that non-nativeness was not seen negatively in ELF communication, the study also points to some ambiguity in the respondents’ perceptions of ELF. Specifically, while they commented favourably on their foreign accents, some of their comments regarding what constitutes good English showed value judgments which could have stemmed from a native-speaker ideology.

From the brief review of selected studies above, there appears to be a growing awareness of ELF as a sociolinguistic phenomenon in the European context, yet a preference for native English seems to be evident to a certain extent. Clearly, there is a need for more research into perceptions of ELF, especially in Asian contexts, given that Asia is now seen as the centre of gravity of English as a global lingua franca (McArthur, 2003; Sung, 2016). In the remainder of the paper I present the findings of a study in which I investigated a group of Hong Kong university students’ perceptions of ELF communication and their own English use in ELF contexts.

The Hong Kong context

Hong Kong is an interesting site for research into ELF (see Chan, 2014; Sung, 2013, 2014). As one of the major languages in the city, English is used as a major lingua franca by Hong Kong people for intercultural communication with people from the rest of the world. Apart from being a co-official language with Chinese, English plays a significant role in different sectors in Hong Kong society, including the government, business, higher education and the professional workplace, where the use of ELF is an everyday phenomenon (Bolton & Han, 2008; Sung, 2015). However, despite the increasing presence of ELF in intercultural communication, exonormative attitudes towards English in Hong Kong still prevail (see, Sewell, 2009; Tsui & Bunton, 2002). Most notably, native-speaker norms are upheld as a yardstick in high-stakes public examinations, and native English-speaking teachers continue to be recruited from overseas under the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) scheme. Against the backdrop of strong exonormative orientations to native English, the study reported here investigates the perceptions of ELF from the perspectives of Hong Kong speakers/users of English.

The study

This paper is based on a larger qualitative study conducted at a major university in Hong Kong, where English is not only used as the medium of instruction, but also as a lingua franca on campus as a result of the international student and faculty bodies (see Sung, 2014). A total of 30 participants, including two from the pilot study, were recruited from the Faculties of Arts, Business and Economics, Science, and Social Sciences. All the participants were local undergraduate students (aged between 18 and 24) at the time of the study and were highly proficient second language (L2) speakers/users of English, with at least 12 years studying English prior to their university studies. Further, they reported using English for intercultural communication with people from different countries in a wide range of contexts and for academic-related and social purposes.

Individual interviews were used for eliciting participants' perceptions of ELF. Specifically, the interviews covered several main topics, including participants' perceptions of ELF, their use of English in ELF communication, their experiences of using ELF, and perceptions of other speakers of English. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, with sporadic use of English words and phrases. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Follow-up interviews and email correspondence were also used for further clarification.

Findings

Based on an analysis of the interview data collected, three recurrent perceptions of ELF were identified, namely, positive orientations towards ELF, native-speaker-centric views of ELF, and ambivalent attitudes towards ELF. For the purpose of illustration, selected extracts from the interview data are included below. Note that the extracts were translated from Cantonese into English and that the names of the interviewees are represented with their identification numbers, which were randomly assigned.

Positive orientations towards ELF

One of the main perceptions of ELF among some participants can be characterized by their positive orientations towards ELF. As revealed in their comments, these participants considered that it is an inevitable phenomenon for English to emerge as an international lingua franca which serves as an important means of intercultural communication in today's globalized world:

It's inevitable that different people from different parts of the world have to communicate with one another through the same language. And English is an international language that serves that purpose. (#7)

In particular, these participants appeared to define ELF primarily from a functional perspective, emphasizing that the purpose of ELF communication is to achieve mutual understanding among people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds:

I think the most important thing is for others to understand what you say and for you to get your message across. (#8)

We all just try to make sure everything is clearly understood. (#14)

As a result of the pragmatic view of ELF communication, these participants appeared to be primarily meaning-oriented, rather than form-oriented in ELF communication. In particular, 'native-speakerness', or native-speaker competence, was perceived to be 'neither expected nor necessarily beneficial' (Ehrenreich, 2010: 418) in ELF communication:

I don't really feel bad about not being able to speak very fluently like native speakers. (#23)

Even though you are British and you speak in English, you may not speak clearly. Even though you're British, that doesn't help in communication. (#16)

As indicated in parts of the data, the participants appeared to display a preference to allow certain linguistic abnormalities to pass, which could be characterized by 'let-it-pass' or 'make-it-normal' strategies (Firth, 1996):

Sometimes, other people make mistakes, for example, grammatical mistakes or pronunciation errors. We just ignore them because they don't really affect what they try to say. (#3)

Moreover, these participants showed an awareness of the importance of accommodation strategies for achieving the purpose of communicative effectiveness in ELF communication. For example, they emphasized the need for accommodation, given the recognition of the diversity in the Englishes spoken by different users in ELF communication:

As long as we can communicate and understand each other, that's the goal. It takes a bit of adjusting to each other's ways of speaking or accents. (#5)

