

# Identity Crisis among Chinese University EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Learners

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**Abstract:** *Since English has emerged as a global language, it is no longer the sole possession of the English native speakers. Many studies have concluded that second language learning affects learners' identity. As China is the largest gathering place of English learners in the world, the influence of English learning on learners' identity is inevitable. The current English teaching in Chinese universities overemphasizes the input of English culture and neglects the inheritance of local Chinese culture, resulting in the lack of identity of Chinese university English learners. As language, culture and difference are all intimately linked to identity, this paper will examine the three primary causes of Chinese university students' identity crises and offer solutions from these angles. The first reason lies in the overemphasis on Standard English and the so-called Standard English accent in Chinese English learning programs. The second reason is the overemphasis on Anglo-American cultural norms and values. Finally, English language learning in Chinese universities overemphasizes the legitimacy of native speakers.*

**Keywords:** *Identity crisis, EFL contexts, Chinese university*

## 1. Introduction

As English has become an international lingua franca, English is no longer exclusive to the inner-circle nations, including Britain, America and Australia and so on. Over 80 percent of English speakers are non-native speakers from the outer-circle and the expanding-circle nations<sup>[1]</sup>. Since the mid-1970s, decades of reform and opening-up and the shift of the market economy have dramatically transformed China. As early as the 1980s, China had the largest number of English language learners in the world, about 50 million. By 2009, the number had risen to roughly 350 million, far exceeding the total number of English speakers in the United States<sup>[2]</sup>. Many research studies have concluded that foreign language learning will influence the learners' identity<sup>[1-3]</sup>. Prolonged exposure to a foreign language and a new cultural background that different from the mother tongue can lead to an irreversible destabilization self-perception of the learner<sup>[4]</sup>. As China has the largest English language learner population in the world, it is unwise to downplay the impact of the English language on Chinese EFL learners' identity. Some kids in urban areas started learning the alphabet in kindergarten, but most of them started English learning in primary school. So by the time they have their first English class, the norms and cultural values of their native language are firmly rooted in their minds. However, at this age, the cognitive abilities of English language learners are not yet mature, and by the university level, English language learners have a clear motivation to learn English and also accumulate a certain amount of vocabularies and grammatical rules of the target language. It is inevitably for those university learners to undergo an identity crisis when they adopt the cultural norms and values of the target language in the foreign language learning process<sup>[5]</sup>.

Understanding and internalizing English culture has become an important content and goal of English language teaching, and English language teaching not only pursues the language proficiencies but also strives to cultivate the near-native speakers who are familiar with English cultures. Therefore, English learners must learn and understand the cultural norms of English-speaking society<sup>[6]</sup>. It has become widely accepted in the foreign language teaching community that the sociocultural teaching of target languages should be included in the foreign language learning curriculum. However, the significance and the role of the learners' mother tongue culture in foreign language education has been neglected and even excluded. The first language culture is also considered to have a negative effect on foreign language learning, namely the first language transfer or interference<sup>[7]</sup>. The Anglo-American cultures prevail in almost all English language learning curriculum in China, which originated either in Britain or the United States, leaving limited room for discussion of Chinese culture. English from inner-circle nations are role

models of English language teaching, causing learners to struggle to reach the level of native speakers, but this is impossible to achieve. Even worse, when foreigners hope to learn something about Chinese culture and social phenomena from these learners, they are often unable to make a voice and explain the culture in-depth in English. Because they are less likely to be taught to express or describe the concepts or events of the Chinese culture<sup>[7]</sup>. At this point, they can neither become native speakers nor explain their culture in English, creating an identity crisis among Chinese university EFL learners.

