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Investigating Chinese students' attitudes towards China English accent in the English as Foreign Language context

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Abstract:
English is a compulsory course for college students and has been paid more and more attention among students. There are many varieties of English, some of which have taken a long time to be de-stigmatized and respected. Against this background, this study aims to reflect upon the background of diversity and fluidity of English as a lingua franca to investigate Chinese students' attitudes towards China's English accent at the Macao University of Science and Technology (MUST). Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used and revealed students' attitudes toward English accent of their own, their teachers and general CE accents. It hopes to contribute to the current study of CE accent as well as find implications for English Language Teaching (ELT).

Keywords:
English accent, China English,Language learning, Intercultural communication

1 Introduction

With the expansion of population use and speaking English every day from everywhere in the world, the English Language is now used as a lingua franca (ELF) and the study of World Englishes (WE) has challenged the native speakers of English (NSE) norm. Multiple local English varieties (such as Japanese English, Indian English, Singapore English, etc.) have emerged and are still emerging or developing. The Nativeness Principle and standard English ideology have been gradually challenged and replaced by the Intelligibility Principle, which means different English varieties are increasingly gaining legitimacy and acceptance by users and scholars. Accent, as the most salient element of language, receives the most attention. The phenomenon is that dominant English accents such as standard AmE (GA) and standard BrE (RP) are prioritized while foreign-accented English speech is faced with stigma and negative stereotyping has been revamped. China English (CE), as a variety of English, is attracting growing attention from scholars and a great number of research into attitudes towards China English accent has been conducted. Yet these studies mainly address the issue in the traditional Chinese university context and the results of the overwhelming support of native English accent were found.

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2 Literature review

2.1 China English accent as a developing variety

As an expanding circle country according to the WE paradigm, China owns the largest population of English learners and the English language has gained high status and is widespread in this country. The issue of whether CE should be viewed in the ELF context or in the WE framework has aroused continuous disputes. Also, naming the English language practice by Chinese people is a long-term debate. According to Hu, there is no clear boundary or neat distinction between the terms "China English" "Chinese English" and "Chinglish", yet among which Chinglish holds a pejorative implication, so we choose to use China English in this essay.

Increasing scholars argue that CE is a variety of English. Hu indicates that China English is a good communicative tool as a standard English and listed three reasons why it should be regarded as a variety of English with its own standard. Xu directly defines China English as "a developing variety of English". Kirkpatrick in 2007 has predicted that China English would inevitably become the very variety in the future which may genuinely empower Chinese learners and users of English. Therefore, this essay takes the perspective that China English functions as a variety of English used for intranational and international communication, even though it doesn't get legitimacy, it's more dynamic and fluid.

Accent is a notion that hard to define. According to Lippi-Green, accent can only be defined and understood when it comes to comparison unless it's difficult to give a precise definition. Similarly, non-accent becomes an ambiguous notion, either. Conflicts exist as some scholars argue that intelligibility is the focus of communication while some stick to NSE norms. China English accent, due to diverse dialects mother tongue, can not show identifiable fixed features. However, undeniably, CE accent is inevitably influenced by Chinese including replacing /v/ with /w/, omission of final plosives, the addition of a vowel after word-final consonants, etc. Therefore, this study would not look into detailed CE accent features, instead, it focuses on general CE accent.

2.2 Research on attitudes toward CE accent

Language attitudes issues are related to all domains of sociolinguistic and social psychological phenomena. Language attitude research helps us to figure out people's preferences and biases towards certain linguistic features as well as reveal similarities and differences across communities. It also offers "a backdrop for explaining linguistic variation and change". According to Jenkins, the notion of accent is the most salient part of foreign language use and language attitude. Popular research questions in this area include to what degree do participants admit CE accent as a variety of English, to what extent do participants view accent as a decisive factor to communication, whether intelligibility is the core of communication in participants' view, etc.

Most previous attitudes toward CE accent research have shown ambivalent or negative feelings and attitudes towards CE accent both from teachers and students. For instance, 71.2% of respondents from Fang's study said they are unhappy with their CE accent and perceive them as English learners rather than legitimate WE or ELF users. In terms of CE accent's correctness, acceptability and pleasantness, participants in Jenkins' study all gave negative evaluations. In Bian's longitudinal research, two distinctive voices appeared since some participants downgrade the native sound accent while others are reluctant to accept CE accent. Simi-

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larly, Wang investigated both university teachers' and students' attitudes, results showed low recognition and acceptability of CE accent and native speakerism was still the predominating ideologies in the education context in China.

Generally, both teachers and students in the traditional Chinese universities' context downgrade CE accent and regard themselves as English language learners instead of ELF users. To be noticed, studies of this kind were mostly conducted in SLA context, where students' main aim of learning English is to pass exams rather than communication or other purposes. So it's worthwhile to conduct a research in a different linguistic context, such as ELF contexts and a multi-accent environment.

2.3 MUST as ELF contexts

Macao University of Science and Technology, located in Macao SAR, where Cantonese, Putonghua, Portuguese and English and other languages are widely used, is an ELF context. According to the official website introduction, "M.U.S.T. offers tens of programs that are conducted mainly in English, with some conducted either in Chinese, Portuguese or Spanish" (MUST). Chinese and English are two major mediums of instruction. Moreover, students and staff here show diverse linguistic background, which includes local Macao students, mainland China students with various dialect background, international students of different L1s, Philippine security guards, etc. Therefore, it's highly possible that English serves as a lingua franca on this campus between Chinese students, international students and their teachers. The current study aspires to investigate MUST Chinese students' attitudes toward CE accents. More specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions:

Q1:What are the attitudes of MUST Chinese students towards English accent of their own, and general CE accents?

