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University students' perceptions of ELF in mainland China and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This study examined mainland Chinese and Taiwanese students' perceptions of two aspects of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): phonology and lexico-grammar. The researchers surveyed a total of 400 students at two universities in mainland China and at two universities in Taiwan (200 in each area). The results indicated that although students in both groups were aware that they could not speak English as native speakers did, they still preferred to achieve a native speaker accent. They admitted that they spoke with Chinese accents, but they believed that their accents were intelligible and acceptable. Nevertheless, the students in both groups tended to not maintain their local accents in English. With respect to ELF lexico-grammar, both groups considered some features incorrect, but they were uncertain about others. However, they could understand and tended to accept all the ELF sentences. The present study also revealed variations between the two groups with respect to their perceptions of ELF phonology and lexico-grammar. Given that little research has compared ELF users' perceptions across different geographical areas, this study addresses an important research gap by investigating the interaction of ELF perceptions and local contexts. Findings of the study may have important implications for ELF researchers and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

The spread of English as a global language has posed new challenges to traditional English language learning and teaching, particularly in countries where English is normally treated as a foreign language. As a result of globalization, English is often used as a Lingua Franca (henceforth, ELF) worldwide between people from any culture. English learning and teaching would better shift from a monolingual paradigm targeting a static native speaker norm to a multilingual paradigm prioritizing competence in a repertoire of multilingual resources (refer to Canagarajah, 2005; Canagarajah & Wurr, 2011 for more discussion on the two paradigms). ELF is 'the world's most extensive contemporary use of English', which refers to 'English when

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it is used as a contact language between people from different first languages (including native English speakers)' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 2). It has become a thriving field in applied linguistics over the last decade (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011).

On the other hand, dialectology (Trudgill & Hannah, 2002) has revealed intralingual variations in regions where people share the same L1. It has examined national varieties of a given language (e.g., American English and British English), sub-national varieties of national varieties of a given language (e.g., regional variations in American English) and both national and sub-national varieties of a given language (Schneider & Barron, 2008). It is worth investigating whether regional variations also exist with respect to the ELF perceptions of individuals with the same L1. However, the available empirical studies on users' attitudes towards ELF have mainly examined ELF users in just one area. Few studies to date have investigated the perception of ELF across different regions with similar linguistic background. In order to explore whether intralingual variation exists within ELF attitudes research, more studies comparing speakers of the same L1 are needed.

To contribute to the existing ELF attitudes research, the present study investigates ELF perceptions among university students in mainland China and in Taiwan, two areas with the same L1 but different political and social systems, where English is traditionally seen as a foreign language (Kachru's, 1992 'expanding circle'). We wonder whether people with the same L1 but living in different local contexts will view English differently as a global language. In mainland China and Taiwan, where English has been taught as a foreign language (EFL), English tends to be exonormative in that people have traditionally looked to native English models for linguistic norms. English plays a key role in schools as a major exam subject. Proficiency in English is considered a definite asset of considerable value at an individual and societal level.

The present study examines students' perceptions of ELF phonology and lexico-grammar. In dialectology, pronunciation has been predominantly studied because the most salient feature of any variety of a given language is pronunciation. The second most studied areas in dialectology are vocabulary and grammar (Schneider & Barron, 2008). As for ELF, Jenkins et al. (2011) in their comprehensive review of ELF research, outlined the three linguistic areas that are most frequently examined by ELF researchers—phonology, lexis/lexico-grammar and pragmatics. Among them, phonology and lexico-grammar are the two fields with the most progress in ELF research (Jenkins, 2009). For example, Jenkins (2000) explores pronunciation-based intelligibility problems in ELF and divides features that are crucial to intelligibility from features that are not crucial. Walker (2010) provides guidelines for teachers who wish to incorporate an ELF approach into their pronunciation teaching. Corpus findings in ELF, particularly the VOICE (Seidlhofer, 2004, 2011) and ELFA (Mauranen, 2012) projects, have shown a certain degree of typicality in ELF lexico-grammar features. Given the explorative nature of the present study and because phonology and lexico-grammar are the two linguistic areas that are examined extensively in both dialectology and ELF, we decided to focus on these two aspects of ELF in the current study.

2. Previous research on ELF perceptions

Empirical studies on ELF perceptions can be divided into three major categories: (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) teacher perceptions, and (3) student perceptions. In what follows, we will review categories (1) and (3) because they are the most relevant to the present study.

The studies focussing on teacher and student perceptions include Timmis (2002), Ranta (2010), Pan and Block (2011), and Wang (2013). Timmis (2002) designed two parallel questionnaires to elicit student and teacher responses from different countries to native speaker (hereafter, NS) norms with respect to pronunciation and grammar. Most students preferred NS pronunciations, whereas most teachers regarded 'accented intelligibility' as desirable. Although, students and teachers differed in their perceptions of pronunciation, they both showed a strong tendency towards NS competence in grammar. Ranta (2010) employed questionnaires to examine non-native English teachers' and students' awareness of the global role of English in upper secondary schools in Finland. The findings indicated that both teachers and students in Finland were aware of the role of English as a lingua franca. However, this type of 'real-world English' view held by individual teachers and students appeared to conflict with the norm-based 'school English' view held by educational authorities and test planners.

Pan and Block (2011) worked with university teachers and students in Beijing to examine their language beliefs. The participants clearly regarded English as a global language and a mark of social prestige in mainland China; English was seen as crucial for the development of mainland China, and the English education in mainland China was examination-oriented, with a particular focus on grammar. Wang (2013) investigated the perceptions of non-conformity to norms of English as a native language (ENL) of professionals and university students in mainland China using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire results showed a slightly positive orientation towards non-conformity to Standard English varieties. The interview data indicated that the participants tried to strike a balance between conformity to and non-conformity to ENL norms. For explanation, the participants' conformity to ENL were motivated by perceptions of ENL as the essence of English, ENL as norm-based English, and ENL as the socially preferred English. On the other hand, the participants' non-conformity to ENL was for the purposes of communicative efficiency and cultural identity projection. From these studies, we can see that although university