International Students' Perceptions of and Attitudes towards their Chinese Accented English in Academic Contexts[1]

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Abstract

Dominant processes of economic and cultural globalization have accelerated the use of English as a medium of instruction and precipitated diverse, yet intersected global student mobility, which have resulted in varied forms and uses of English in academic contexts. The present study reports on the findings of research into the attitudes and perceptions of a group of Chinese students studying English as an Additional Language (EAL) towards the legitimacy of non-native speaker (NNS) accents, including their own, as used in cross-cultural interactions in academic contexts. The research aims at unpacking students' views of their Chinese accented English to better understand the ways in which their attitudes towards English accents help negotiate and sustain their ethnic identities in academic contexts. Drawing on a qualitative paradigm, the study utilized in-depth interviews with a sample of four participants. The results suggested that intelligibility is highly regarded at least at the cognitive level, which gives their idiolectal varieties of English greater legitimacy. However, such a hard-developed belief is seriously thwarted by their lived experiences of discrimination over their accented speech, which pushes them back, yet again, to a position of perceived inferiority that hinders their active participation in their academic contexts.

Resumen

Los actuales procesos de globalización cultural y económica han acelerado el uso del inglés como medio de instrucción y han provocado un fenómeno de movilidad estudiantil cruzada que ha dado origen a variadas formas y usos del inglés en contextos académicos. El presente estudio da cuenta de las actitudes y percepciones de un grupo de estudiantes chinos de inglés como lengua adicional respecto de la legitimad de (sus) acentos no nativos en contextos interaccionales académicos transculturales. La investigación procura develar las conceptualizaciones de los participantes respecto de su inglés con acento extranjero a fin de comprender cómo sus actitudes frente a los acentos del inglés les ayudan a negociar y mantener sus identidades étnicas en contextos académicos. El estudio empleó una metodología cualitativa y entrevistas en profundidad con una muestra de cuatro participantes. Los resultados relevan una apreciación por la inteligibilidad, al menos a nivel cognitivo, lo que le confiere a sus variedades ideolectales mayores grados de legitimidad. No obstante, la mencionada creencia, fruto de procesos laboriosos de desarrollo, se ve interpelada permanentemente por experiencias discriminatorias a causa de sus acentos extranjeros, cuestión que mina su participación activa en contextos académicos y los relega a una posición de inferioridad percibida.

Introduction

It is no doubt that globalization as an international phenomenon has been a great contributor to the establishment and development of major economic, political and social change around the world. Described as "one of the most important changes in history" (Bauman, 2003, p. 156), its pervasive presence has penetrated all spheres of life, which has generated new modes of communication, information access, trade and commerce. Maranga (2018) argues that although globalization processes have always existed, its impact has become more particularly evident in the "fluidity" of information through communication technologies, and of people moving across geographical areas. These phenomena have had a profound impact on the dispersals of English around the world, which have led to the emergence of "new Englishes" and the development as well as the establishment of a multiplicity of language varieties. Smit (2010) argued that "thanks to socio-historical developments, the military power exerted by English speaking nations and, more recently, the socio-economic power of international companies and organizations" (p. 2), the English language has taken on a position of power worldwide. This geopolitical phenomenon has brought about interesting—and at times rather heated—scholarly discussions (Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2003) about the teaching and learning of English, where the notion of standard English, native speaker (NS) models and standard accents have been critiqued since English language communication commonly takes place in international contexts (Jenkins & Leung, 2019). Notwithstanding, standard varieties and standard accents of English continue to be largely favored by foreign language learners (Rivers, 2011; Sung, 2016; Tsurutani, 2012; Zhang, 2008). Such preferences tend to create personal and collective images and associations between speakers and the varieties/accents they use (Tsurutani, 2012), thus shaping language learners'

identities who may even undergo a process of "temporary alienation, loss of identity or perceived marginalization" (Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 264.). Within this complex landscape, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. *What are Asian international students' perceptions of the legitimacy of their varieties of English in intercultural interactions in academic contexts?*

2. *How do students' perceptions of the legitimacy of their Non-Native Speaker(NNS) English relate to their maintaining, reorienting, constructing, and negotiating their ethnic identities in academic contexts?*

For the purposes of the present study, the terms "NNS English accent" and "accented" English will be used interchangeably.

