

## **CHINESE ENGLISH TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA'S COLLEGE CLASSROOMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The global use of English in diverse cultural contexts calls into question the dominant representations of Anglo-American culture in English language textbooks. To contribute to the discussion of this issue, this study aimed to investigate the attitudes of Chinese College English teachers towards a more balanced treatment of culture in English language teaching when they need to follow a required textbook. It examined the results of a focus group interview, in which a total of six female Chinese English teachers were invited to share their opinions and practices of teaching English culture in China's college classrooms. It was noted that cultures other than Anglo-American culture received inadequate attention and focus in the teachers' teaching process because they lacked both control over syllabus design and sufficient awareness of the relationship between global cultures and English today. Without gaining solid institutional support, altering perception of the English language and adjusting professional identity, it seemed difficult for the teachers to exert greater autonomy in the classroom to enhance their students' communicative competence and teach English truly as an international language.

Key Words: culture, EIL, attitude, autonomy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture is considered an integral component of language education (Hilliard, 2014). With the worldwide spread of English and the massive growth of non-native speakers of English (Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 1992), the essence of English culture and English language education need to be redefined (Alptekin, 2002; Bayyurt, 2006; Nault, 2006). Teaching only Anglo-American culture in an English class

today tends to overlook the fact that appropriate use of English is bound up with social norms and conventions in various global settings and thus runs the risk of inadequately preparing learners for communication in a world of linguistic and cultural diversity. Considering that many English language textbooks feature mainly cultures of mainstream English-speaking countries and have limited leeway for accommodating other cultures of the world (Hilliard, 2014; Keles & Yazan, 2020; Mahmoud, 2015; Shin et al., 2011; Yuen, 2011), this paper intends to explore whether English teachers in China, despite working with a required textbook, would adopt a flexible and multicultural approach to teaching culture and present English as an international language (hereafter EIL) in the classroom. First, the study reviews the critical issue of cultural diversity in English language teaching (hereafter ELT) and the solutions for the problem of underrepresentation of non-Anglo-American cultures in ELT textbooks. Then, through a focus group interview, it explores the attitudes of a group of Chinese College English teachers towards a more balanced treatment of culture in ELT. It is anticipated that the findings may reveal a positive influence of teachers' attitudes and autonomy on potential cultural dominance existent in ELT.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Culture and English Language Teaching**

In light of the inextricable nature of language and culture, it is reasonable to believe that teaching a language demands attention to the cultural context where the language is used (Baker, 2012) and involves “teaching at least some aspects of its culture” (Hilliard, 2014, p. 238). Today English is spoken extensively by millions of people inside and outside English-speaking countries (Crystal, 2003), with non-native speakers remarkably outnumbering native speakers (Kachru & Nelson, 2001). Kachru's (1992) well-known model of three concentric circles divides the English world into Inner Circle countries where English is often used as the native language such as the United Kingdom and the United States, Outer Circle countries which have British colonial ties such as India and Singapore with English spoken as an inherited second language, and Expanding Circle countries where English is often treated as a foreign language such as China, Japan and Russia. When English comes into interaction with diverse cultures and languages of the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle countries, the essence of English culture

has also changed (Gilmore, 2007) and become international (Alptekin, 2002).

With English gaining new cultural and linguistic characteristics, the ownership of this language has also been in dispute. Widdowson (1994) claimed that the continuing internationalization of English makes it impossible for any nation to have guardianship over the language, and “it is not a possession which they [native speakers] lease out to others” (p. 385) but something owned by others and modified for their own specific needs. Modiano (1999) likewise believed that English should now be the property of speakers of its varieties and its correct usage could be “determined by experts who speak a prestige variety” (p. 24). Moreover, Sharifian (2013) maintained that English, instead of being the sole property of its native speakers, should be viewed as a “shared” language that is used by speech communities from diverse backgrounds for intercultural communication.

Given the shifting ownership of English and incessant intercultural communication in broad sociocultural settings around the world, scholars in the field of applied English linguistics have advocated a paradigm shift to EIL and suggested a multicultural approach to teaching English culture in the classroom. This approach calls for the inclusion of local and global or international cultural content in ELT materials (McKay, 2002). McKay (2012) further proposed some fundamental principles for an EIL pedagogy such as promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism, localizing second language policy and planning. Similarly, Wandel (2002) claimed that ELT should consider the broad geographical scope of English use and incorporate non-mainstream (non-Inner Circle) cultures if it acknowledges the reality of English as a world language. Nault (2006) also emphasized that the ELT curriculum should not uphold Anglo-American norms and values insensitively and ignore all others. Instead, it should embrace local cultures and diverse cultures of the world alongside British or American culture.

