

Lessons from China on English language learning in a globalised world

Whose language is it? The fact that an estimated three times as many people now speak English as a second or foreign language, compared with 400 million native speakers, raises important questions for English language teaching around the world. Dr Fan Fang from Shantou University in China argues that the global spread of English with the phenomenon and diversity of 'Global Englishes' are proof that it is time to rethink the linguistic landscape and what, as well as how, students of English are taught.

Instant communication is a necessity as well as an opportunity in today's globalised world. Even before the advent of computer and internet technologies brought the world closer than ever, English was recognised as the primary means of communication between people of different language groups.

English as a lingua franca has a complex history which is characterised not only by its British trading and colonial past, but also by the development of 'Global Englishes' that have developed around the world. English as a lingua franca refers to the use of English as a contact language among people whose first languages are not English, and that English is one of the primary choices facilitating intercultural communication.

In China it is estimated that around a fifth of the one billion people who speak Mandarin Chinese as their first language also learn and speak English as a foreign language. Traditionally the goal of English language teaching has been to speak English to native English standard. In reality this is beyond many people who, as a result, can lose their motivation for learning.

Research by Dr Fan Fang of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Shantou University in China

suggests that we are living in a time of transition and that English language teaching should be re-evaluated and reorientated. In a series of recent papers he argues that the development of Global Englishes has changed the 'linguistic landscape'. As a result, he argues that the learning paradigm needs to move away from concentration on native English standards.

In addition, although English as a foreign language is traditionally taught solely through the medium of English, Dr Fang argues that students should be allowed to use their first languages as a resource for their language learning. In further recent research he looks at the use of multiple languages and multimodal practices in classroom discourse, known as 'translanguaging'.

GLOBAL ENGLISHES

While academics recognise the importance of raising awareness of the diverse varieties, identities and situations in which English is currently spoken around the world, English language teaching in the classroom still privileges English as spoken by native speakers.

Dr Fang conducted a study to evaluate the introduction of a Global English-orientated English-learning course for students at a university in south-east China. The university requires all students to pass certain levels



of English, not least with the aim of facilitating participation in foreign exchange programmes.

Researchers began by designing an optional 16-week, Global English-orientated course which included a coursebook, supplementary materials and online learning. It presented examples of native and post-colonial varieties of English, as well as the current status of English use in a broader setting. The course also focused on language policy, planning and English language teaching practice in China.

After taking the course, students were asked about their experience.

In particular Dr Fang wanted to find out whether the course had influenced students' attitudes to their own English and what their attitudes were towards the concept of Global Englishes. In this way Dr Fang's aim was to assess the feasibility of extending such a course to other classes and universities.

Students' responses indicated that most had a positive reaction to the course and believed that learning about other people's use of English had made them

feel better about their own. One student reported: "I have learned that it is more important to express your ideas clearly during communication and not to judge whether someone can speak standardly." Another said: "I now regard myself as an English user. I am able to express myself and I am not afraid of making grammar mistakes anymore."

Some students expressed that they continued to be worried about having the 'right' accent and not making mistakes

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in grammar and writing. However, others voiced that having been presented with a more critical perspective of English, they learned to challenge entrenched ideologies and respect differences. One student commented: "I have developed my linguistic awareness and will respect others when they use English."

LESSONS LEARNED

Although his study was conducted in China, Dr Fang believes that its findings and implications are useful for other

English language teaching communities. He argues that the study shows that the pedagogical focus has to change and that traditional practices based on teaching to the standard of native speaker English should be re-envisaged.

In particular Dr Fang argues that stakeholders should recognise the important role that teachers play in raising learners' awareness of diversity in English and should also reconsider the notion of linguistic correctness. He explains:

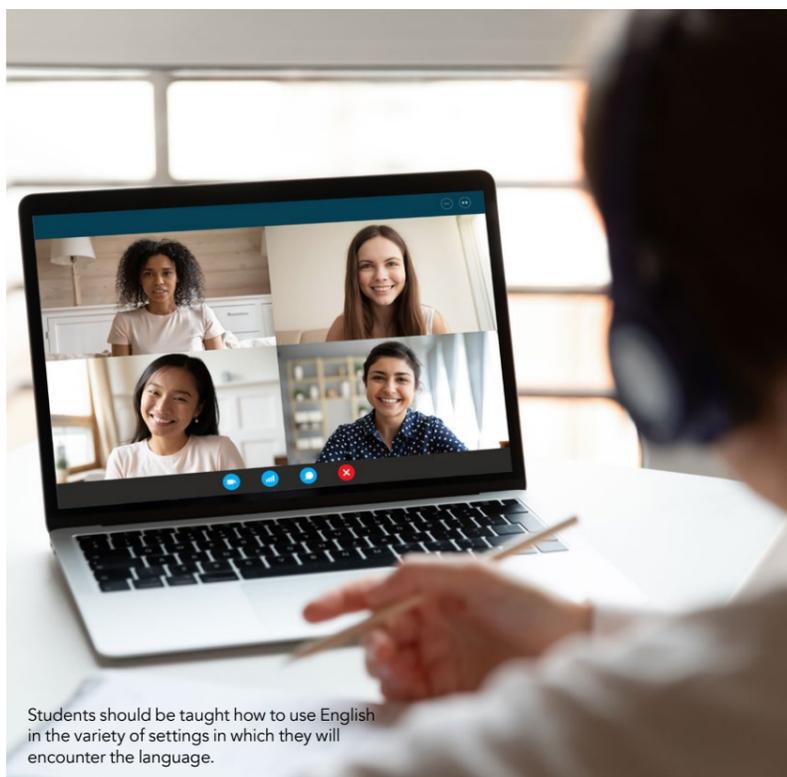
"Incorporating Global Englishes into English language teaching can help students gain a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the hybrid nature of English and

