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Perceptions, awareness and perceived effects of home culture on intercultural communication: Perspectives of university students in China

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of English has brought into the dominance of Anglophone cultures in intercultural communication (IC). For this reason, it is important to investigate how English language learners' perceptions and awareness of home culture influence the social practice of intercultural communication. Conceptualizing home culture as a key topic in IC, this study used questionnaires and interviews to investigate Chinese university students' perceptions and awareness of their own culture and the perceived effects of home culture on IC. Anchored in descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis, the findings show that: 1) the majority of students had a rather superficial understanding of their home culture; and 2) most students reported that perceptions and awareness of home culture play critical roles in negotiating with speakers of other backgrounds. This suggests that home culture should be regarded as a resource to challenge the dominance of Anglophone cultures in English language teaching classrooms. It also calls for an integration of home culture and other cultures into the English language curriculum, material development and pedagogical practice.

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1. Introduction

The global spread of English has facilitated its use for intercultural communication (IC), and in recent years, IC has become an important topic in English language teaching (ELT) because language learners are expected to communicate in English with people of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Baker, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Widodo, Wood, & Gupta, 2017). Despite the difficulty to provide a widely agreed-upon definition of IC, this paper adopts the perspective of sociolinguistics and multi-lingualism which views IC "as a social practice rather than an object and of fluidity and change" (Baker, 2015, p. 27). The use of English in various lingua-cultural contexts as a social practice challenges us as teacher educators and practitioners to ponder how intercultural components, in particular, home culture, can be integrated into English language classrooms (Handoyo Widodo, personal communication).

The global prominence of English has led to rise not only in its *intranational* use in traditional inner- and outer-circle contexts (Kachru, 1992), but also, more widely, in its *international* use as a medium of communication (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). As a result, the number of non-native English speakers has surpassed that of native English speakers,

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making English no longer solely the property of its native speakers (Graddol, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 1994). The development of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2007, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011) has drawn attention to approaches to teaching this international language and the various ways in which people from various lingua-cultures use it in IC (Baker, 2012, 2015; Corbett, 2003; Fang, 2011, 2017). In today's globalized world, the fact that English is being used as a lingua franca by increasing numbers of non-native speakers in multicultural contexts prompts the question of whether Anglophone cultures should serve as the sole norm in teaching cultures in the ELT classroom (Baker, 2015; Canagarajah, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Wen, 2016).

In addition, questions arise concerning the significance of home culture, or as McKay's (2002) term, the "source culture," and how or whether it should be acknowledged in the ELT field (Guo & Beckett, 2007; Knutson, 2006; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Against this backdrop, Fang (2011) suggests that teachers need to develop their cultural awareness and understanding of cultural diversity, which will help students gain a sense of intercultural awareness and learn to reflect on their own cultures during the English learning process (see also, Gu, 2016). Similarly, in their study, Guo and Beckett (2007) voice concern that the idolization of "Anglocentric culture in the name of authenticity" (p. 124) has marginalized local Chinese culture. They point out the importance of implementing critical multiculturalism and multilingualism to reclaim local languages and cultures within ELT.

To extend this scholarship, this study recognizes that the concept of culture is not fixed against the backdrop of globalization and that home culture is a highly complex concept encompassing a constantly changing set of beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and values. Traditionally, in English classrooms the correlation of English and the English-speaking western cultures has been taken for granted. However, the new thinking about culture has challenged this simplistic region- and nation-bounded understanding of culture (Baker, 2011, 2015; Holliday, 2009; Risager, 2007). In particular, in ELT, the view of culture is often oriented toward Anglophone cultures (Canagarajah, 2005; Kramersch, 2014; Nault, 2006), while "the dynamic and liminal nature of much intercultural communication" (Baker, 2011, p. 198) is often neglected. The next section explores the new thinking about culture in relation to IC to challenge the over-simplistic correlation of language and culture in ELT, with a focus on the Chinese context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Home culture and IC in ELT

Culture plays a central role in effective communication because it not only represents the sum total of shared experiences but also shapes the life experiences of the individuals who occupy a particular culture as members of that community (Guilherme, 2002; Nieto, 2010; Tang, 2006). Echoing the status quo of the global use of English, this paper defines *culture* from a poststructuralist approach conceptualizing it "as a complex social system, as opposed to natural system, that emerges through individuals' joint participation in the world giving rise to sets of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices" (Baker, 2015, p. 71). In this way, culture is perceived not merely as a cognitive concept (as knowledge, it cannot only be cognitive – but must also involve social practice), but, rather, from a critical perspective that challenges an essentialist set of cultural meanings (Baker, 2012; Guilherme, 2002; Piller, 2011). Thus, culture is viewed as a discourse, practice, and ideology in which IC is as a process tightly bound to identity negotiation and construction (Baker, 2015; Liddicoat, 2015; Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016). When discussing the concept of home culture and researching IC within the Chinese context, *home culture* refers to Chinese culture, understood to be fluid and dynamic. However, some researchers report that Chinese students share many core concepts related to Chinese culture and view these as part of their own identities (Gao, 2010; Gu, 2010; Lo Bianco, Orton, & Gao, 2009).

Language instruction has long emphasized the crucial, inherent relationship between language and culture (Corbett, 2003; Kramersch, 1993, 2009; Liddicoat, 2015), and cultural instruction occurs within language teaching classrooms (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007). It might seem unquestionable that specific languages are generally associated with target cultures, but when English is used as a global language, the term *target culture* cannot be applied to the majority of English language learners (or language users, from an ELF perspective). Cultural globalization requires that learners of English gain exposure to more cultures than the culture of traditional Anglophone countries to be successful in international communication with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. The ideology of *native speakerism* in the ELT field has resulted in the problematic, monolithic, unilateral view defining culture as representative only of Anglophone countries (Holliday, 2006, 2011; Kubota, 2016), but to a large extent ELT has "privileg[ed] native speakers and marginaliz[ed] nonnative speakers in matters related to language use, language learning, and language teaching" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 71).

The complexity of the nature and politics of IC has led scholars, such as Baker (2015), Piller (2011), and Kramersch (1993, 2009), to explore the relationship between IC and ideology, to critically re-examine cultural practices, and to re-address the concept of intercultural awareness against the backdrop of globalization. For example, Kramersch (2009) introduced the term *the multilingual subject*, arguing that language learners need to develop a cultural position from which they can comfortably mediate between their own culture and that of the target language as symbolic competence that is multiple and subject to change. This requires a negotiation process, which helps learners shuttle between home culture and other cultures on IC. This is relevant to the discussion of home cultures situated in China.

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