There are multiple benefits of integrating local and global cultures in ELT. First, when learning the uses of a different language, learners are naturally inclined to interpret them with the cultural knowledge of their mother tongue. If a new usage of the language can be associated with learners’ own cultural knowledge, it may accelerate their comprehension, make learning less laborious (Alptekin, 1993; Mahmoud, 2015) and reduce negative feelings (e.g., helplessness, anxiety, exclusion) caused by making culturally inappropriate behaviours (Frederick, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Second, learners are provided a chance to compare and contrast their own culture-

based communicative behaviours and those targeted for learning. Through introspection and analysis, they can develop “critical cultural awareness”, which is a capability to critically evaluate the cultural perspectives, practices and products of one’s own country and other countries (Byram, 1997). Fostering “critical cultural awareness” will not only engage learners with foreign cultures and expand their understanding of local culture (Mahmoud, 2015) but also enable them to respond to foreign cultures and languages with adequate knowledge and confidence and protect themselves from potentially harmful ideas (Hyde, 1994). Third, embracing cultural diversity in ELT will remind learners that English functions as a lingua franca in various contexts around the world. It may expose learners to different ways of using English and perceiving social reality, challenge the assumption that native speakers are the only providers of English culture, and cultivate learners’ appreciation of global cultural diversity (Yuen, 2011). This awareness of diversity may prevent learners from viewing non-Anglo-American ways of English use simply as deficient (as opposed to different) (Matsuda, 2002) and enable them to understand and respect language users as “complex human beings with multiple identities” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 5). Therefore, it will be critical to learners’ successful intercultural communication.

### **Problem in Presenting Culture in ELT**

Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) showed that Anglo-American culture was considered less preferable or inappropriate for ELT in parts of Asia, Latin America and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the culture still dominates ELT textbooks, resulting in limited or little room for involving other cultures. For instance, Yuen (2011) discovered that the cultural representation of English-speaking countries is much greater than that of Asian or African cultures in two series of junior secondary English language textbooks used in Hong Kong. Similarly, Shin, Eslami and Chen (2011) examined the cultural content of seven series of internationally distributed English language textbooks, and the results revealed that cultural content of inner-circle countries dominates most of the textbooks. In addition, Hilliard (2014) reported that the four textbooks for teaching general English skills for adults, which she analysed, over-represent Caucasian characters, standard native speaker accents and Western values. Mahmoud (2015) also noted that most English language textbooks for adult learners in the Arab world are laden with Western culture, and “little or no reference is made to

the criteria, features, or elements of Islamic Arabic culture” (p. 67). Furthermore, Keles and Yazan (2020), after examining the changing content of culture in five editions of Oxford’s New Headway elementary level textbook, also found an imbalance favouring European and Anglo-American cultures with around 10% of the textbook content featuring other cultures of the world. They concluded that the textbook neither adequately engages learners in critical reflection on their own culture nor increases their global cultural awareness.

Given the condition that non-Anglo-American cultures are underrepresented in many ELT textbooks, some scholars advocate localizing learning materials and enhancing the inclusion of diverse cultures in textbook and curriculum design. For instance, in accordance with McKay (2002, 2012), Alptekin (2002) suggested that familiar cultural features of a local context could be assigned a main role in instructional material design to motivate students and reinforce their learning experience. Likewise, Shin, Eslami and Chen (2011) claimed that instructional materials should be localised through incorporating learners’ own experiences and making the contents culturally relevant. Kristiawan (2012) also maintained that instructional material designers should select topics that are of importance and interest to students, include materials that are grounded on students’ prior knowledge, and develop learning tasks that are authentic and associated with local needs. Moreover, Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Nault (2006), and Mahmoud (2015) argued that global cultures should be incorporated to expand students’ multicultural perspectives and an effective integration of diverse cultures of the world needs to be maintained, so that localised textbooks will not narrow the scope of culture targeted for learning.

### **The Influence of Teachers’ Attitudes on Teaching Culture**

Teachers’ attitudes towards EIL pedagogy also play a vital role in the successful implementation of a multicultural approach to ELT. Jenkins (2005, 2007) found that non-native teachers of English tend to deem non-standard varieties of English as incorrect and deficient, and seem to hold negative attitudes towards EIL because it contradicts the target of linguistic perfection that they have long expected to achieve and poses a threat to their professional identity. Similar findings have also been reported by Zacharias (2014a) and Tajeddin et al. (2020). Hence, despite the awareness that English has various forms and functions in a wide range of global settings, Oanh (2012) found that only a small proportion of the English teachers in

eight Asian contexts in his study agreed to localize ELT. In contrast, Bayyurt's (2006) investigation of Turkish English teachers' attitudes towards teaching EIL-related cultural norms discovered a positive result, with the teachers supporting teaching international culture and acknowledging the importance of exposure to both native and local cultures. Toledo-Sandoval's (2020) examination of 63 primary school teachers' perceptions on the localization of ELT course books in Chile also revealed the teachers' favorable attitudes towards local culture and their actual inclusion of the culture in their textbook. Hence, it is crucial to develop teachers' awareness of EIL and positive attitudes for the smooth realization of a multicultural pedagogy.

