

ELF Learners' Attitude towards English Accents

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| Received: 08.07.2023 | Accepted: 14.08.2023 | Published: 22.08.2023

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Abstract

It is observed that the majority of English non-native speakers (NNSs) use English as a Lingua Franca among themselves rather than as a foreign language to communicate with English native speakers (NSs). Nonetheless, the English language attitude of NNSs in the context of ELF has not been clear so far. Many studies on accent attitude have assumed that their participants had been aware of different English accents and had the ability to identify them, but it seems not true for a certain number of students. Therefore, this research surveyed 50 Chinese university students and 30 overseas students from other expanding circle countries. Three aspects were examined: (1) the ability to identify and understand different English accents; (2) the familiarity with different English accents; (3) the accent attitude in the aspects of pleasantness and acceptance. The results indicated that the accent attitude of participants correlated with their identification ability to some degree. Participants who were more familiar with different English accents tended to show higher acceptance for them. Their acceptance depended largely on the intelligibility of the accents. In addition, only a few students would like to show their cultural identity through speaking English with a local accent. This study addressed a significant research gap in the position of students' identification ability for different English accents in the context of ELF. Based on this study, the educators in the expanding circle could be more aware of the impact of the development of ELF on students.

Keywords: Accent attitude; ELF; identification; the expanding circle; acceptance; intelligibility.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is more and more widely used in the expanding circle, where 'English is leaned and spoken but does not serve institutional purposes' (Seidlhofer, 2006). Most English learners in the expanding circle acquire English for the purpose of communication with non-native speakers (NNSs) who share the same native language and cultural background rather than with native speakers (NSs) (Jenkins, 2007). Under the impact of globalization, the role and function of English are changing conspicuously in many parts of the world (Crystal, 2003). The terminology of ELF develops as time goes by and many researchers argue that revisiting the teaching paradigm of English in the ELF context is necessary (Sharifan, 2009; Hu and Renandy, 2012; Matsuda, 2017).

Studying language attitude is a significant way to explain the language behavior of a specific group of people. The terminology of attitude is in the category of social psychology at first (Jenkins, 2007; Garrett, 2010). When this concept is used in the field of linguistics, it can be treated as a mirror to reflect underlying reasons for certain language policies in a

certain area. Language attitude study is also necessary in the context of ELF because English has undergone many changes in the aspects of form, pronunciation and usage. In the expanding circle, language attitude researches are also fundamental since the function and status of English are different from those in the inner circle. In addition, the perceptions and beliefs of people in the expanding circle of English language are not clear (Jenkins, 2007; Buckingham, 2014).

Accent attitude is an important dimension of language attitude. For ELF learners, accent attitude is the most "salient" side of the usage of the target language and has the most significant impact on language attitude (Jenkins, 2007). Accent itself is hard to define and the notion of non-accent is still a myth (Fan, 2015). Due to the complicated and delicate nature of both accent and attitude, psychologists and linguists have relatively little interest to investigate accent attitude in a detailed way (Gallois, 2007). This case is not changed for the better in the past decade, especially in the field of English accent attitude in the context of ELF. Researchers were inclined to investigate accent attitude in a narrow sense and mainly focused on the accent study from the perspective of Second Language

Acquisition. We could find many studies on the intelligibility of different English accents but the importance of accent attitudes was not stressed. In addition, among the investigations of accent attitude of ELF learners, many of the scholars tended to study accent attitude towards certain English accents and then these accents were ranked by some rational criteria (Jenkins, 2007; Pantos, 2010; Matsumoto, 2011; Kaur and Ranan, 2014). However, Scales (2006) noticed that, in the process of oral English learning, some learners could not distinguish native English speeches from non-native ones. Their ability to identify English accents is mismatched with their ambitions to speak English like native speakers. That's to say, their preference for the American accent or British accent had little meaning supposing they could not even identify these accents. However, in previous literature, we can find little research aims to investigate the correlation between ELF learners' ability to identify accents and their accent attitude. In order to investigate whether accent attitude would be influenced by the ability to identify different English accents and the familiarity with different English accents, more studies are needed.