As identity is intimately bound with language, culture and difference, this paper will analyze three main reasons and solutions for the identity crisis issue from these perspectives. In the language part, the reason is overemphasizing Standard English and so-called Standard English accents in the Chinese English learning curriculum, so the solution is to change the English learning goal, which is from near-native speakers to intercultural communicator. In the culture part, the reason is overemphasizing the Anglo-American cultural norms and values. Hence, incorporating L1 cultural norms in the L2 learning curriculum will develop learners' cognition of their identities. Last part talks about identity and difference, Chinese university English learning overstates the legitimacy of native speaker<sup>[3]</sup>, and so EFL learners will feel inferior in the learning process. Thus, it is time for them to establish the correct identity perception. EFL learners need to acknowledge their multiple and changing identities instead of fixed identities<sup>[3]</sup>. Rather than defining their identities as incompetent imitation native speakers, why not recognize themselves as multicompetent English speakers<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2. Language : Overemphasis on Standard English and so-called standard accent

An accent is one of the signifiers in the language system, which uses many signs (e.g. like a word and sounds) to produce and convey meaning. Language is an encoding system to help the people to interpret the world and then share their viewpoints, feelings and so on in a same way<sup>[8]</sup>. Language is also a symbol of identity<sup>[9]</sup>, if one person speaks one language, he or she possesses the medium to communicate with the people in the same language community. Many English courses aim to teach students to speak authentic British or American English, but with the acceleration of globalization, some English accents around the world have been widely recognized as acceptable regional English varieties, such as Singapore English, Indian English, African English<sup>[10]</sup>. These English accents are now internationally accepted as an important part of the construction of language and cultural identity in these countries. As a significant component in language, the various accents have particular meanings attached in particular socio-cultural contexts<sup>[8]</sup>. For example, John So, the Mayor of Melbourne, although he has a strong Cantonese accent in English, his accent exactly shows that Melbourne is trying to become a multicultural society. For the chef with a French accent, his customers may think his French cuisine is more authentic. When they speak English, they are given the identity of English speakers, while their English accents reflect their native language identities. Identities are not fixed, singular, people have different identities in different scenarios, and these diverse identities can coexist. When it comes to the EFL context, the Chinese university English curriculum only focuses on General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (PR), misleading learners' cognitions of such English accents. So the role of Standard English and accent has been virtually deified by these learners. Forcing students to abandon the accent of their mother tongue and turn to imitate the accent of the Anglo-American is like asking them to change their identities, or even causing students to be ashamed of speaking English with a Chinese accent. Therefore, such cognitions will further influence their understandings of local cultures<sup>[6-7]</sup>.

Although there are many English varieties worldwide, the English from the inner-circle nations is at a dominant position. It seems to have a hierarchical relationship within this "Englishes family", these Englishes are less likely to equally and peacefully coexist<sup>[10]</sup>. Over the years, it has been internationally accepted that the Standard English, namely the American English and Britain English, is the most authentic English variety model for teaching English<sup>[10-11]</sup>. Under this circumstance, other varieties are rarely exposed to Chinese university EFL learners. They may consider other Englishes are wrong and ungrammatical, and not to mention "China English", which even from the country in the periphery of the "Englishes family"<sup>[7]</sup>, will be labelled as an inferior language.

However, as mentioned above, non-native English speakers far outnumber native English speakers, and the "ownership" of English in the inner-circle countries is beginning to be questioned. It has been pointed out that no countries or nations can claim the ownership of the English language<sup>[2]</sup>, so the division of the so-called Standard English language is becoming increasingly blurred in the age of globalization. Thus, many English varieties and Englishes are beginning to emerge around the world, which aims to develop local English usage while responding to different socio-cultural environments<sup>[12]</sup>. Even the Englishes of the inner-circle countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia,

etc. are more or less different from each other in terms of pronunciation, spelling or grammar. This suggests that in the context of globalization, so-called Standard English in the English-speaking world will no longer hold the top status, indicating that the central position of Standard English is being challenged.

Therefore, the previous learning goal of the Chinese university English curriculum needs to be changed. Apart from the learners who hope to further study overseas, a majority of Chinese university EFL learners are more likely to speak English with other non-native speakers rather than native speakers. The deification of Standard English causes an unrealistic learning goal, namely the near-native speakers. Moreover, even most Chinese university English teachers are less likely to achieve it, how can their students do that?