Literature review

The Spread of English, English Varieties, and Accent

The spread of English, one of the current "liveliest debates" (Seidlhofer, 2003, p. 7) in TESOL, is not a phenomenon that is treated from a purely linguistic viewpoint. It is, for the most part, a sociopolitical phenomenon whose repercussions can be felt at various levels, amongst which is the individual's personal emotional one.

As Crystal (2003) pointed out, English has gained world status due to "the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century" (p. 59). In Europe, in particular, a process of "Englishization" has gained increased momentum with English being used as a means of instruction in increasingly more and more universities across the continent and beyond. Such a process has been conceptualized differently by different authors, from a process inextricably associated with economic development (Crystal, 2003) to an ideologically-loaded one (Phillipson, 2006), whose pedagogical consequences have become apparent over the past few decades, and have taken the form of which variety and accent of English to teach, who should teach it, which materials should be used, and so forth. These contentious issues take an interesting turn in a context where "the group of L2 users of English greatly outnumbers that of native speakers" (Ferguson, 2006, p. 149); as a consequence, traditional related constructs, such as (standard) English, (standard) accent, NS, and others, have been critically interrogated accordingly. The acknowledgment of the so-called "New Englishes", often associated with postcolonialism, has resulted in greater recognition for dialectal diversity, yet this recognition has not been without problems. As a way of illustration, Zhang (2008) found that Chinese English language learners continue to express a stronger preference for varieties representing hegemonic powers, a preference that most likely stems from the availability of English language materials and language exposure. In other words, the leading role of certain varieties of English is closely linked to the political and economic power of the relevant speech communities.

Dialectal diversity, as briefly outlined above, often becomes more evident in diversity of English language accents and their ensuing related pedagogical phenomena. Accent is usually conceived of as placed on a continuum, with accent accuracy – with a NS model predominance at one end, and accent intelligibility at the other – with a NNS orientation in a context of English as an International Language (EIL). Although intelligibility has been favored by scholars such as Jenkins (in Fan et al, 2017, Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Setter & Jenkins, 2005), accuracy is still embedded in teacher education programs and teachers' and students' attitudes. Watson-Todd and Pojanapunya (2009) conducted a study wherein English language learners expressed preferences for NS accent models, confirming previous studies (Timmis, 2002; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), yet, at the same time, expressed a feeling of ease when exposed to NNS speaker accents. As can be seen, English language learners are either subconsciously pushed to (or simply) look up to NS (or "Western") accents, especially as perceived by Asian learners (Rivers, 2011), which is in itself rather challenging for various reasons (Singleton, 2014) It follows, then, that some English language learners who naturally do not achieve a native-like accent are filled with bitterness resulting from the perceived gap between the desired accent and their actual accent, as reported by Sung (2016). At times, the intrapersonal feeling of bitterness translates into a social correlate of superiority and inferiority, depending on the perceived social prestige of a particular accent. Indeed, Diao (2017) pointed out that "discrimination against foreign accent…is merely a natural phenomenon reported in English-speaking society" (p. 89). In other

words, accent can have a powerful effect on language learners' developmental identity structure (Rivers, 2011), which is briefly treated below.

Identity and accent

The last couple of decades have seen a great surge of interest in the relationship between language learning and identity from a poststructuralist perspective, which looks at identity as a dynamic, socially-constructed concept (Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Ricento, 2005). This means that identity is best to be understood as being driven by and dependent on the constantly changing nature of context (Andrade, 2007 Block, 2006; Karam et al., 2017; Norton, 2013; Yang & Yi, 2017;). Indeed, Marx (2002) argued that identity is "a process of continuous change and permutation which is comprised of cultural identity, social role, and discursive voice" (p. 266). Thus, identity construction is a context-dependent, dynamic and fluid process, yielding multiple identities in a single language learner (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), wherein the learner's narratives can help us understand power relations and identity negotiation mechanisms.