Some suggestions have been put forth for situations where English teachers prefer the multicultural approach but need to follow readymade textbooks whose content of culture may not be properly balanced. For example, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) advised teachers to encourage students to discuss materials from English-speaking countries in relation to their own culture and make comparisons and reflections. An alternative way to promote classroom discussion about cultural differences is inviting some guest speakers from different cultural backgrounds to allow students to compare and contrast their own culture with the speakers' cultures. Teachers may also require students to contrast their interpretation of a person's speech behaviour from local and non-local perspectives or to conduct textbook role-plays in different ways following different cultural norms to gain insights into cultural diversity (Lee, 2012). Moreover, Nault (2006) proposed that teachers can make students design their own culture-oriented materials following textbook topics. As the suggestions show, teachers have the potential of exerting autonomy in teaching to diminish cultural dominance in required textbooks.

### **The Chinese Context of ELT**

Since China's Open-Door Policy was launched in 1978, English has been vital for the country's connection with the world and has become a compulsory subject at all levels of schools (Hu, 2005; Lam, 2005). People in China need to learn English to pass university entrance examinations and oftentimes to obtain lucrative employment (Hu, 2003). The instrumental value of English has made it one of the most widely learned and spoken languages in China. According to Wei and Su (2012), the number of Chinese English learners in China is roughly 390 million. Given this context, it is worth exploring the issue of teaching culture in the country's English classrooms in that

the underrepresentation of non-Anglo-American cultures in ELT could possibly influence a large population of learners, who need to enhance their competence for engaging in increasing international communication and tell China's stories well. As mentioned earlier, some research has been conducted to analyse English language textbooks in terms of content of culture, such as Yuen's (2011) study of Hong Kong, one of China's special administrative regions. However, more studies should also explore English teachers' attitudes towards a multicultural teaching approach in China's classrooms where compulsory textbooks need to be followed. This may expand the knowledge of positive influence of a teacher's role on potential cultural dominance existent in ELT in this country.

### **Research Goals**

The notion of "attitude" is "derived from the Latin word 'aptitude' and the Italian 'atto' (Latin = actus)", so its original meaning is "aptitude for action", implying a propensity towards actions (Baker, 1992, p. 11). Oppenheim's (1982) definition of attitude also incorporates the behavioral dimension. As he proposed, attitude is a mental construct revealed "through much more obvious processes such as stereotypes, beliefs, verbal statements or reactions, ideas and opinions, selective recall, anger or satisfaction or some other emotion and in various other aspects of behaviour" (p. 39). Since attitude cannot be directly observed, Garrett (2010) suggested that researchers adopt the probing items that Oppenheim offers to understand people's attitudes. Following this advice, this study will investigate teachers' attitudes through their ideas, opinions, beliefs and behaviours in relation to teaching English culture in their classrooms. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are Chinese English teachers' current opinions of English culture?
- 2) Whose culture is taught in their classrooms?
- 3) What are their beliefs about the multicultural approach to ELT?

The teachers targeted for this study are those who teach College English in China. College English (hereafter CE) was established in the early 1980s, and now it is a compulsory course for all non-English major undergraduate students in China and one crucial component of the Chinese higher education curriculum. There are six levels of CE, with Band One (B1) as the lowest and Band Six (B6) as the highest. Starting from the freshman year, students should complete four

consecutive semesters of CE learning and reach at least B4. Most Chinese higher education institutions require students to take the national English tests, the College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) and/or the College English Test Band 6 (CET 6), both of which are closely related to the CE course. The CET4/6 certificates can often help college graduates secure a position in businesses or government (Ruan & Jacob, 2009).

The CE course has followed rigid national top-down educational policies. “Syllabi, textbooks, and assessment instruments are all designed by national committees. Central authorities determine what students will learn, when learning will take place, and what teaching methods will be used, often at the expense of student interests and needs” (Ruan & Jacob, 2009, p. 482). This traditional mode of teaching and learning produced students with high exam scores but low communicative competence and thus incurred significant criticism. In order to cultivate college students who can assist the Chinese government to play a more significant role on the international stage, the CE course has undergone educational reforms, with communicative competence being considered the most critical aspect of learning achievement for the course. Teaching is required to be tailored to students’ individual needs, with teachers becoming facilitators for students’ independent learning. Cultural knowledge is also emphasized in the development of communicative competence because it enables students to gain better cultural awareness and sensitivity towards English use in a specific social context (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). With increasing weight placed on learning culture in CE classes, it is reasonable to engage CE teachers in this study, who may provide insightful accounts of teaching English culture in the Chinese context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Instrumentation and Participants**

Although questionnaires are often used for collecting people’s attitudes, focus group interviews enable the participants to generate opinions through mutual interaction among themselves, explain their thinking and justify their answers, which can yield ample detailed information and a more profound understanding of the researched issue (Eliot & Associate, 2005; Millward, 2012). Fontata and Frey (2000) also claimed that group interviews could motivate members of the group to describe shared experiences and to aid recall. Hence, this



study utilised the focus group interview as an instrument for data collection.