Different communicative and interactional strategies, such as simplifications, paraphrasing, clarifications and repetitions, were also cited by some participants as ways to pre-empt any potential misunderstanding in ELF communication (see Kaur, 2010):

Some of the people don't have good English proficiency, and we have to try to use simple words or simplify the sentence structures. (#16)

Perhaps we should try to rephrase our ideas in a different way. It's easier to them to understand what we mean. (#29)

Interestingly, we can see that the positive orientations to ELF appear to resonate with the recent findings that young ELF users in Europe identified positively with their use of English in ELF contexts (see, e.g., Cogo, 2010; Cogo & Jenkins, 2010; Peckham et al., 2012). It appears that their receptive attitudes towards ELF could be the result of their pragmatic orientation to ELF, with priority placed on communicative effectiveness, rather than 'native-speaker correctness'. Indeed, participants' reported use of accommodation strategies and other interactional strategies (such as repetitions, clarifications and paraphrasing) could be seen as a testimony to their pragmatic attitudes towards ELF as a means to achieve 'efficiency of communication' (Cogo & Dewey, 2012).

Native-speaker-centric views of ELF

Another recurrent perception of ELF identified in the analysis concerns some participants' native-speaker-centric views of ELF. Such a perception seems to be closely associated with the perceived hegemonic position of native English in ELF communication. As revealed in parts of the data, these participants expressed their desire to speak like native speakers of English in ELF contexts, as a result of the perceived supremacy associated with native English:

I think I try to speak English like native speakers of English and sound like them, and that's my ultimate goal. I may not be able to do so, but I think that's going to help me express myself better when I speak English with people from other cultures. (#12)

In addition, the data shows that some participants placed a high premium on native-speaker norms for measuring English competence for ELF communication. For example, some participants commented favourably on some L2 speakers' close approximations to native-speaker pronunciation

norms, which would imply that they held the belief that the English spoken by native speakers is 'the best':

I think some of the European students can really speak like native speakers of English. I want to speak English like these people. Sometimes, you can't really tell whether their first language is English or not. It's really enjoyable to talk to these European students. (#27)

I generally like talking to speakers of English who speak standard or native English. It's easy to understand them. (#5)

Furthermore, it was found that native speakers of English and L2 speakers who show native-speaker competence were perceived by some participants to be ideal role models of communication in ELF:

I really see people who speak like native speakers as my role models. As I am not a native speaker of English, I need these role models so that I can learn from them. (#5)

From the data presented above, it appears that some participants' native-speaker-centric perceptions of English in ELF communication are still closely tied up with an idealized notion of native-like fluency, which is not contextually sensitive (Cogo, 2010). What is also noteworthy is that the native-speaker-centric views of ELF seem to suggest the continued influence of the native-speaker ideology on some participants' perceptions of ELF (Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2007), especially given the various gatekeeping practices of language policy makers, examination boards, and international publishers. It would appear that the influence of the native-speaker ideology on the perceptions of ELF is unlikely to be weakened within a short period of time unless there are drastic changes in the educational system in Hong Kong, particularly with respect to the exam-oriented culture and the deferential attitude towards native English and native English-speaking teachers. It is important that more work is done in the local education system in order to promote a context-sensitive and critical understanding of ELF so that a more accepting attitude towards linguistic diversity in ELF communication can be fostered (Canagarajah, 2006).

Ambivalent attitudes towards ELF

A further recurrent perception of ELF as evidenced in parts of the data concerns participants' ambivalent attitudes towards (non-)conformity to native-

speaker norms in ELF communication. On the one hand, these participants emphasized the importance of achieving mutual understanding over 'native-speaker correctness' in ELF contexts and accepted deviations from native-speaker norms in the use of grammar and vocabulary in ELF communication. On the other hand, they felt a need for a common standard for different ELF users to orient to in order to ensure intelligibility. Invariably, such a standard is often associated with native-speaker norms.

As evident in their comments, these participants understood the communicative effects of ELF, as a result of the perceived practical purpose of using ELF. As such, they prioritized the importance of communicative efficiency over native-speaker accuracy:

Whether I can deliver my message to the people I am talking to is important. Sometimes, sticking to the ways in which native speakers speak English is not really important. (#16)

I don't care about whether my English is perfect or not. I don't really care much about whether I am a native or non-native speaker of English. You don't have to speak perfect or native English in order to make yourself understand. (#22)

However, while it was felt that conformity to native-speakers norms does not necessarily lead to effective ELF communication, these participants also pointed to the need for a 'standard' to which speakers of ELF should orient so that mutual intelligibility can be more easily achieved. For example, they perceived the need for a common 'standard' for ELF communication:

We need to communicate with different people. And the differences in accents may make our communication more difficult. English is an international language, and I think it's better to have something like a standard for all the accents of English. (#29)

In addition, they appeared to show support for using an internationally acceptable and comprehensive variety of English in ELF communication, particularly a native-speaker variety of English:

I think the reason why people want an international language is that they may not know each other's mother tongue. And they want to use a language that is widely used [. . .] I think we need some sort of a common standard of English so that everyone can communicate with everyone else in the world. (#30)