Bordieu (1991) claimed that language learners' specific needs and motivations to learn an additional language relate closely to how they perceive themselves in relation to the world. In a similar vein, Ebtekar (2012) states that "the rationale for desiring a second language is informed by who a learner wishes to be" (p.5), an "imagined, desired" self, an identity. Norton (2013) explains that there are a variety of reasons that drive learners to learn another language (or a particular language variety, with a particular accent), which, more often than not, leads to the emergence of more desirable identities within a particular social target language community. West (1992) identifies "desires" as highly influential factors of identity and identity construction. An example of how desires act in the construction of identity was presented by Yoshimoto (2008) in an autoethnographic study regarding identity struggles of Japanese women learning English as a second language. Relying on her own personal experience while living in Canada, Yoshimoto (2008) reflects on how being Japanese working at an English school exposed her to the social and cultural ideologies and practices that prevail in an English speaking environment. These led her to navigate new understandings about, for instance, what it means as a Japanese woman to earn her own wages in a society where women's freedom is constantly nurtured. Yoshimoto (2008) concludes by stating that "I am neither Japanese nor Canadian, but at the same time, I am both Japanese and Canadian, I am finding myself in a hybrid space, between both cultures. I am changing every day and I think that this change in my identity is necessary for me to grow as a person" (p. 234).

The process of identity formation in a hybrid space has been explored in relation to how language learners view themselves in terms of their English language foreign pronunciation. As a way of illustration, Sung (2016) studied eighteen Chinese university students using in-depth semi-structured interviews as a primary method for data collection. Sung (2016) sought to understand how students' accent preferences were related to identity. Thirteen participants claimed that they wished to have a NS accent in English. Student participants expressed that having such an accent would help them enhance their self-image as learners of English as a foreign language. The study concluded that "the analysis shows that participants' self-reported accent preferences appear to correlate with particular desired identities in EFL communication" (p. 62). It is notable that the process of identity construction of some participants is driven by a desire to be accepted as a competent speaker; however, others who accepted and acknowledged a desire to keep their local accent, showed an emphasis on projecting lingua-cultural identities avoiding all sorts of NS associations. These results resonate with those obtained by Rindal (2010). The author investigated L2 pronunciation of both British and American varieties of English among Norwegian adolescent language learners. Rindal (2010) argued that an increase in the status of English language in Norway, due to the spread of English as a world language, presents a possible relationship between how language learners wish to present themselves to others and their use and choice of English pronunciation. In the study, American and British English varieties were presented to students in terms of status, social attractiveness and linguistic quality. Findings of the study suggest that "[l]earners did not only evaluate accents of English, but also their Norwegian peers based on which English accents they attempted to use. L2 use of English could, therefore, index attitudes and qualities, and learners reported that choice of English pronunciation relied on how speakers wished to present themselves to others" (Rindal, 2010, p. 255). Hence, the reason why the author concluded that these findings confirmed that learners made use of their L2 in their own identity construction process.

Methodology, Methods and Participants

In order to examine participants' attitudes towards and perceptions of the legitimacy of their Chinese accented English in intercultural communication within academic contexts, and better understand how they

negotiate and reorient their ethnic identities, the present work is situated within the realm of qualitative research. Without undermining the benefits of other methodological designs such as quantitative and mixed-methods, the present study embraces what Peshkin (1993) calls "the goodness of qualitative research" (p. 23). This denotes the idea that no research paradigm should be characterized as having a certain monopoly on quality, and that, rather than drawing attention to theory-drive, hypothesis-testing frameworks, greater understanding and appreciation of the nature of qualitative research, that which relates to the continuing search for tentative answers rather than truth. In this study, this is aimed to be achieved through an iterative process which involves description, interpretation, verification and evaluation (Peshkin, 1993) of the respondents' data.

As far as the method of data collection is concerned, the method of choice in this study entailed face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. Apart from the popularity of interviews as a data collection method in educational research (Cohen et al., 2007) and applied linguistics (Davies, 1995), our choice is informed by what Talmy (2010) calls a means to "transform inner voices into public discourse by constructing particular types of subjectivity and including subjects to reveal their inner voices" (p. 130). In this way, the interviews were opportunities for uncovering "inner voices" about the complex ways in which students reorient their ethnic identities and negotiate their memberships in multiple communities within a context where ELF is used. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes, where the exact length was primarily dictated by the participants' desire to speak and depth of responses.

