Chapter 9 – Ying Wang transcript (full)

Chinese English speakers’ language attitude in the context of global Englishes

Hello from China Three Gorges University. I’m Ying Wang, lecturer in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. In the following 15 minutes, I’ll briefly talk about the changing context of Chinese speakers’ contact with English, major research perspectives on Chinese speakers’ English, and my own research on Chinese English users’ language attitude.

The changing context of Chinese speakers’ contact with English

Chinese speakers’ contact with English language started in 1637 when the first British mercantile ships arrived in Canton and Macau. The English were known as ‘red-haired barbarians’ at that time. The Chinese government controlled the communication between the native Chinese and English merchants. The government also banned the teaching of Chinese to the English. While the English find it extremely difficult to learn Chinese language, Chinese people learning English became the best and only solution in order to conduct communication for the purpose of the trade. A missionary, William, perceived this phenomenon as strange and he noted:

Everywhere else it is expected that time will be devoted to the acquisition of the language of the country by strangers; and no-one thinks of going to France, Germany, or India to reside, and intending to speak a foreign dialect while there. But here, the case is exactly the reverse. Foreigners have for ages come to China from different lands for trade, and still all communication is carried on in a foreign tongue.

By the end of nineteenth century, English speakers, including businessmen, missionaries, and the colonizers, came to China and, subsequently, the use of English exceeded domain of business communication. Missionaries built up missionary schools and colleges successively with the attempt to ‘convert the Chinese’. This consequently brought English education into classrooms in China.

Till then, the English was mainly from Britain and America. They were people who taught Chinese people English language and with whom Chinese speakers contacted. English was used by a small number of Chinese people who were doing business with the English or working for them or serving them.

Later, English went through ups and downs due to different political, economic, and cultural reasons. Because of the foreign policy of New China in its early years, Russian was once a foreign language widely learned and taught in China. English regained its popularity since 1970s, when the Chinese government recovered its relationship with the United States after the Cold War and realized the importance of English in its national development, especially in four modernizations. English was used by people who constituted some Chinese people who had a good command of English in China, and worked in the domain of science and technology, media, foreign trade and tourism, and translation.
With the start of twenty-first century, English in China moved further into a new era. The use of English is expanding. The number of Chinese speakers is growing. English is used by people from all walks of life, covering a cline of Chinese bilinguals. While previously Chinese speakers mainly used English to communicate with Britons or Americans, Chinese speakers are using English to communicate with people from all over the world. This change is particularly motivated by China’s entry into the World Trade Organization and is particularly evident in the 2008 Olympic Games, 2010 World Expo, and all other sorts of international events.

English has become a widely used language accessible to many users in China. The Internet offers an easy access to English and English-medium information. The media also provides Chinese people with more exposure to English. In short, while English was considered as alien for most Chinese people in the past, many Chinese freely code-switch between English and Chinese today.

While the context of Chinese speakers’ contact with English has gone through all these changes, native English monolingualism has always been central to English education in China. British English and American English have been the models of English to be followed in English education. Non-conformity to native English norms in the Chinese speakers’ linguistic performance has often been criticized as ‘learner English’. In a word, a gap emerges between sociolinguistic reality, in which various forms of English are used for communication, and assumption in English pedagogy that Chinese learners should strive to approximate native or near-native English competence.

**Research perspectives on English in China**

English in relation to Chinese speakers has been a research interest for a long time. One major research perspective converges with the traditional second language acquisition research, with its focus on Chinese learners’ English and error analysis. Another research perspective is known as the World Englishes paradigm. Following this paradigm, China/Chinese English research has been conducted to argue for the legitimacy of English variety used by and generated among Chinese speakers.

The changing context of English used by Chinese speakers reveals the limitations of these two paradigms. From a second language acquisition perspective, Chinese speakers and learners are supposed to follow native English norms and strive to achieve near-native speaker competence. The increasing use of English by Chinese speakers in their intercultural encounters with people who are not native English speakers, however, motivates a question: why should native English be followed? Native English norms, which have been generated in native-English contexts, should not be treated as the one-for-all solution for various intercultural encounters between non-native English speakers where native English speakers are absent. The exclusive focus on native-English norms overlooks language users’ adaptation to different contexts and to different interlocutors.