Since this exploratory study is qualitative in nature and intends to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation instead of measuring the prevalence of an issue, only a small non-random group of participants with significant knowledge and relevant experiences were chosen (Dörnyei, 2007; Hennink et al., 2011). The recruitment was conducted through convenience and snowball sampling via professional contacts, and screening was performed by requesting interested CE teachers to complete the first part of the Appendix with demographic questions. Only those who shared common characteristics were eventually recruited for this interview. It was hoped that group homogeneity would ensure equal status among the participants so that they would not feel inhibited but contribute to a productive discussion (Eliot & Associates, 2005; Hennink et al., 2011). After screening, a total of six teachers attended the final interview. All of them are non-native English speaking female Chinese, teaching the course “General College English” to undergraduate students. Their textbooks were mostly published in China, and their classes had directly involved teaching English culture as they reported. Table 1 presents more demographic details about the interviewees.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of CE Teachers in the Study*

Name (Pseudonym)	Feng	Gui	Shao	Chen	Peng	Zhen
Age	36-40	31-35	36-40	36-40	31-35	36-40
City Where University Is Located	Hangzhou, East China	Guangzhou, South China	Fuxin, North China	Loudi, Central China	Loudi, Central China	Loudi, Central China
Years of ELT in University	Five to ten	Five to ten	More than ten	More than ten	More than ten	More than ten
Textbook Currently Used	New College English	Exploring American and British Culture	New Standard College English	New Horizon College English	New College English	New Framework
Textbook Publisher	Zhejiang University Press in China	Science Press in China	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in China and Macmillan Publishers Limited in the United Kingdom	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in China	Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in China	Higher Education Press in China

**Data Collection**

In order to ensure coherence and validity of the investigation, the relationship among the interview questions (see the second part of the Appendix), the research goals, and core concepts and issues identified in the literature review was carefully aligned, as suggested by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011). All the participants were informed of the purpose of the study via email prior to the interview and their consent to participate was obtained.

The formal interview was conducted and moderated by the researcher on a Friday evening in Chinese as the participants preferred, which allowed them to fully express themselves. WeChat,

a free messaging application that is widely used in China and allows group live chats, was employed for the interview in that the participants did not work and live in the same city. Before the interview started, the interviewees were reminded to bring their teaching materials (i.e., textbooks) to the interview for reference, join the group on time, and stay focused throughout the interview to ensure the validity of the data to be collected. Although WeChat allows its users to send written and verbal messages, the interviewees were encouraged to maintain written communication during the interview for two main reasons. First, written communication enables the interviewees to edit their message to increase data accuracy. Second, it visualizes the interaction and makes it convenient for the researcher to review and transfer data for analysis after the interview. To safeguard identity, they were also informed not to use their real names in the discussion. The interview lasted for one hour and fifty minutes. Then, the interviewees were given time to verify the recorded data to reduce misunderstanding and inaccurate observations (Maxwell, 2013) before the data were subject to further analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analysed with reference to Ryan and Bernard's (2003) theme identifying techniques and Dörnyei's (2007) suggested method of two-level coding. For initial coding, recurring ideas and topics were labelled, key words were used to make the metaphoric meaning of some data more transparent, and key incidents were annotated. These preliminary labels (codes) were then subject to second-level coding, which joined closely related labelled data together under a new and broader label (theme). In order to strengthen the validity of the themes identified, the researcher conducted several rounds of careful coding of the data to ensure coding consistency. Triangulation was also applied as Patton (1990) suggested through sharing a summary of the major findings with the interviewees for determining the accuracy of the interpretations, and positive responses were received. The findings will be reported in the following section with the interviewees' accounts translated into English.

## **RESULTS**

### **Chinese CE Teachers' Current Opinions of English Culture**

All the CE teachers agreed that culture should be taught in the English classroom because “culture is the essence of language, so language teaching is bound to involve teaching culture,” asserted Zhen. Gui also explained, “Language learning is basically learning the use of a language, which always takes place in specific cultural contexts. Even if there is no course on culture, it permeates teaching when a particular language usage is taught.” Shao agreed and added, “When I stopped teaching students cultural knowledge in class, sometimes they found it very difficult to understand a text. In other words, without the accumulation of cultural knowledge, mastering a language becomes very tough.”

However, five of them did not think that the culture of English should contain Chinese culture (see Table 2). They concurred that English culture is the culture of English-speaking countries represented by the United Kingdom and the United States, and only Shao thought that it might as well include the culture of non-Anglo-American countries where English is used. Two of them, Shao and Feng, indicated that Chinese culture should not belong to the culture of English because: 1) English culture with Chinese characteristics can hardly be produced when people do not speak English as the major language in China, and 2) Chinese English speakers are learners of English culture rather than its owners. However, Chinese culture can be employed for comparison in the teaching process, as Peng and Gui stated.