Eight participants were interviewed for this study. However, due to the richness and large volume of qualitative data collected, four were randomly selected and utilized in this study.

Data Analysis

In order to provide the researchers with an opportunity to verify tentative interpretations of the data, the data collection process and analysis of the qualitative data were conducted concurrently. This concurrent collection and analysis process allowed for following up unanticipated themes and new understandings that emerged from the new upcoming data. Once the qualitative data was collected, it was transcribed for analysis, and thematically coded on the basis of the original questions. These were further categorized into three larger themes which emerged from the data. The categorized themes were representative of all participants. This means that those emerging patterns that gave rise to a theme appeared in all participants' responses.

The transcriptions maintained all lexical or grammatical inaccuracies in the participants' speech to not lose any feature of language which could contribute to overall meaning making. Since the participants had already undertaken several months of both General English (GE) and EAP study in Australia, and were now pursuing their masters' degrees, their overall level of proficiency in English was highly competent to hold a conversation in English about their lived experiences with English at university.

In order to provide a greater sense of "personification" without revealing their identities, pseudonyms were used.

The coded and categorized themes from the data are as follows:

  i. Recognition and value of a "standard variety" and native-like unaccented pronunciation in academic contexts
 ii. Negative attitudes towards non-native accented pronunciation
iii. Desire to fit in and not feel marginalized in cross-cultural interactions in academic contexts

Results

Analysis of Students' Responses

Recognition and value of a standard variety and native-like unaccented pronunciation

One of the first questions that participants were asked was in relation to their views and perceptions of the existence of a standard variety of English, and its significance to them. Analysis across the participants' responses revealed, first and foremost, that they all possess shared understandings of what constitutes a standard variety of English. In general, standard varieties are defined as "the language taught in schools, used in formal writing, and often heard from newscasters and other media figures who are trying to project authority or ability" (Van Herk, 2018, p. 13). Students' responses generally tapped into different aspects of

what is involved in a standard variety of English. Their perceptions and understandings of what counts as a "standard variety" of English seem to be predominantly shaped by ideas about the significance of certain phonological aspects which contribute to the intelligibility of speech. This was evident in the following responses:

> *Well, I'm pretty sure standard English is like the English that people use on the TV and that is not too difficult to understand. (Jason)*

> *I think that standard form of English is very clear, with good pronunciation, that anyone can understand, like the BBC news English that doesn't really have too much slangs.* (Rosie)

Similar views about what seems to constitute a standard variety were expressed by Eric who thinks that:

> *A standard English is like the Queen English, clear, easy to understand, good accent, and simple to follow.*

Besides the element of "intelligible speech" that seems to be entailed in all responses, it is also evident that their views are largely framed by dominant "colonial" (e.g., *BBC news English, Queen English)* ideas about what is a standard variety of English. He and Zhang (2010) argue that "for many years, the standard varieties of British and American English were accepted and promoted as the only internationally acceptable pedagogical model for language teaching" (p. 770). The colonial view of British and American English as being the accepted models of standard varieties has been challenged and questioned by some students after some active participation in multilingual, intercultural contexts at university.

> *Though I think that in general a standard English is like good BBC English, in real contexts with people and students from different countries, who cares about this kind of English? British or American, it doesn't matter. My own accent is fine, I guess, and that's what I use because it's still accepted. Using your own accent, and understanding each other is the most important thing. (Eric)*

The questioning of the legitimacy of British and American English in intercultural communication seems to have led Eric to the understanding that their own variety of English is not a deficient form of English, but one that is legitimately acceptable in diverse contexts with people from different "linguacultural backgrounds" (O'Regan, 2014). The capacity to understand others, or what Kim and Billington (2018) call "comprehensibility," has been researched extensively as a fundamental feature of interactional success, and this is precisely what seems most central to Eric in multilingual interactions with people from different ethnic backgrounds. In line with this perspective on the legitimacy and acceptability of their non-standard varieties, some students expressed a rather positive sentiment about the need for tolerance, acceptance and respect for "all types of English," as indicated by Sarah.