In the curriculum, learners should be consciously exposed to a large number of different forms of Englishes, but it is not advisable to emphasize the superiority of one form over the others, otherwise EFL learners will unconsciously devalue these other forms<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, English teaching in China should set reasonable teaching objectives according to students' interests and the actual situation that they use English in future jobs. Norton claims that EFL learners are constantly engaged in the identity construction processes whenever they speak English, so that the power of discourse cannot be underestimated in the identity construction<sup>[3]</sup>. Identity is constructed by difference<sup>[13]</sup>, and it is fluid, multiple and even contradictory rather than pre-decided, static and fixed<sup>[2]</sup>. English shifts from EFL to EIL (English as an international language), some current teaching and learning paradigms are criticized as the fallacies. Kachru summarized six fallacies below<sup>[1]</sup>. Firstly, for those learners who in the outer and expanding circle nations, learning English is to communicate with native-speakers; Secondly, English must be regarded as a tool to understand or instruct the Anglo-American cultural values, which is also called Judeo-Christian tradition; Thirdly, native models (like GA and RP) should be the goal of English learning; Fourthly, non-native Englishes are in essence the "interlanguages", which is often be seen as "bad" and "inferior", as opposed to Standard English. Fifthly, native English speakers in English teaching areas are not only teachers, but also academic administrators and material developers, providing vital input into the global English teaching, policy formation, and the ways for the spread of English. Due to the differences in the "Englishes family", the legal English varieties challenge the hegemony of Standard English. Remaining the original unrealistic learning goal, an EFL learner will become an "accomplice" of the hegemony of English, further exacerbating their identity crises. Moreover, as English is the medium and decoding system, it can translate the different languages and convey the meaning from a different culture. Thus, the teaching and learning of language is not just a transfer of skills, but a process of becoming another person. Language is both formative and expressive of identity<sup>[8]</sup>. Language is a tool to express meanings and also present identities. Globalized English is the best tool for intercultural and international communication, so developing EFL learners' intercultural communication skills is a reasonable learning goal of Chinese university English teaching.

### 3. Culture: Overemphasis on the Anglo-American cultural norms

Language practices are formed from early childhood through our identities. Learner's identities are formed by culture, and language is part of that process, so when speaking in another language, although it may sound strange, according to the textbook or standard, we are proficient English speakers. Language is inextricably tied to culture, which can be symbolized, expressed, and embodied by language<sup>[14]</sup>. Merely realizing of the linguistic rules cannot lead a person to the shared culture and history. Thus, it is impossible to master a language without studying contexts and social purposes<sup>[8]</sup>. To learn and use a language is to accept a cultural value or idea of this language. When a person writes, thinks, and communicates in English, this learning process reflects the cultural assimilation, and the learner will gradually be assimilated with the target language.

Over the years, Chinese university English teaching reforms have been carried out around the goal of enabling students to better grasp the English language, and in response to problems such as "dumb English" and "Chinglish". Situational language teaching and English copy of the imported English materials, such as the Aesop's Fables, and the Million Pound Note are the most popular teaching methods<sup>[6]</sup>. Many teachers believe that one of the important reasons why Chinese EFL learners fail to achieve near-native proficiency is because they are not exposed to the real English context (focus on Britain and America). English teaching should actively create English-speaking scenarios, and learners are required to keep their minds connected to English when they learn and use the target language. For instance, some culturally determined features in Chinese EFL learner's English essays are seen as mistakes listed on American writing textbooks and handbooks. Chinese university EFL learners are more