Table 2

*The Interviewees' Opinions of English Culture*

Interviewees' Statements		
Chen	Peng	Gui
<p>"I think it's British and American culture. It does not include Chinese culture."</p>	<p>"It mainly refers to the culture of the UK and the US which are countries where English is spoken as a native language. Chinese culture can be used for comparison in class, but should not be included."</p>	<p>"[It's] British and American culture and the culture of other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. It does not necessarily include Chinese culture but can relate to Chinese culture. When teaching involves comparing English culture with Chinese culture, students can resonate."</p>
Zhen	Shao	Feng
<p>"It's the culture of English-speaking countries with the UK and the US at the center."</p>	<p>"I think it should include British and American culture and the culture of other non-Anglo-American countries where English is used. It should not include Chinese culture, because China is not a country where English is used as the main language, is it? Only countries with English as the main language can produce some English culture."</p>	<p>"It's the culture of countries where English is the main language such as the UK and the US. It does not include local culture. We are only Chinese people who can speak English and know part of English culture. If English culture is what we are learning, it should not include Chinese culture. We are still very Chinese, although we teach English."</p>

Overall, the six Chinese CE teachers acknowledged the inseparability of language and culture, but most of them did not consider Chinese culture as part of English culture and seemed not to be aware of the fact that the form of English and its culture could be continuously shaped by roughly 390 million Chinese English speakers in China (Jiang, 2003; Wei & Su, 2012; Xu, 2010).

**Teaching Culture in China's College English Classrooms**

All the CE teachers reported that British and/or American culture had been taught the most in their classrooms. Feng explained, "The class content is prescribed by the textbook. Our current textbook is

dominated by American culture, so you will not teach culture about other countries.” Also, Zhen claimed,

My teaching is mostly concerned with the UK and the US because all the texts are about these two countries. If a text introduces education in the UK or the US, I would also require students to contrast it with Chinese education. However, the materials about local culture are references I prepared for in-class activities during lesson planning.

Likewise, Shao stated,

British and American cultures were taught more. This really depends on the requirements of teaching materials. Sometimes I would prepare some materials for my students to compare British and American cultures with Chinese culture, but these materials were extra per se and not included in the textbook. I think teaching materials restrict us. Even if we have many great ideas, we have to follow the textbook.

When questioned about the appropriateness of placing the teaching focus on British and American cultures only, five of the teachers believed that it is appropriate, except Peng, who declined to answer the question and said she had not considered this issue thoroughly. “When British and American cultures are the representatives supplemented by local Chinese culture for comparison, we don’t have enough time for teaching cultures of any other countries,” said Gui. Shao agreed and maintained,

We may not have that much time to cover so much content in class. Speaking of cultures of other countries, we may not understand them well, so I need to spend more time planning lessons. If my textbook doesn’t include them and we are not required to mention them, I just let it go.

The other teachers confessed in a similar vein that their inadequate cultural knowledge of other countries prevented them from teaching those cultures (see the dialogue excerpt below).

Chen: I rarely incorporate other cultures. I may not understand them.

Zhen: I agree. My textbook presents Spanish culture slightly, but I did not expand it much [in teaching] because I

don't speak Spanish and I worried that I could not teach Spanish culture properly. When a text involves Japanese culture, I taught it more because I am more familiar with Japan.

Peng: For things I don't know much, I don't teach students about them at all.

Chen: True, it is difficult to understand many cultures when you don't live in their native land.

In brief, it seems that Anglo-American culture dominates the CE teachers' textbooks, which impacted their teaching practice in the classroom. Due to the influence of textbooks and the teachers' lack of class time and sufficient cultural knowledge, local Chinese culture was only treated as a supplementary teaching component for cultural comparison, and cultures of non-Anglo-American countries other than China had been taught the least in the CE teachers' classrooms as they reported.

### **Beliefs about the Multicultural Approach to ELT**

Despite the constraints of textbook, class time and knowledge of culture, five of the CE teachers still considered it important to teach cultures other than Anglo-American culture in the English classroom, and they at least made some effort to integrate Chinese culture into their teaching. Table 3 below features their beliefs about the benefits of adopting a multicultural approach to English teaching. It is evident that explicit teaching of diverse cultures may potentially enable students to perceive the value of local culture in intercultural communication and develop multicultural awareness (Yuen 2011), which also consolidates their cultural knowledge (Alptekin, 1993; Mahmoud, 2015) and boosts their positive feelings towards learning (Alptekin, 2002; Frederick, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Table 3

*The Benefits of Teaching Diverse Cultures of the World in the English Classroom*

Benefits	Selected Statements from the Interviewees
1) Increasing students' learning motivation	<p>“My students from different provinces were enthusiastic about sharing their own cultures when asked to compare Chinese culture with American culture” (Chen).</p> <p>“Students are also interested when the class is related to China and they are required to make comparison” (Peng).</p>
2) Enhancing students' learning of culture	<p>“Using China for comparison leaves a deeper impression of British and American culture on my students. Also, it reinforces their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture” (Gui).</p>
3) Promoting local culture	<p>“Students can answer the nation's call and undertake the mission of introducing Chinese culture to the world” (Shao).</p>
4) Cultivating tolerance and awareness of diversity	<p>“It makes students realize that British and American culture is not the only representative of Western culture. When people know that this is a plural world, they can be more tolerant of cultural differences. Cultural patterns are not necessarily British or American” (Gui).</p> <p>“It increases students' understanding and tolerance of alien cultures and allows them to reflect on themselves and their own culture” (Zhen).</p>

When asked whether they prefer to adopt a multicultural approach to teaching culture in the classroom, four of the CE teachers claimed that it was unrealistic to maintain full balance because “the culture targeted for learning is determined by its influence. Some countries seem to be weaker than the UK and the US in terms of influence” (Feng). Peng added, “Exactly, it depends on the development of a country; the power of discourse is held in the hands of the powerful.” Zhen and Gui both agreed. In addition, the rigid teaching system also restrains the CE teachers from incorporating more content of world cultures in their teaching (see the dialogue excerpt below).