> *In academic conversations, discussions in class, with the teacher, and then in University I think it's really important that we accept all types of English like Chinese, Indian, Korean, Japanese, but it's important that we all try to understand each other, more than accent or other things, but it's important to also have like a native accent. This is what I've learned in Australia that has people from all over the world.* (Sarah)

Coupled with the importance of accepting all varieties of English, Sarah, as well as previous accounts from other students, stresses on the centrality of mutual understanding over accentedness in a global community and, more specifically, in academic contexts where intercultural communication and multilingual practices take place. Due to the fact that "the majority of the world's population uses more than one language on a regular basis, and monolingualism is by and large a historical and Anglophone anomaly" (Piller, 2017, p. 72), Sarah has come to the realization that although her NNS accent may not be legitimate in academic interactions, others' accents have to be acknowledged and equally respected.

> *...I try really hard to improve my accent because it's not an academic English, but at the same time I try to respect all the forms of English of my classmates, and even teachers because I have teachers from India and Philippines and many Australians, and that's really valuable. (*Sarah)

Although Sarah's efforts to improve her English accent may not cease in the future, what seems clear is that her broader understanding of accented English along with other English varieties has enabled her to embrace the value of linguistic diversity through classmates and teachers from different cultural backgrounds. These views of acceptance and tolerance of "other" varieties are in stark contrast to those who take the view that a standard variety of English should be relentlessly pursued irrespective of the person with whom the language is used.

Negative attitudes towards accented English in academic contexts

Students were asked what they think of their accented English as used in academic contexts of intercultural communication. Those who related standard English with "Queen" English during the interview showed a particular inclination towards what they call an "accent-free" English that, in their view, would allow for more inclusion in academic contexts, as expressed by Rosie:

> *I'd like to have an accent-free English, like really clear and easy to understand, to find more opportunities for better communication different people in university. Sometimes I feel I get lots of weird looks that make me uncomfortable, though nobody has ever said anything to me about my accent, so I hate when that happens.* (Rosie)

Despite Rosie's wish for an accent-free English which would open up a world of opportunities for more successful communication with people of different cultures in academic contexts, her negative feelings about her own accented English seem to be driven by the unwanted and awkward stares she gets about her English. Although she is fully aware that accentedness is inevitable, as observed in the comment below, she seeks opportunities for communicative intelligibility and comprehensibility in multilingual encounters:

> *I don't really want to sound like British, American or Australian, I want to feel different, get a positive feeling when I speak and when people understand, and this is the reason why I don't really like my accent or other accents like Indian, Korean, Saudi Arabia.* (Rosie)

As indicated earlier, some students seem to be willing to show acceptance and tolerance of accented English as well as other varieties of English in certain contexts. However, when it comes to using English for Academic Purposes (EAP), there seems to be a strong feeling of rejection of accented English shared by some of the participants.

> *I know I am not included in Australian academic circles because of my English, mmm...my accent sucks, and, yes, if you understand each other, that's important, but in university, like with Aussie students, and other countries, it is important a good accent, like a standard, and I don't have that and it's frustrating but in oral presentations in class, I try my best to get a proper Queen accent.* (Eric)

Earlier in the interview, as shown in a previous comment, Eric showed some level of opposition to the idea of adopting an American or British accent, and argued more in favor of seeking comprehensibility in communication. Despite this, his overt recognition of possessing a "good proper British" English as a standard variety seems to be framing his negative attitudes towards his own accent which causes some frustration, particularly in multilingual contexts of academia.