likely to use many stock phrases in their English papers, mainly because it is a common Chinese writing practice, “four-character phrases”, in their first language writing. However, the same practice is considered clichéd, redundant in English writing<sup>[15]</sup>. Most teachers and learners in China think that it is best to have a study tour in the inner-circle nations to experience the local culture and customs, so that they can learn authentic English. Meanwhile, to deepen students’ understandings of English culture, more imported English textbooks are needed. There are 64 articles in the new edition of the Comprehensive English (1-4 volumes), which is the compulsory textbooks in China’s university. 44 readings are linked to Anglo-American culture, occupying 68 percent of the total, while only 4 articles are related to Chinese culture, accounting for merely 6 percentage of the total<sup>[16]</sup>. The importance of Anglo-American culture is overstated, leading to a bias in students’ understandings of the culture. To some extent, the learners are consciously and unconsciously devalue local cultures, and will feel inferior, bored and even resentful of Chinese culture, resulting in an identity crisis.

Before giving the suggestion to improve the problems above, the exact meanings of Western culture or inner-circle culture should be stated first. In Chinese English teaching, Western culture can be divided into four main domains, aesthetic, sociological, semantic and pragmatic aspects. Aesthetic part includes media and lecture; the sociological domain, the dominant part in English culture teaching, mainly includes Education/teaching methodology, geography, history, culture, customs, interpersonal relations, family, politics, economics, society, everyday life work and so on; the semantic domain consists of values and British or American differences; the last pragmatic aspect comprises English language, dialogue and avoid taboo. More importantly, 75 percent of Chinese English teachers only teach the Western cultures that written on the textbooks<sup>[17]</sup>. Admittedly, these Western cultures play an important role in English language learning. Cross-cultural communication is a required course in the Chinese university, especially in the English major. This course includes social customs, habits, ways of thinking and behaviour, etc. Cross-cultural communication covers a wide range of aspects in language, ranging from greetings, goodbyes, compliments, acknowledgments and apologies in everyday conversation, to understanding, mastering euphemisms and body language or gestures. However, in such a course, cultural communication seems to be one-way instead of a two-way conversation. The learners are the passive receivers of one-way flow information about dominant Western culture, which includes communication patterns of Standard English, direct eye contact, limited physical contact and canalised emotions. They do compare the local culture to Western culture, but since students are rarely taught English of their own cultures, this comparison is often presented in Chinese. Although students complete the reading and listening comprehension task text while being taught Anglo-American culture, at the same time they develop only a sense of correctness instead of an effective way to access information and communicate with other English speakers<sup>[1]</sup>.

In university English teaching in China, there has a serious shortage of Chinese cultural knowledge and localized English vocabularies in the required teaching materials in universities, the students have an obvious imbalance between the input and output of cultural communication in cross-cultural communication. So many students cannot actively and effectively introduce China's excellent traditional culture to others because they are less likely to correctly translate and elaborate Chinese culture, and can only passively accept the information of other countries’ culture conveyed by others in the conversation. In a survey of the English translations of the names of six traditional Chinese festivals, namely Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Lantern Festival, Qingming Festival and Qixi Festival, it is found that the accuracy rate of the English translations is incredibly low. More than 70 percent of the university students only translated the names of Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival and Dragon Boat Festival, occupying 97.6%, 92.5% and 76% respectively, while only 58% of the students were correct on Lantern Festival because of the misspelling of words. Over half of the students try to explain the meaning of the Qingming Festival and Qixi Festival to translate them into English. However, most students can speak accurate names of some Western culture holidays in English, such as Christmas, Christmas Eve, Easter, Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, Halloween, and April Fool's Day<sup>[16]</sup>.