To make a contribution to the accent attitude study, this paper was designed to investigate accent attitude among ELF learners from China and several other expanding circle countries, like Korea, Japan, Pakistan, Russia and so on. This study examined participants' accent attitude by exploring their familiarity, acceptance and pleasantness toward different accents. We wonder if learners with different abilities to identify English accents would have different perceptions of oral English accents in the context of ELF. Therefore, this investigation aims to answer the following three research questions:

1. What is ELF learners' attitude towards English accents?
2. How do ELF learners' identification ability and comprehension ability for English accents affect their accent attitude?
3. How does ELF learners' familiarity with English accents affect their accent attitude?

In China, students have been taught under the pattern of EFL (English as a foreign language) and the concept of Standard English has produced a great influence on their accent attitude. In the teaching of English pronunciation, the notion that students should conform to NS norms is still popular. I hope that this research could help other researchers to revisit teaching norms of English in China. This research could also raise the awareness of educators that students' acceptance for English accents has changed in the ELF context. In addition, the curriculum and target settings of English pronunciation teaching could be improved based on students' accent attitude and their different purposes to learn English. In turn, it is also found that teaching intervention can effectively promote a positive change in students' attitude towards some English

accents (Pei and Wei, 2014). In the long run, the criteria in oral English tests could also be improved in order to suit the conditions of students in the expanding circle.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The first part of participants in this study were 50 Chinese university students and the second part of participants were 30 overseas students (non-native speakers). The participants were from different seven departments. English-major students were not included in this study for they might be exposed to the conception of English used as a Lingua Franca for a long time, which would affect their attitude towards ELF. The Chinese participants were senior students who studied in 11 Chinese universities ranging from 21 to 22 years old. They all spoke Mandarin as their first language and have studied English as a second language for 13 years on average. Most of them have passed College English Test (band four and band six) in university. Only three of them have studied or lived in English-speaking countries and the durations of such experiences was no more than one year.

The overseas students were from several expanding circle countries including Korea, Japan, Russia, Ukraine, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Pakistan. There were 17 undergraduate students and 13 postgraduate students. They used English as a second language and have studied abroad for more than one year. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old. During their period of studying abroad, they used English as a Lingua Franca to communicate with native speakers and non-native speakers from other expanding circle countries frequently.

Speech Sample

The first part of the questionnaire was to assess participants' identification ability and comprehension ability of six English accent samples. These samples were from a voice repository named the Speech Accent Archive, which had thousands of audio made by people in different parts of the world. People in different countries read the same English passages and then upload them to this website (<http://accent.gmu.edu>), so researchers could investigate English recordings from all around the world (Dragojevic and Soan, 2020). This website constructs an elicitation paragraph to be read by each subject. The paragraph is written in English, and uses common English words, but contains a variety of difficult English sounds and sound sequences. The paragraph contains practically all of the sounds of English. In the audio file of this study, the six speakers were from India, America, Japan, Korea, China and Britain.

Questionnaire

There were two versions of questionnaires in this study, one for Chinese students and the other for overseas students. The questionnaire was designed to

enable me to investigate four aspects of the participants. The first part (question 1) was to assess participants' identification ability and comprehension ability of the six English accent samples in the audio file. The second part of the questionnaire (questions 2 to 4) asked for age, gender, college, and study abroad experience. Information on the mother country and mother language was also required in the English version. The third part (question 5 and question 6) were used to investigate participants' familiarity with different variations of English accent. From this part, we could explore whether a participant would make judgments based on his stereotypical beliefs or preconceptions (Jenkins, 2007). The fourth part of the questionnaire (question 7) included five statements about accent learning and accent beliefs, each of which was followed by a requirement to give reasons for one's choice or make comments on the statement. These statements were

adapted from three previous research of Fan (2015), Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard and Wu (2006) and Jenkins (2007). They were put on Likert scales and they investigated participants' attitude towards English accents in the aspects of pleasantness and acceptance. The two pleasantness scales were involved because some researchers have found a connection between "judgments of the intrinsic pleasantness or unpleasantness of accents and social evaluations".

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification and Comprehension Ability

Table 1 shows the accuracy of identifying different English accents of Chinese students and overseas students. Table 2 shows the comprehension ability of Chinese students and overseas students for the six recordings.