A somewhat similar level of frustration is evidenced in Jason's remark who wishes for a "less foreign accent" which would facilitate more effective communication in academic contexts:

> *I wish I can have a clearer accent, less foreign, and become a more effective speaker in academic situations. When I studied English in the Philippines I felt different because some teachers were from there, and a lot of students from different countries so I felt more included. I didn't really have to do much effort to change my accent, but I feel I have to do this in Australia to be understood...my messages... when I speak with other people. (Jason)*

Jason's view of his foreign, accented English seems to be framing his opinion about what it means to be an effective communicator in academic contexts. Although no mention whatsoever is made to a preference or desire for unaccented, native-like English, the student thinks that more effort is needed for him to be more comprehensible when involved in academic situations in Australia. This seems to suggest that, more than developing an accent-free English, the learner is driven by a motivation to establish a relationship with the social world. Successful engagement with the academic-social community in Australia, however, requires Jason to invest in his English language practices to the extent that adjustments to his accent take place through interaction and negotiation with other speakers.

It seems that participants' negative attitudes towards their accented English are deeply entrenched in a rather dominant ideology of "native speakerism" (Holliday, 2005) which not only captures a growing sentiment of discontent with their Chinese accented English but also reifies the wrongly-rooted assumptions about the validity and legitimacy of native-like unaccented English as a standard form and norm in multilingual academic contexts.

Desire to fit in and not feel marginalized

Although all participants revealed a degree of ambivalence regarding their attitudes towards their own accented Chinese English, some reacted very strongly about not wishing to change or eradicate their accented English in academic contexts.

For me, it's not really about having a different accent in English (but I think it's important), but it's more about feeling accepted by other people. If feeling more accepted is about changing my accent, my style and everything and sound like an Aussie, then I can try and do my best, I just don't want to be excluded.(Eric)

Eric's remark is suffused with feelings that spark issues of equality, social justice and racism. His concerns about inclusion and acceptance by the wider community seem to destabilize our common understanding of "accent," to a point where it denotes a sense of "otherness" - sounding, and potentially becoming, "like an Aussie." Traditionally, social justice embraces the idea that all humans are entitled to basic human rights irrespective of gender, class, nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, age, religion, health, disability or language background (Zajda, 2010). Eric's willingness to take on a different accent, style and even "everything" seems to impose on each of us a sense of responsibility for providing opportunities for inclusion and membership in the Australian community, and more specifically in academic contexts as observed in the following comment:

If I could go to more places with Australians and sometimes if Australians are more kind in University and other places, I think I wouldn't worry about my Chinglish and my horrible accent because people would accept all Chinese. I don't want to do the same that Aussie do, but have more access and learn about their culture, and be be understood in University, hang out with Aussie friends, have long conversations with teachers...things like that. (Eric)

Eric does not seem to aspire to be what Conway and Leonard (2014) call a "privileged migrant" in the Australian community, but become an active participant in activities undertaken by Australians. Eric's particular interest in becoming an active participant in the Australian community is a clear indication of his motivation and willingness to establish new relationships through an on-going process of negotiation of values, beliefs, practices and forms of identification. For example, some students feel quite strongly about the practice of having to choose an English name in Western societies. Sarah expressed that choosing a "Western" name for her was a matter of having an opportunity to be accepted, understood, and integrated into a particular group:

For me having an English name is not just about choosing a name that you people can remember more easily, but it's about trying to be part of the Western society because as soon as people hear your English name they have a different attitude for listening and trying to understand your accent, and I feel lower than them. (Sarah)

The importance of an individual's name as a determinant of identity is universally recognised across all major cultures of the world (Lisbach & Meyer, 2013). Sarah's view on the benefits of taking on a Western name highlights a seemingly privileged position which appears to help mitigate a perceived sense of marginalisation, which, as she feels, manifests itself in interlocutors' attitudes towards her accent which generate feelings of inferiority. Despite this, deep down, Sarah seems more concerned about developing a sense of "social cohesion." Musgrave and Bradshaw (2014) define social cohesion and inclusion as a "sense of involvement or attachment to a group or community" (p. 199), which is reflected in Rosie's profound desire to be part of the Australian community:

Well, I don't want people to look at me different when I am not understood, and changing my accent could be an easy solution, but it would help me more if I didn't really feel left out in some contexts, mainly in university. (Rosie)

A feature of cosmopolitanism, as indicated by Tsolidis (2014, p. 34), is "persistence with cultural difference" where, in an increasingly globalised world, difference is no longer considered different. It seems as though Rosie wished for inclusion and integration into English-medium academic environments where her differences are no longer considered different. A rather similar motive for integration is shared by Jason, who, despite his efforts for improvement, sometimes wishes to return to his home country.