Therefore, although Chinese university English teaching attaches importance to cultural teaching, it overemphasizes the Anglo-American culture and undervalues the significant role of Chinese culture, which is the other subject of cross-cultural communication. Effective communication must base on cultures, and the absence of a cultural basis will inevitably hinder communication and prevent it from achieving the desired results, which in turn will affect the progress of work. If students do not have sufficient knowledge of their first language cultures and are unable to break through the language barrier to express the Chinese culture, they will lack cultural confidence in cross-cultural communication and will receive information about the culture of the other country “in silence” instead of exporting information about the culture of their own country. Furthermore, they will not be able to successfully communicate with each other about their culture. Hence, even some university students who have a good

command of English and also are familiar with Western culture are less likely to illustrate traditional Chinese culture. Those EFL learners will at a disadvantage in cross-cultural communication<sup>[6]</sup>. This phenomenon can be called "Chinese cultural aphasia". From another point of view, this is, in fact, a more serious form of "mute English" that undermines university students' sense of pride and belonging to their first language cultures, resulting in the loss and confusion of their first language cultural identities.

Consequently, incorporating the first language cultural norms and values into English learning can address the problem of university students' identity crises. It does not mean that all Western cultures should be replaced by the local cultural norms in the English learning curriculum. First of all, the proportion of Chinese culture in the curriculum should be increased and teachers can design some communicative learning activities for students to compare the Chinese and Western culture in English, such as role-playing or group presentation. The learning of a foreign language culture is also inseparable from the learning of the first language culture, and a multicultural environment enables learners to compare different cultures and develop their capacities for cultural reflection. The curriculum should clearly set the educational objectives, content and requirements for teaching Chinese culture in English, and reflect the reasonable positioning of Chinese culture in English teaching and also reflect the unity of English culture and Chinese culture. While retaining the traditional comprehensive English course and the Anglo-American culture or literature course, the English course that talks about Chinese culture can be added and a related course on comparative culture can be offered<sup>[7]</sup>. Through the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures, students understand the relevance and differences of Chinese and Western cultures and deepen their knowledge and understandings of Chinese and Western cultures.

Moreover, some new localized English varieties are created in the Outer-circle nation. While preserving the phonetic, lexical and rhetorical characteristics of their mother tongue, these non-native English speakers find expressions of their national and cultural identities in the process of speaking the international language<sup>[7]</sup>. The listening part of the IELTS exam often involves English with an Indian accent and a Japanese accent, and reading part also often concerns the culture of Outer-circle and the expanding circle nations, such as the Toji pagoda in Japan. So the culture of indigenized Englishes that claim the legitimate status can also be paid attention in the Chinese university English learning curriculum. Furthermore, for contemporary college students under exam-oriented education, they only value and study the exam contents. The current contents of tests in universities tend to focus on basic knowledge and basic competencies, with cultural aspects and knowledge of the target language. The content of such examinations only strengthens the learners' awareness of Western cultures and is not conducive to the improvement of intercultural communication skills. By adding Chinese culture to the test, students will be able to pay more attention to the local Chinese culture, and the import of Chinese culture will be guaranteed. College English Test Level 4 and 6 have made a good example in this regard. Since 2014, the translation part of these two exams has been replaced with translations of Chinese cultural content, which has undoubtedly played a good role in promoting students' application of English expression in Chinese culture.

#### **4. Identity and Difference: Overemphasis on the legitimacy of the native speakers**

Identity is best to see as fluid, plurality rather than fixed and unitary, people can have multiple identities at the same time, sometimes these identities are even contradictory. Identity is constructed by differences, which provides the conditions on which things exist and are used to distinguish what those things are, resulting in those identities being the same or different<sup>[13]</sup>.

In the process of acquiring a second language, EFL learners find a difference between their first language and target language identities. The diversity and variability of cultures dictate that two cultures will inevitably collide when learning English and understanding Western culture. When these two cultures encounter, cultural conflicts are more likely to change the learners' identities in some way. Then, the problem of the cultural identity crisis will arise. In the process of the conflict, the learners deepen their perceptions of different cultures, strengthen the identification with Western culture, and then clarified cultural differences, and further expanded the scope of cultural identities. This linguistic culture, formed over time, in turn, leads to the emergence of differences and then new standards of the identity. Therefore, in the English learning process, the identity of an EFL learner is dynamically evolving, and it is also can be seen as a production that never ends<sup>[18]</sup>.