Table 1: Accuracy for identifying oral English with accent

Participants	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1
Chinese students	0.75	0.75	0.67	0.60	0.70	0.92
Overseas students	0.80	0.73	0.70	0.57	0.77	0.93

Table 2: Intelligibility of oral English with accent

Participants	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1	Speaker 1
Chinese students	0.42	0.69	0.27	0.50	0.54	0.60
Overseas students	0.47	0.77	0.20	0.56	0.43	0.57

The six speakers in the audio were from India, America, Japan, Korea, China and Britain separately. From Table 1 we can see there was only a slight difference in their ability to identify different English accent variations. The easiest accent for them to identify was the British accent because the accuracy was 0.92 and 0.93 for Chinese students and overseas students respectively. The participants' ability for recognizing American accents was not as high as that of British accents. The accuracy for Chinese students was 0.75, equal to that of identifying Indian accents.

This result could be examined with the answers to question 5 (Are you aware that there are various English accents?) and answers to question 6 (What English accents do you know or have come into contact with?). Almost half of the participants mentioned that they had touched upon the American English accent in their study or in daily conversation. Fifteen participants said that acquiring an American English accent was their target or one of their targets for studying English pronunciation. However, among the participants who said so, three of them did not recognize it correctly from this video.

Among the Chinese participants, the accuracy for identifying the Chinese English accent was 0.7, which ranked fourth. It was lower than the two native accents (0.92 for the British accent and 0.75 for the American accent) and the Indian English accent (0.75).

It might be because a part of Chinese university students have immersed themselves in the context of the Chinese English accent for a long time so this accent has been well accepted unconsciously. Another reason might be that their exposure to native English accents was not sufficient in the university curriculum and in their daily life.

From Table 2, we could find that the two native accents were relatively more intelligible for both Chinese students and overseas students. The two figures also showed that even though the British English accent was the easiest accent to be recognized, it was not as intelligible as the American accent.

Since the two parts of participants had a close ability to identify and understand six English accents, I tended to investigate the correlation between the identification ability and the comprehension ability by using the data of 80 participants as a whole. First, the 80 students were divided into two groups based on their identification ability of the six accents. Students who could recognize correctly five or six accents in this audio file would be counted as members of the high-level group. The rest were in the low-level group. In this way, we could regard high-level identification ability and low-level identification ability as two categories and thus an independent t-test could be employed. The result revealed that students in the high-level group could understand the six recordings better

than those in the low-level group. If we count the number of recordings that one could understand as a score, the mean score for the high-level group is 3.60 and 2.29 for the low-level group. That's to say, students with higher identity to identify the six accents also had higher competence to understand them. An independent t-test showed that this difference was significant ($t = 2.331, p = 0.024 < 0.05$).

Accent Familiarity

Question 5 on the questionnaire asked whether participants knew or had come into contact with different English accents and a following open question let them list the accents they knew. 70.83% of Chinese students had a knowledge that English had different accents while 90.00% of overseas had the same view, which showed that more overseas students had a conception similar to ELF. The reason may be that they had higher exposure to different English accents in cross-cultural communication. Among the overseas students who answered this open-ended question, 18 of them said they knew some other NNS accents and eleven of them mentioned the English accents of their own mother countries, like Japanese English accent, Korean English accent, Rwandan English accent and Pakistani English accent. Several students also listed accents in different American cities, such as Texas accent, New York accent and Boston accent. One participant mentioned an American southern accent and a rural accent. There was an answer as "south accent" and I supposed it also referred to the accent in the American South. From these answers, I found that overseas students seemed to have more interest in the American accent than the British accent. Maybe it is because the American accent is more influential when America has had a higher political and economic power in the global world for a long time (Crystal, 2003).

Compared with the overseas students, the US accent and UK accent were more frequently mentioned in the answers of Chinese students. 38 Chinese students made reference to the two accents while only twelve of them mentioned non-native accents. This indicated that many university students in China were limitedly exposed to the conception like ELF and the notion of the Standard English accent still had a significant impact on their perceptions of the English accent. Only 7 Chinese students mentioned the Chinese English accent, which might indicate that many university students in China had little awareness that the Chinese English accent was also one of the legitimate ELF accents. One student said that the English accents in China were related to the various dialects of China. He stated that some Chinese dialects, such as Shanxi dialect, Chongqing dialect and Guangxi dialect, would have an influence on the English accent spoken by Chinese people. Unlike overseas students, Chinese

students showed the same interest in the US accent and UK accent. Several characteristic British accents, like Welsh accent, Yorkshire accent, London accent and Scottish accent were mentioned in four students' answers. When it comes to the American accent, two of the students stated that it was more "casual" and "relaxed". Interestingly, one student wrote that "President Trump has his own spoken accent" and he had his own peculiar style to say "Everything is fine". From this answer, we could find that this student noticed one particular parole of the American accent, which was the personal realization of the American accent in actual use. This was also related to the lexicogrammar of accent.