The World Englishes paradigm explores the use of English as a second language between speakers who have the same first language backgrounds and belong to the same speech
communities. Geographical boundaries between different varieties are clearly drawn in the World English’s research. The use of English by Chinese speakers for intercultural communications, however, goes beyond the geographical boundaries and thus goes beyond the scope of the World Englishes perspective.

The research into English as a lingua franca, for ELF, and Global Englishes offer implications for the understanding of the English used by Chinese speakers. The notion of ELF conceptualizes the role of English that is widely used among speakers from all over the world, and emphasizes the equal right of using English by all users in different ways. Non-native English speakers’ performance is evaluated with the focus on the function of the linguistic output. Non-native English speakers’ Englishes are considered as different from and equal to native English. Correspondingly, some issues considered as unacceptable on the second language acquisition paradigm take new lines from an ELF perspective. For example, first language transfer is conceived as second language users’ identity marker, and code-switching/code-mixing are considered as part of second language users’ bilingual resources. In turn, the same linguistic output might be treated as variation or error respectively in different perspectives. It deserves noticing that ELF does not suggest that ‘anything goes’. While formulaic correctness is irrelevant in ELF communication, appropriateness is an important indicator of successful ELF communication. Following an ELF perspective, Chinese speakers’ English emerging in their intercultural communication is legitimate in itself and comparable rather than inferior to native English.

**Chinese speakers’ attitude towards their own English**

Despite the theoretical support to the legitimacy of Chinese speakers’ own English, Chinese speakers are the agents of using and of sustaining their own English, and it is therefore necessary to find out how they perceive their own English in relation to native English, and why they perceive their own way of using English in particular ways. To this end, I conducted a questionnaire survey, 35 interviews and four focus groups. Questionnaire responses were made by 502 Chinese university students and 267 Chinese professionals who used English in their daily work to different extent.

The data shows ambivalent attitudes towards Chinese speakers’ own English. In general, the questionnaire responses displayed a slightly positive orientation towards instances of non-conformity to native English norms, and revealed the respondents’ dilemma between the formulaic conformity and the functional non-conformity. The interviews highlight ambivalence, and conflicting views can be found in each individual participant. On the one hand, Chinese speakers’ English is judged as erroneous; on the other hand, Chinese speakers’ English is considered as successful and useful. The tension is unfolded between the exonorative and endonorative orientations to English. The participants’ exonorative orientation reflect their belief in the centrality of native English speakers to norms of English use, their conceptualization of English as a fixed entity, and their aspiration for social advantages that they believe the conformity to native English can offer. Their endonorative orientations relate to their acknowledgement of the communicative function of English that diverges from native-English norms, and their concern for their identity, cultural identity, which they believe conflicts with the conformity to native-English norms.
The participants’ self-report of their own attitudes and self-reflections revealed few factors contributing to their attitude formation. The major factors included the conception of English, the experience of using English, and English education.

Following up with the interviews, four focus groups were conducted among participants who were Chinese university students. With a brief introduction of the ELF concept as the stimuli for group discussion, attitude change was seen throughout group interactions. Some participants’ engagement with the ELF concept and their ELF experience were found to have positive influence on their language awareness, where other participants continued to defend native-English monolingualism by emphasizing that status quo that native English is currently the predominant model of English. These results thus suggest that there is a need to introduce the concept of ELF to students and increase their exposure to ELF data in order to facilitate their critical thinking about English, about English globalization, and about currency of native-English monolingualism.

**Conclusion**

The changing context of English in relation to Chinese speakers problematizes native English monolingualism, points to the pluricentricity of English, and opens up the discussion of the legitimacy of Chinese speakers’ own English in intercultural communication. The changing context also requires a changing perspective on Chinese speakers’ English – that is, an ELF perspective. In my study, Chinese speakers have ambivalent attitudes towards their own English. They struggled in a dilemma between the orientation towards native English and the perceived value of Chinese speakers’ own English. The investigation into the participants’ attitudes, perceptions, concerns, and beliefs related to English suggests a need to promote Chinese users’ language awareness. This can be done in English education. This could include class discussions of ELF-related issues and the Global Englishes paradigm, such as the spread, the function, the ownership, and the variation of English. Teachers can explain the ELF/Global Englishes concept and present ELF/Global Englishes research findings. It can also be useful to integrate ELF corpus data into language learning and teaching resources. All right, this brings me to the end. Thank you.