Through the symbolic systems, such as culture and language, differences are marked out and reproduced. As the meanings of words and symbols are produced by language, then through the discourse, or the power and knowledge system, the "meaning" of the self and others are produced. Women and men;

Black and White; West and East; straight and homosexual, all these identities are classified by the differences. Language and culture differences identify people as insiders and outsiders, namely the native speakers and non-native speakers. Due to the deification of Standard English and the hegemony of English, native speakers are unconsciously empowered to be the legitimate and authentic English speakers, as opposed to illegal EFL learners<sup>[3]</sup>. Non-native speakers are inferior in learning English, so they strive to become the near-native speakers to narrow the gap with native speakers.

In the context of EIL, Standard English, GA and RP, and the Anglo-American culture norms are no longer the sole criterion in English acquisition. The differences in English variations are regarded as “flourishing, effective, functional, sometimes elegant and literary”<sup>[1]</sup>. The respective identities and cultures are embedded in these English varieties, so English is not intimately bound up with the sole criterion above. Although there always has an interdependent relationship between the use of English and cultures, English is not restricted by any particular culture or political system. In fact, any culture can use English as a vehicle to convey their cultures and identities. Cultural differences can not disappear by the spread of English, which is considered as a homogenizing factor. English actually can be used as a medium to express and elaborate these differences, encouraging people with different shared cultures to communicate with each other<sup>[1]</sup>. English has become a tool to enhance learners' diverse identities. In the teaching of English in China, English learners cannot be empowered if they are only exposed to Western cultures and native language forms through imported English learning materials. Without a deep understanding of the English expression of their cultures, they will lose confidence and become vulnerable English users in language learning<sup>[6]</sup>.

As differences construct the meanings, which are fluid and always “sliding” with the changes of cultures and societies, the meaning of non-native speakers' identity will change. Differences are not fixed in a rigid binary opposition, the differences of native speakers and non-native speakers are not mutually exclusive, but mutually supportive<sup>[2]</sup>. English speakers in China are also empowered to make a voice in cross-cultural communication, and English learners should shift their perceptions of their own identities. So that they are no longer just passive cultural recipients but rather, cultural communicators, which in turn will increase their pride in their Chinese cultural identities and become a strong motivation for them to further explore and protect Chinese cultural heritages<sup>[7]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, global integration has given rise to cross-cultural communication, and the role of English as the international language in this process is clear, but its importance has also been overemphasized. It was found that EFL learners were exposed to a large number of Anglo-American cultures, which strengthened the identity of the target language culture, while weakening the identity of the Chinese culture and losing their cultural identities in English learning. It is unwise to deify the status of Standard English, standard accents, also the legitimacy of native speakers are overemphasized, resulting in Chinese university EFL learners' identity crises.

Therefore, to address the current problems in Chinese university English learning and teaching, it is time for all practitioners to make some changes in this field. Firstly, the unrealistic learning goal should be changed, from near-native speakers to intercultural communicators. It is quite normal for adults to speak a foreign language with a native accent. In the context of globalization, the purpose of English phonics is not to bring the students' accents closer to that of native English speakers, so the learners' native accents should not be considered a mistake. English teaching should focus on how the students' pronunciation can be clearly understood by others. In the past, EFL phonics was designed to communicate with native speakers, so that learners had to eradicate their native accents. It is a difficult and impractical process, so in the context of EIL, teaching and learning should focus on the mutual understandings and acceptances of accents. Secondly, Incorporating the Chinese culture norms in English learning, so the learners can absorb the essence of Chinese culture, learn to express Chinese culture fluently in English, and really improve their intercultural communication skills. Lastly, EFL learners should acknowledge their multiple, shifting and wide-ranging identities, as opposed to the single-component view of the identity. English can reflect multi-cultures and multi-identities in the new era. These EFL learners are multicompetent English speakers rather than incompetent imitation native speakers<sup>[1]</sup>

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