Accent Attitude

Fig 1 shows participants' degree of agreement towards the five statements about English accents in question 7. The accent attitude of the students was compared with their ability to identify and understand various accents and their familiarity with these accents. There were five open questions that asked participants to give reasons for their choices in order to survey the insightful information about their accent attitude. Because the data of Chinese participants and overseas participants had no significant difference, the two groups would be analyzed as a whole.

The single sample t-tests were adopted to examine the results of the Likert scale. For the 7 (1) statement: "I think that some English accents are better than any others", the average for the degree of agreement was 2.88, which was statistically the same as the number 3 (which stands for "neutral" in the degree of agreement) ($t = -0.843, p = 0.403 > 0.05$) and had significant difference from the number two (stands for "disagree" in the degree of agreement) ($t = 5.940, p < 0.05$). Therefore, we could say that students had a neutral attitude towards the 7 (1) statement. As for the 7 (2) statement: "I can accept oral English with an accent", the average for the degree of agreement was 3.73, which was statistically different from the number 3 ($t = 6.513, p < 0.05$) and was also statistically different from the number 4 ($t = -2.419, p < 0.05$), thus it is between "neutral" and "agree". In a similar way, the attitude of students towards the 7 (3) statement: "I am satisfied with my own English accent" was approximately "disagree" ($t = 1.625, p = 0.111 > 0.05$); the attitude towards the 7 (4) statement: "When I speak English, I am happy to be identified as a non-native speaker" was "neutral"; and the attitude towards the 7 (5) statement: "I want people to understand me easily. Native accent isn't important" was statistically similar with "agree" ($t = -1.849, p = 0.071 > 0.05$). Question 7 (5) had the highest average score among the five scales, followed by 7 (2). The statement that students agreed least was 7 (2).