I get real frustration when people say "pardon", "say that again", "sorry say that again", or when people just keep on looking, waiting for what I want to say. I feel like going back to my country, and sometimes people tell me that, but I keep trying to improve my language. Maybe I need to spend more time in Australia for integration in the culture. (Jason)

The level of disappointment and frustration that Jason feels every time he faces an instance where his accented English is not understood has led him to considering returning to his home country, which is where he probably not only feels accepted, valued and integrated, but also, and most importantly, where no efforts whatsoever have to be made in order to change, adjust or "improve his language."

In conclusion, the remarks and observations made by participants provide clear insights into several key dimensions of what it means for a NNS to undertake academic studies in an English-medium university. Besides some of the concerns expressed about their accented English, students voiced their discouragement,

discontent and disappointment about not being understood on certain occasions, and about not feeling integrated or accepted in the English-speaking community, feelings which may not only disrupt smooth transitioning into successful intercultural academic settings, but also leave faulty impressions about being judged unfavorably by others on the basis of their accented English.

Discussion

First and foremost, analysis of the interview data revealed that students shared similar views on what standard English means to them, and how these views stand in stark contrast to their perceptions of their accented English. Several participants expressed preference for those varieties that represent hegemonic powers, in particular British English, which was used as an example of what they understood by a standard variety. This shows participants' inclination to and appreciation for NS accents, which, at the same time, appears to be indicative of feelings of inferiority towards their non-native accent, and possibly of perceived ideas about the accents they deemed legitimate or not. In her study on trainee teachers' attitudes towards different varieties of English, Kaur (2014) found that NS English accents took precedence over NNS English accents, and that NS English accents tended to be described more positively by participants. This is ratified in the participants' responses, which, to a large extent, supports Watson-Todd and Pojanapunya's (2009) findings which revealed language learners' clear preferences for NS accent models.

A particular tendency to favor NS English accents which brought to light strong feelings of rejection of their accented English was manifested in several statements that voiced participants' desires for, for instance, an "accent-free English," as observed below:

> I'd like to have an accent-free English… (Rosie)

> I want to feel different, get a positive feeling… (Rosie)

> I know I am not included in Australian academic circles because of my English… (Eric)

> I wish I can have a more clearer accent… (Jason)

Feelings of non-acceptance and non-legitimacy of their Chinese accented English appear to have implications for not only how they may wish to "sound," but most importantly for how a NS English accent may be, according to the participants, a channel through which they would not feel singled out, and therefore how a stronger sense of inclusion could be embraced. These statements align with much of the data found in Kaur's (2014) study in which participants rated negatively Asian English accents through pejorative and diminishing expressions such as "robot-like," "confusing," "flat," and "tongue-twisted".

While participants' negative perceptions of their Chinese accented English reveal a rather dominant underlying view of the non-legitimate status of their NNS English accent, it is of great interest to observe that participants' inclination towards such dominant varieties of English in the form of "Queen's English" or "BBC English" was, however, driven by a "desire" for communicative intelligibility and comprehensibility, and not necessarily by wanting to aimlessly sound like a NS. While participants' preference for a NS English accent, and consequently negative attitudes towards their own, may seem conflicting with a level of tolerance towards accented Englishes in academic situations, expressed through an inclination to favoring "intelligibility" rather than "accuracy", it becomes clear that the value attached to what they called "clear pronunciation" is far more important in contexts of intercultural communication where speech diversity is inevitable, and accuracy impossible. Indeed, this is, according to Jenkins (in Fan et al., 2017; Setter & Jenkins, 2005), the model that should be made more visible and more widely adopted in a context of EIL.