acknowledge the legitimacy of their own English."

It follows that for change to happen, more curricula emphasising Global English need to be adopted and more resources need to be developed.

MULTILINGUALISM AND TRANSLANGUAGING

A second recent study by Dr Fang challenges another traditional view of English language teaching: that English



as a foreign language is best taught through the medium of English.

In the last 20 years scholars have begun to question monolingualism in the classroom. Empirical evidence in support of multilingualism has come from critical applied linguistics and cognitive psychology. In this way language is understood as a social practice, and students' own language-learning skills are regarded as valuable linguistic and cultural capital.

As a result, the academic focus has turned to 'translanguaging'. This rejects the view that only English should be

English is a global language that is owned by all those who speak it.

spoken in the classroom and instead advocates making use of a student's linguistic skills and capabilities in the acquisition of a second language. The term translanguaging originated in Wales, where the concept developed, and in various contexts including primarily Europe and North America. However, research in a Chinese context is scarce.

Dr Fang's study was based at a university in south-east China where students not only learn English in English language classes, but are also taught through the medium of English on some courses. The research aimed to find out what kind of translanguaging was carried out at the university and what teachers' and students' attitudes to it were. Using a mixed methods approach, data were collected by means of classroom observation, an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

The findings showed that, despite the English-only policy, some teachers

did utilise translanguaging strategies to facilitate teaching, for example to check students' understanding and content knowledge.

Students were in general neutral to positive in their attitude towards translanguaging, with some arguing that it was a natural practice that improved their confidence and

supported learning, helping them to understand key concepts. Some students also reported that it helped less-proficient students.

Teachers differed in their responses. Some used it as a tool to facilitate concept-checking and comprehension. It was also used less frequently to help manage the classroom and engage classroom rapport. Teachers commented that whether they adopted a bilingual approach depended on the context, explaining that some content was more open to translanguaging. Like the students, they also believed that it helped less-proficient students.

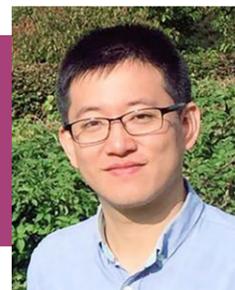
EXPLORING TRANSLANGUAGING FURTHER

Dr Fang finds that the study showed that translanguaging strategies in both teaching contexts were mainly used "as a tool for unpacking knowledge and managing classroom interactions." Translanguaging was not yet used as a means to develop students' "positive bilingual identity" and most teachers were unaware of its potential to do so.

While arguing that his study "provides evidence for the legitimacy of translanguaging approaches," Dr Fang acknowledges that universities' and other institutions' strict monolingual policies deter teachers from implementing translanguaging in the classroom. As a result translanguaging in teaching through the medium of English, and in teaching English as a foreign language, remains "under-explored" and would repay both greater academic attention and the development of "contextualised translanguaging pedagogical strategies."

A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

Dr Fang's message is clear. Now that the number of non-native English speakers far surpasses that of native speakers, English is a global language that should be owned by all those who speak it. Students should be taught how to use English in the variety of settings in which they will encounter the language. They should also be allowed to use their own linguistic and multimodal resources to help them acquire English as a second language.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Fan Fang's research interests include Global Englishes, language attitude and identity, sociolinguistics and language education.

Detail

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Personal Response

The argument against monolingualism in the EFL classroom is mounting but changing the learning paradigm is a huge task. What do you believe would be the most persuasive argument to win stakeholders around?

// Language learning from the monolingual perspective does not reflect the current linguistic landscape. The fields of applied linguistics and language education need to recruit policymakers who specialise in language teaching and learning with an understanding of people's multilingual resources as their linguistic repertoire. Stakeholders should also realise that translanguaging with various multimodal, semiotic resources should not be regarded as language deficit. It is hoped that language assessment will also incorporate the components of Global Englishes and translanguaging to test people's real-life competence in language use. //