- Feng: I suggest we conduct more open discussions on culture [in class] and encourage students to share their own opinions.
- Chen: Absolutely infeasible because it doesn't follow the syllabus. I once proposed a project about Chinese traditional culture, but my boss rejected it. He agreed with my idea but told me that all had been set by the syllabus.
- Zhen: Under the current system, I agree it is impossible. Our syllabus is quite fixed. It determines what is taught in each semester and even each class. The teaching system lacks flexibility.
- Gui: We also need to fulfil assigned teaching duties in time. Although we can supplement materials which are not prescribed by our syllabus, examinations keep us from including too much content that is irrelevant to the syllabus.

Considering the restrictions, Gui reminded the group, "Anglo-American culture should still be the principal learning target; otherwise, the required teaching content will be too much to be covered within a limited number of teaching hours, and we can't finish the job."

In contrast, Chen and Shao supported a more balanced presentation of world cultures in the English classroom. Chen explained, "It is crucial for students to carefully learn how to transmit traditional Chinese culture to the outside world." Shao also emphasized, "This is the trend for the future because it meets the mode of development for the future – pluralism and cultural amalgamation." However, Shao admitted that the challenges from limited class time, a rigid syllabus and standardised teaching could not be easily tackled in that "these issues are closely associated with the main teaching aims and requirements of each school". English teachers without any administrative roles to set central pedagogic goals seem to have limited leeway for adjusting their teaching of culture in the classroom. Furthermore, Shao and Gui contended that teaching diverse cultures of the world would raise requirements for English teachers. As Shao claimed,

I haven't studied other languages as a major. Even though I have learned a second foreign language as a minor in college, I don't think I have known its culture thoroughly when I lacked profound training. Therefore, my instruction in other cultures may not be

very accurate and appropriate for my students.

Therefore, Gui suggested that English teachers should be proactive in expanding their knowledge of diverse cultures. Shao also believed, “Teachers should be provided with more opportunities to experience different cultures.”

In summary, most of the teachers realized the significance of teaching other cultures in the English classroom because it may motivate students to disseminate Chinese culture and increase their awareness of cultural diversity. However, they did not appear positive towards a multicultural approach to ELT because they believed that the influence of Anglo-American culture is still immense, and the local standardized educational system seems to neither allow them much leeway for syllabus design nor provide them with adequate training for gaining extensive cultural knowledge for teaching.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the discussion was to reach a more profound understanding of the Chinese CE teachers’ attitudes towards the EIL paradigm for approaching culture in ELT. The findings above reveal that the six teachers held conservative attitudes on the notion of English culture and had limited positive attitudes towards a multicultural approach to ELT, which seem to have sustained the dominance of Anglo-American culture in the process of their teaching. This result corroborates that teachers’ attitudes are pivotal in the successful implementation of EIL pedagogy (McKay, 2002; Oanh, 2012). These attitudes also seem to be markedly influenced by external factors such as the local educational system adopted by their schools and internal factors such as their knowledge of the status and use of English in today’s world.

Teaching and the educational system are closely intertwined. One major reason that the multicultural ELT approach was not adequately heeded and practiced by the teachers is because their classroom teaching was still subject to the influence of top-down policies of the educational system despite the fact that reforms of CE education had been launched in China and the development of communicative competence had been emphasized (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). As individuals without senior administrative roles, the teachers seemed to have little power to revise a standardised syllabus determined by school administrators, which resulted in their lack of classroom time for incorporating additional cultural content that was not part of their

assigned teaching duties. Although they made some effort to encourage students to discuss textbook content in relation to local culture and make comparisons as suggested by Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), they did not gain sufficient institutional support to facilitate greater autonomy in teaching. The dominant representations of Anglo-American cultures in the textbooks used by the teachers also seem to overlook the changing needs of communication in an international context and the reform standards of CE education. The consequence may be that students in these teachers' classrooms are still inadequately prepared for international communication in a rapidly changing Chinese society. Therefore, it is essential for the higher institutions, where the teachers work, to initiate changes in traditional top-down approaches of educational administration.