It seems, however, that the predominance of a NS model which focuses primarily on "accent accuracy" is increasingly difficult to eradicate from the daily teaching pedagogies in EFL contexts such as China which is where participants in this study began their English language trajectories before coming to Australia. In many Asian countries, English language learners are generally pushed to develop a level of admiration for, and attain a level of, native-like accents, which is most likely the reason as to why, despite embracing intelligibility as acceptable in intercultural academic encounters, participants cling to an idealized model of NS English accent, mainly as a vehicle to legitimize their ethnic identities.

Accent is usually conceived of as placed on a continuum, with accent accuracy – with a NS model predominance – at one end, and accent intelligibility at the other – with a NNS orientation in a context of EIL context. Although intelligibility has been favored by scholars such as Jenkins (Fan et al., 2017, Jenkins & Leung, 2019), accuracy is still embedded in teacher education programs and teachers' and students'

attitudes. Nonetheless, it is clear that these feelings about and attitudes towards their accented English sit right at one end of a spectrum where their most inner feelings of disappointment and frustration for not being understood or included in certain academic contexts seem to stand in contrast to those of the other end - their imagined self and profound desire for intelligibility and comprehensibility. It seems vital that students develop a greater appreciation and recognition of their language and communicative capabilities. After all, they have made an enormous personal, psychological and linguistic investment to gain entry to an EAP program at an English-medium university.

An element that became apparent in the responses is a clear sense of personal, social and cultural dissonance with the Australian academic discourse community that does not seem to make sufficient allowances for integration and inclusion. This impinges heavily on a desire to reorient their identity towards the idealized model of a "native speaker". This is, in many ways, a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of their own accented English, which seems to generate a need for negotiating an identity that allows for a wider connection and deeper relationship with people in academic contexts at university. Students' comments and reflections on their accented English evidenced clear traces of various ways in which they either wished or attempted to negotiate and reorient their identities. It seems that participants' sense of belonging, identify formation, and community membership is in a state of flux and transition into an idealized model of NS, which, as reported, appears to have great potential for increasing their opportunities for socialization in academic contexts, and for inclusion and a greater sense of acceptance. This was reiterated by several of the participants who, despite the apparent motive to sound "more native", expressed an overt desire to "not become a native speaker," but to "be more included in academic circles", and "to become a more effective speaker".

Conclusion

The present study sought to unpack Chinese participants' perceptions and understandings of the role and legitimacy of their accented English as used in intercultural communication settings at university, and the ways in which they negotiate their identities. In conclusion, the findings indicated that although there seems to be greater awareness of the importance of accent intelligibility and of the legitimacy of English varieties, originally resulting from post-colonial contexts (Ferguson, 2006) and later spreading into broader international settings (Jenkins & Leung, 2019), a latent preference for varieties and accents representing hegemonic native-speaker models prevails. Such a preference appears to emerge from the sociolinguistic load of accent and its ensuing capacity to shape learners' identity (Karam et al., 2017; Rivers, 2011) as it reveals a good deal of who the speaker is, where s/he comes from, his/her socioeconomic status, and so forth; also, accent quickly evidences possible gaps between a learner's given desired model and the learner's actual level; thus, when the gap is perceived as great by the learner, frustration follows (Sung, 2016), as evidenced in the study. Additionally, the study showed that the resulting feeling of exclusion and discrimination caused by exhibiting a foreign accent in academic circles contributes to the construction of power relations based on the learners' undermined self-confidence levels, which hinders their participation in their academic contexts. Put differently, language learners' social voice is contingent on the leaners' capacity to access a socially appreciated pseudo-material asset: accent. Due to the complex, and potentially life-changing, impact of feelings of exclusion, discrimination, intolerance and inequity on the construction and negotiation of our self-image, and on our capacity to seek and accept opportunities to fit into academic contexts, it becomes essential that a greater level of awareness be heightened across the education sector, and particularly in academic settings such as university contexts, about linguistic diversity as well as the validity and significance of all varieties of English. The responsibility, however, impinges more heavily on teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) given that they facilitate instruction to students for whom English is not their first language.

It needs to be noted that findings of this study provide insights into cross-disciplinary areas such as social theory, sociology and psychology, all of which could reconcile in an attempt to pursue further research into, for instance, social and psychological effects of Chinese students' poor self-image on their participation and integration into the target language community.

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