As one of the participants mentioned, it was considered imperative to emulate a kind of English that is regarded as internationally acceptable in order to achieve the purpose of operating efficiently across cultural boundaries in ELF:

I think we should just follow some kind of a standard and that standard should be accepted internationally. And you follow that kind of standard and you can try to understand English which other people speak from other parts of the world [. . .] I think British and American English can serve as the standard. (#22)

Arguably, the ambivalent attitudes observed above could be the result of the co-existence of the concepts of both ENL and ELF in some participants' minds (see Kontra & Csizer, 2011). On the one hand, these participants appeared to be cognizant of the role of English as a global lingua franca among speakers of different lingua-cultural backgrounds, emphasizing communicative efficiency over 'native-speaker correctness' in ELF communication. As a result, they were likely to accept 'non-standard' and/or 'non-native' language features in ELF interactions. On the other hand, they also perceived the value of some kind of 'standard' or 'norm' for the sake of ensuring mutual intelligibility among speakers of different L1 backgrounds. As such, they may see ENL as a convenient point of reference in conceptualizing linguistic acceptability in contexts of ELF communication. With the two opposing tendencies of centrifugal and centripetal forces of English at work (Murata & Jenkins, 2009), these participants seemed to be caught up in the competing influences of the two concepts, ELF and ENL, and were, in Bamgbose's (1998: 1) words, 'torn between the norms'. Interestingly, the ambivalent attitudes towards ELF seem to be reminiscent of the 'linguistic schizophrenia' experienced by Jenkins's (2007: 214) participants. As revealed in Jenkins's (2007) study, L2 speakers of English developed a sense of ambivalence in ELF contexts as a result of their multiple and competing desires; specifically, their desire to be identified with an 'imagined' native-speaker accent and their wish to project an identity associated with their L1 and expressed through their own L1-influenced English accent.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of the paper was to investigate a group of Hong Kong university students' perceptions of ELF. While the data reported here are in no way representative of the entire Hong Kong population, the findings of the study offer some important

insights into the perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong and provide much-needed empirical evidence of the complexity of ELF perceptions in the era of globalization.

Different from earlier research that indicates predominantly exonormative orientations to English in Hong Kong (see Sewell, 2009; Tsui & Bunton, 2002), the analysis shows that the perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong appear to be much more complicated. In particular, a range of varied and complex perceptions of ELF as a sociolinguistic phenomenon emerged in the analysis, namely, positive orientations towards ELF, native-speaker-centric views of ELF, and ambivalent attitudes towards ELF. Based on the findings reported here, we can see that the perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong are not straightforwardly positive or negative, but could be characterized by Bakhtin's (1981) concept of 'heteroglossia', which involves the multiplicity of voices, styles and perspectives. Also important to note is that quite a number of participants appear to express two or more of the perceptions identified, albeit not necessarily at the same time. In other words, ELF perceptions seem to be far from straightforward, but are likely to be ambiguous, self-contradictory, and inconsistent (see Jenkins, 2007).

In light of the co-presence of varying perceptions and ideologies of ELF among a group of Hong Kong university students, the analysis also suggests that ELF is not a monolithic phenomenon. What is notable is that the varied perceptions of ELF identified in the study not only point to the complex and heteroglossic nature of ELF perceptions in Hong Kong, but also draw our attention to the 'multilithic' (Pennycook, 2008) nature of ELF. With multiple and competing ideologies at work in influencing and shaping the perceptions of ELF, the analysis calls for the need for a much more nuanced understanding of the diversity and the interconnectedness of different ELF perceptions, as well as the complexity of ELF as social practice.

It is also worth pointing out that participants' varied perceptions of ELF could be the result of their differing prior ELF communication experiences. While we cannot overlook the strong exonormative orientations towards native English in Hong Kong as a result of its political and sociocultural circumstances, individual differences in terms of their experiences of using English could shape their varying perceptions of ELF to a certain extent. In particular, communicating through ELF in intercultural encounters could be charged with positive or negative experiences and loaded with personal meanings, thereby resulting in diverse perceptions of ELF. For example, participants' positive

orientations towards ELF may be closely linked to their positive communication experiences. As a result, they were likely to be receptive to the idea of ELF, at least in theory, and to language variation more generally (Jenkins, 2007). On the contrary, participants with relatively limited, or even negative, ELF communication experiences may likely attach importance to the need for a single 'standard' or 'norm' in ensuring mutual intelligibility in ELF communication and may hold more conservative attitudes towards language variation in ELF communication.

To end on a positive note, despite evidence of mixed perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong, the study here appears to show some promising signs of more relaxed attitudes towards language variation and diversity in ELF communication in a city where exonormative norms towards English reign supreme. Importantly, the findings resonate with the increasingly receptive perceptions of ELF as reported in previous studies conducted in the European context (e.g., Cogo, 2010; Kaloscai, 2009; Peckham et al., 2012). More research would be needed to investigate whether more accepting perceptions of ELF will prevail in Hong Kong in the near future.

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