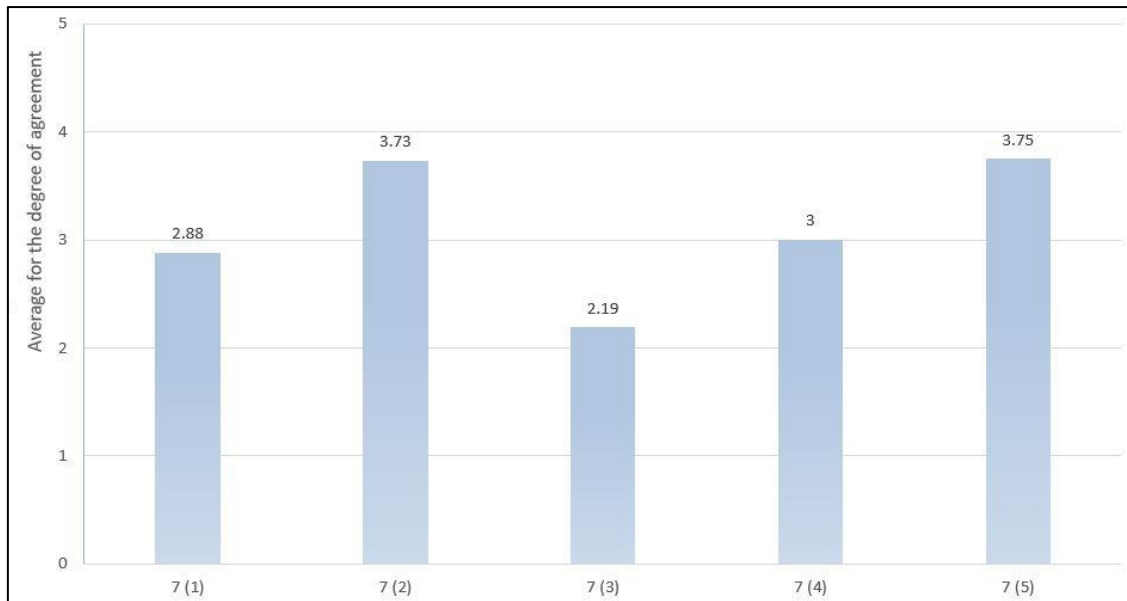


Fig 1: Attitude towards English accents

According to the answers of 7 (1), 31.25% of students had no idea whether there was better accent. The students who agreed with this statement were almost equal to the students who disagreed. One student who disagreed with this statement reported that accent was a cultural mixture of English countries and the speakers' mother country, so different accents should not be treated as "better" or "worse" for different cultures could not be judged in this way. One student declared that there was no standard English accent. In his view, English accents could be changed by people of different regions to make it in line with their own pronunciation habits. While for students who agreed with this statement, some of them also focused on the notion of Standard English. One student argued that certain English accents were more pleasant, formal, popular or intelligible than others, so people tended to have preferences for them. Another student said that NS accents were obviously better than others for they were the original English accents and thus more authentic.

By the analysis of answers to 7 (3), we could find that most students were not satisfied with their own English accents. Two students stated that even though they learned English pronunciation with the native English accent as a target, they could hardly get rid of their Chinese English accent. One student said it was very difficult to speak English as native speakers did without specific training. Several students said that they had few chances to practice and use English in their daily communication. The conversation in English was mainly with their countrymen, which was a usual circumstance in the expanding circle in the context of ELF (Jenkins, 2007). Eleven students regarded their oral English as "nonstandard" against native English norms. There were two students saying that they actually paid less attention to their accents because oral

English ability was not so important in English education.

We could investigate participants' acceptance for English accents by analyzing the statement in 7 (2) (I can accept oral English with accents) and the statement in 7 (5) (I want people to understand me easily. Native accent isn't important). The acceptance for various English accents is the presumption for the working of English used as a lingua franca. These two questions had the highest average scores among the five scales. In the answers to question 7 (2), few students showed strong disagreement toward this statement. More than half (59.9%) of students chose to agree that they could accept various English accents. One important reason that students would accept different accents was that they had the assumption and expectation that their own English accent would be accepted by others. A Pakistani student said that when communicating with other NNSs, no one's accent would be criticized. A Japanese student also noted that many NSs would be patient enough to listen to her. The communication among speakers sharing the same mother tongue had a similar situation. Another important factor that influenced the acceptability of various English accents was their intelligibility. Almost half of the participants said that they would accept an accent that was understandable and not too "wired". It was more important to make one's meaning clear to others rather than speaking like a native speaker.

These comments on the statement in 7 (2) were consistent with the results of 7 (5). The students agreed most on the statement in 7 (5) with an average score of 3.75. 70.84% of students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In the open question following it, both Chinese students and overseas students mentioned the Indian accent, which put a big

challenge on their listening ability. One Chinese student stated that the Indian English accent was the most “strange” English accent but as long as it was understandable, he could still accept it. One Korean student reported that whether the Indian accent was acceptable depended on the speaker. She once met a speaker who was very hard to understand, because that speaker could not put the stress on the right position. Three Chinese students and one Pakistani student related the acceptance with the issue of respect. An independent t-test indicated that the answer of the question 7 (5) correlated with students’ familiarity with various English accents. For students who chose “Yes” in the fifth question, their average degree of agreement for the statement in 7 (5) (3.94) was higher than that for students who chose “No” (3.29). Based on the independent t-test, their difference was significant ($t = 2.249, p = 0.029 < 0.05$). This indicated that supposing students knew more about the variety of English

accents, they may attach more importance to the intelligibility of one accent.

I also found that there was a correlation between the student’s ability for identifying English accents and some aspects of their attitude towards English accents. The high-level group students distinguished themselves from the low-level group counterpart by showing a significantly higher agreement for the statement in 7 (4). The average degree of agreement was 3.38 for the high-level group and 2.63 for the low-level group. By adopting the independent t-test, we could find their difference was statistically significant ($t = -2.245, p = 0.030 < 0.05$). Fig 2 shows the distribution of the answers for high-level group and low-level group to the question 7 (4). From this figure, we could have an intuitive understanding of the difference between the two groups because the orange line is higher than the blue one as a whole.