First, educational administrators in the schools need to be timely informed of the significance of exposing students to a multitude of world cultures in today's English classrooms and understand the value of local culture in international communication mediated by English. They need to have a critical eye for a norm-bound pedagogy that buttresses a central variety of English as the only standard form, and carefully considers the reality of language use and students' actual needs – they may need to manage various sorts of culture-loaded communicative situations more frequently with non-native English speakers (Sifakis, 2004) in an Asian or global context. For syllabus design, they may consider creating a comprehensive syllabus that incorporates cultural characteristics of inner-circle English models and many facets of world Englishes (Brown, 2012; Sifakis, 2004) and develops learners' "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997), and then support the use of textbooks and teaching methodologies that align with this comprehensive design in order to respond effectively to the national CE educational reforms that aim at developing English learners' intercultural communicative competence (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). This meanwhile demands CE textbook writers in China to include content of English varieties and multiculturalism in the materials that they design and develop (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, Park & Kim, 2014).

Alternatively, the school administrators should consider decentralizing their power and involving teachers in decision-making and syllabus design (Sifakis, 2004). In doing so, teachers will feel less discouraged and de-professionalized but trusted, empowered and confident. This may prompt them to positively confront challenging situations, investigate educational issues and learn innovative instructional methods, which is conducive to the

betterment of teaching, learning and the entire institution. Instead of criticising and rejecting teachers' new ideas and plans that may bring educational innovations, school administrators need to make efforts to promote a more democratic and collaborative professional climate for making decisions (Jumani & Malik, 2017).

Furthermore, the school administrators also need to assume a more supportive role to improve teachers' professional competence, and this requires them to re-examine the system and programs for training, evaluating and selecting teachers (Park & Kim, 2014). For example, to enrich English teachers' local and global cultural knowledge or experience, they could arrange EIL-oriented teacher education programs, including training courses on culture and world Englishes or hands-on strategies for intercultural communication, culture learning tours, and team teaching practice with collaborating teachers from various linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Park & Kim, 2014). Also, they should not continue to evaluate teaching effectiveness by the extent to which teachers and their students demonstrate native speakers' language behaviours but the extent of growth of students' awareness of their own culture and cultural diversity (Zacharias, 2014b). With regard to teacher selection, the multilingual and multicultural backgrounds of teachers would be valued more than their nationality in constructing highly diverse teaching teams. This means that recruitment standards would be raised or courses for learning additional languages need to be arranged for monolingual native-speaking teachers. Those who are merely familiar with Anglo-American culture may no longer be ideal teachers for today's English classroom where students need to gain "glocal" (global and local) cultural knowledge for effective intercultural communication.

Aside from the influence from the local educational system, the CE teachers' understanding of the ownership of English also impacted their attitudes towards the multicultural ELT approach. Since most of the teachers did not view local Chinese culture as part of the culture of English, it is highly probable that they still deemed English as a foreign Western language that they could barely claim ownership of, instead of a public property of the world (Alptekin, 1993; Crystal, 2003; Modiano, 2001), whose culture has become international (Alptekin, 2002). This latent belief of native speakers as the owner of English (native-speakerism) has long been challenged (Holliday, 2005; Sharifian, 2013; Widdowson, 1994) because it disregards cultural diversity in communication, reduces mutual respect among speakers of English varieties, treats communication only as a linguistic phenomenon instead of a social action where

interlocutors' cultural identity also plays an important role (Seidlhofer, 2011) and thus produces negative impacts on both teachers and students such as low professional self-esteem and lack of motivation for learning and confidence for language use (Kim, 2011; Park & Kim, 2014).

According to Holliday (2005), this view of native-speakerism can trace its origin in an essentialist worldview that perpetuates a self-and-other dichotomy and results in monolithic treatment of language teaching. The power and dominance of the central "self" over the periphery "others" could hinder the teachers from perceiving or recognizing their own interests (Lukes, 1974). If local interests are constantly influenced, shaped and even dissipated through privileging Anglo-American culture in ELT materials and classrooms, the Chinese CE teachers may continue to hold the opinion that English is a language that mainly belongs to the UK or the US, which further naturalizes and sustains the marginalization of local or world cultures in the English classroom.

To adopt a more EIL-informed pedagogy that embraces local and global cultures, the CE teachers need to be vigilant in their awareness of the prevalent beliefs about native-speakerism and adjust their professional roles. Instead of viewing non-standard varieties of English simply as "mistakes" and a threat to professional identity, they may consider Englishes with new characteristics as a means for users and learners to share and project their own cultural identities (Carter & Nunan, 2001; McKay, 2010). As opposed to reinforcing the obsession with idealized "standard" English, they may assume new roles such as promoters of English varieties and intercultural competence, critical users of culture-laden instructional materials and teaching methodology (Renandya, 2012), and agents of change to rekindle learners' enthusiasm and awareness of cultural diversity (Zacharias, 2014b). In addition to teaching the forms of English, they may consider how to teach students to "language", negotiate and accommodate communication (Seidlhofer, 2011) and how to present English varieties effectively so that teaching can promote students' ownership of English (Park, 2006; Park & Kim, 2014) and train them to become a critical and effective user of English (Carter, 2007, cited in Park & Kim, 2014). With their professional role or identity reshaped, the teachers may gain more confidence in their capabilities and contributions in ELT and develop more agency for initiating innovations in their teaching (Masoumpanah & Zarei, 2014).