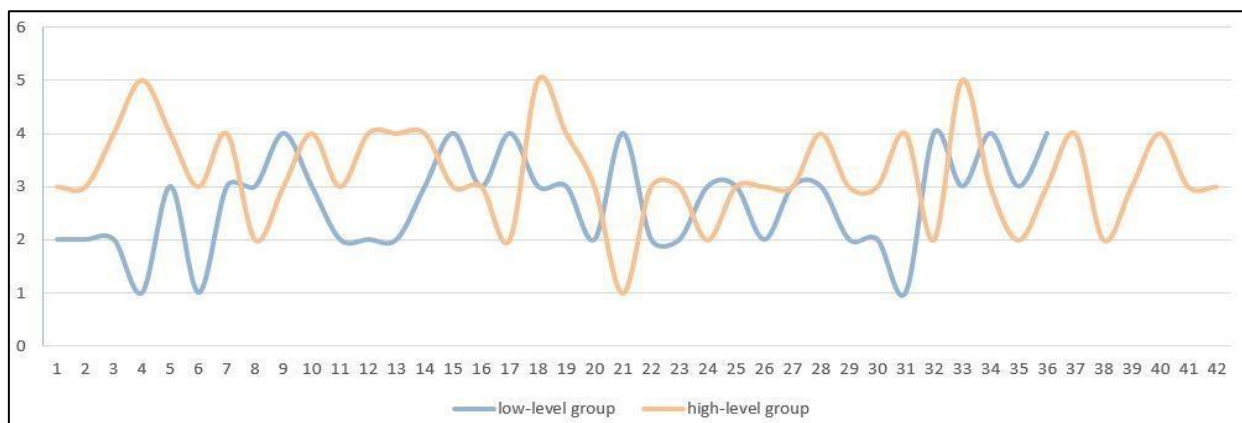


Fig 2: Answers of the high-level group and the low-level group to question 7 (4)

The scale of 7 (4) investigated whether non-native speakers would be pleased to show their identity with a local English accent. The average for the degree of agreement of this statement was 3. There were 48% of the students choosing the option of “neutral”, which indicated that many students did not relate their emotional feelings with the presentation of their cultural identity through speaking English with a local accent. None of the Chinese students showed strong agreement to this idea while 3 of the overseas students did. In general, the degrees of agreement for this statement between Chinese students and overseas students had a slight difference but was not significant. 18.75% of students chose ‘agree’, which was lower than the percentage of students who chose ‘disagree’ (25%). 6.25% of students strongly disagree with it.

According to the students’ comments, five students who were against this statement thought speaking English with a local accent was embarrassing sometimes, let alone joyful, so they could not be proud of showing their identity through a local accent. One Chinese student said one of his learning targets was to

be sounded like a native speaker, so having a local accent when speaking English meant a deviation from his goal. Another student linked learning competence and competition to this issue. In his opinion, having a native-like accent helped build her identity for it was a manifestation of higher learning capacity. On one hand, from the students’ comments on this statement, we could find a few numbers of them thought of English accent as a way to present their cultural identity. One Chinese student argued the Chinese English accent had some cultural and linguistic characteristics, which was quite common and inevitable. Chinese learners would be pleasant to have an exclusive English accent with Chinese features. On the other hand, one student thought that a native-like accent could bring him confidence and manifest his learning potential, thus his image as a Chinese student could be upgraded. From these comments, we could also find that the students in the high-level group were more aware of the identity issue of English accents and tended to link accents with cultural factors; while many students in the low-level group were inclined to compare their accents with “standard” English pronunciation. This could be one of

the reasons why the two groups had significant differences in the degree of agreement for the statement 7 (4).

4. CONCLUSION

This study surveyed the attitude towards English accents of 50 Chinese university students and 30 overseas students from other expanding circle countries. According to the study, students with a higher ability to identify different accents also had a higher capacity to understand them. The familiarity with different English accents correlated with the acceptance towards them. More specifically, participants who had more knowledge of different English accents showed more acceptability for them. The intelligibility of one accent was the most important factor that influenced the acceptance of it by both Chinese and overseas students. Only a very few Chinese students tended to show their cultural identity by having a Chinese English accent. In conclusion, when it comes to answering the second research question, the identification ability for different English accents and familiarity with them did influence students' accent attitude to some degree.

This study contributes to the accent attitude study in the context of ELF. From the results of the study, we could see that the Standard English ideology is still influential to the accent attitude of participants. On the other hand, the impact of the notion of ELF is also significant. Educators in expanding circle countries are supposed to raise their awareness that students' accent attitude has changed in the context of ELF. Therefore, it is reasonable to make some changes in the English teaching curriculum, especially in pronunciation instruction. The criteria in oral English tests could also be improved to make them in line with the conditions of students in the expanding circle.

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