Overall, before students fully harvest the benefits of a multicultural approach to ELT, the CE teachers need to reconsider the notion of the English language and reappraise their professional

identity. More importantly, educational administrators need to provide institutional support and wider autonomy for the teachers so that they can feel encouraged and prepared for teaching English truly as an international language.

## CONCLUSION

Since English has claimed the title of international language, some linguists argue that its culture should not be restricted to Anglo-American culture but become diverse and international owing to the fact that language and culture are reliant on each other (Alptekin, 2002; Gilmore, 2007). They believe that ELT should align with an EIL paradigm and accommodate cultures of the world in a more balanced manner (Bayyurt, 2006; McKay, 2002; Nault, 2006; Shin et al., 2011; Wandel, 2002) instead of privileging the cultures of mainstream English-speaking countries. This study aimed to further discuss this issue of teaching English culture by exploring a small group of Chinese English teachers' attitudes towards a multicultural approach to ELT in China's college classrooms where required textbooks are followed. Although the results of this small-scale investigation may not be applicable to all CE teachers in China, they lend support to previous studies by providing evidence that Anglo-American culture remains dominant in ELT. Interestingly, most of the teachers in this study did not consider such cultural dominance a problem because they believed that English culture still belongs to the inner-circle countries represented by the UK and the US. Although they attempted to include local Chinese culture in supplementary learning materials for their classrooms, they rarely introduced other non-Anglo-American cultures of the world in teaching. While they were aware of the benefits of a multicultural approach to ELT, most of them did not think it is possible to secure a balanced treatment of culture in ELT and lacked solid institutional support and cultural knowledge for adjusting their teaching practices. Overall, this study reveals that internal and external factors such as teachers' perception of the ownership of English, their sense of English culture as well as institutional administration can co-constrain their attitudes and autonomy for teaching English as an international language in the classroom.

Although this paper has focused on cases of College English teaching in four higher institutions in China, it is believed that similar situations could also be found at other educational institutions in the country or similar ELT contexts, which in itself indicates the potential

for further research in other teaching contexts. Furthermore, this qualitative study was based on a small and non-random sample; the results cannot be generalized to represent the attitudes of all English language teachers in China. Hence, survey investigations with larger random samples can be conducted in the future to yield more representative results, which may also verify the conclusion of this study. In addition, the teaching behaviours involved in this study are all self-reported behaviours of the interviewees, but their actual teaching behaviours in the classroom might be different. Therefore, it is also important to conduct observations of teachers' actual teaching practices in further studies to consolidate the findings. Moreover, in light of the powerful institutional impact on classroom teaching, it would equally be significant to probe into educational administrators' (e.g., faculty deans) attitudes to English culture and unravel administrative considerations and concerns towards the adoption of a multicultural approach to ELT. It is hoped that this study and these future endeavours may encourage ELT professionals and researchers to reconsider the practice of entitling English the international language when it may still be widely taught as an Anglo-American language and to adjust their professional roles, duties and actions in cultivating learners' critical cultural awareness and communicative competence, so that English could someday fully blossom as an international language on its global soil.

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APPENDIX

**Focus group interview**

**Part 1: Demographics**

**Please highlight your choices and input your short answers.**

- 1) Age:  20-25  26-30  31-35  36-40  Above 40
- 2) Sex:  Male  Female
- 3) Nationality:  Chinese  Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Are you a native speaker of English?  Yes  No
- 5) The Chinese city where your university is located: \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Years of teaching English in university:  
 less than 5 years  5 to10 years  more than 10 years
- 7) Students currently taught (check all that applies):  
 Undergraduate students  Postgraduate students
- 8) Type of course(s) currently taught:  
 General College English  Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) Does your class directly involve teaching English culture?  
 Yes  No
- 10) Main textbook(s) you currently use (please list the publication details):  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Part 2: Focus Group Interview Questions**

- 1) Should the culture of English be taught in the English language classroom? Why?
- 2) Whose culture do you think the culture of English includes?
  - a) Anglo-American culture (e.g., British, American)
  - b) The culture of other non-Anglo-American countries where English is used (e.g., India, Thailand, France)
  - c) Local culture (e.g., Chinese)
- 3) Whose culture has been taught the most in your College English class? Why?
- 4) Whose culture has been taught the least in your College English class? Why?
- 5) What is your opinion of teaching cultures other than Anglo-American culture (e.g., Chinese culture, Indian culture) in the College English classroom? Is it important or unnecessary? Why?
- 6) How often have you incorporated cultures other than Anglo-American culture in your teaching? Why?
- 7) If you have included or tried to include cultures other than Anglo-American culture in your teaching, what do you think are the benefits to your class in doing so?
- 8) If you have included or tried to include cultures other than Anglo-American culture in your teaching, what do you think are the challenges or problems that you have faced in doing so?
- 9) Would you prefer to teach with an English language textbook with a balanced presentation of cultures of the world? Why or why not?
- 10) Is there anything you would like to add or correct or explain further?