Q2:Are their attitudes influenced by their experience in the ELF contexts of MUST?

3 Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods instrument to collect quantitative and qualitative data by using an online questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, which is a two-stage process.

Firstly, the online questionnaire was adapted from Fang, and before we hand it out, we chose 6 non-research students to answer and adjusted it accordingly. We build the whole structure through the Chinese software "wenjuanxing" and distributed it through WeChat. All of our participants are both MUST undergraduate students and graduate students from different colleges. Thus, all the participants are from different provinces of China, which ensures the diversity of Chinese accents and different major-based attitudes. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were required to leave their contact information, which will be helpful for us to do the second stage interviews. We received 158 samples in total and chose 6 participants to do the further semi-structured interviews.

The further interviews focused on the topics of the attitude toward the Chinese English accent, CE accent in MUST, and the attitude towards CE accent in English teaching. Interviews ensure the reasons of the inter-

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viewee are more flexible. Before the interview, we show all the participants the information sheet, and they were required to sign the participant consent form.

In order to ensure the information comprehension is correct, the questionnaire was designed using both English and Chinese, and the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which lasted 20 to 30 minutes each.

4 Findings

4.1 Questionnaire findings

This section of the report uses descriptive analysis to analyze the questionnaire results, according to our research questions, which were conducted from two perspectives: participants' attitudes toward China English accent, and the relationship between their attitudes and experience in the ELF contexts of MUST.

Due to space limitations, questions were selected for this report. The first perspective is outlined from four aspects: participants' perceptions of CE accents and attitudes toward native sound accents. Not surprisingly, almost all of the participants believe that CE accent exists as a phonological phenomenon and can be widely found in themselves' and other peoples' spoken English (Table 1).

Table 1 Participants' perceptions of China English accents

Questions	Options	
	Yes(%)	No(%)
Q11 Do you believe in the existence of China English accent?	95.56	4.44
Q12 Do you consider you speak English with a China English accent?	72.15	27.85
Q13 Do you think people around you have China English accent?	99.36	0.64

This leads to the following questions in terms of the degree of satisfaction that students had with the CE accent. When looking at the responses to Question 10,18,19, more than 30% of the participants had positive attitudes toward their own accent, (Figure 1). although more than 50% of the participants preferred native-like accents like British accents or American accents and tried to learn/acquire them (Table 2, and the reasons will be further explained in the interview findings part), a large part of them (44.9 %) were content with their own English accent and would like to keep it.

As for attitudes towards other peoples' accents, for example, their teachers' and peers' various CE accents which constitute their daily learning environment. The Majority of participants agreed with the communicative purpose of the language. In Q22, more than 70% of the participants believed that even though a China English accent exists, there is no need to be embarrassed about it as long as it does not interfere with communication. For instance, although almost half of the students hoped that teacher can have standard English pronunciation, according to Q30, their purpose was for the quality and content of the classroom and the desire to understand the speech content (Table 4).

In general, most students in MUST had a positive attitude towards China English accent. They also believed that the China English accent as a variety of English and a unique linguistic and cultural feature should be respected.

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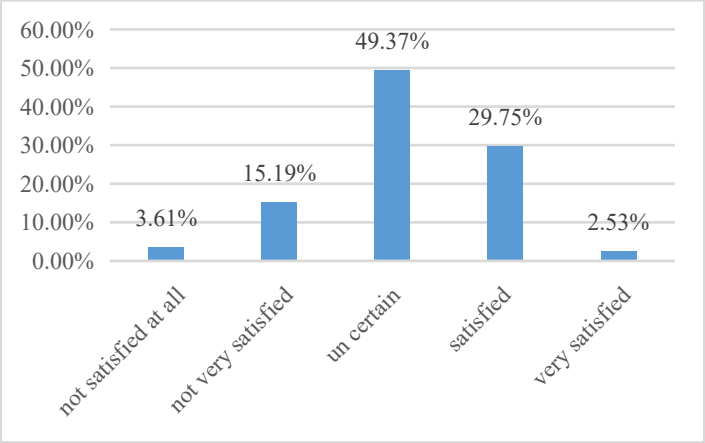


Figure 1 Participants' satisfaction with their own English accent

Table 2 participants' preference for which English accents

	Options				
	Strongly disagree(%)	**Disagree(%)**	**Neutral (%)**	**Agree(%)**	**Strongly agree(%)**
Q18 I feel happy when my English accent is more like native speakers, especially British accent / American accent.	1.27	7.59	22.15	43.04	25.59
Q19 I am content with my own English accent and would like to keep it.	1.27	13.92	39.87	37.34	7.59

Table 3 Attitudes towards CE as a linguistic and cultural feature

	Options				
	Strongly disagree(%)	**Disagree(%)**	**Neutral (%)**	**Agree(%)**	**Strongly agree(%)**
Q24We should respect all kinds of English accents, like Indian English accents, Japanese English accents, China English accents.	0.63	3.8	15.19	38.61	41.77
Q25 Just as there is Indian English, Singaporean English, etc., the China accent is also a linguistic and cultural feature.	1.27	1.9	21.52	37.93	37.34

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Table 4 Participants' attitudes towards English accents in the learning environment

	Options				
	Strongly disagree (%)	**Disagree (%)**	**Neutral (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Strongly agree(%)**
Q28 I prefer teachers who have standard English pronunciation to teach me any subjects.	7.59	13.92	32.28	32.91	13.29
Q30 As long as the teacher is qualified and the speech is intelligible, I do not mind what accent the teacher owns.	1.27	8.23	23.42	44.94	22.15

The second perspective on the relationship between students' attitudes and experience in the ELF contexts of MUST can be outlined in two ways: participants' perceptions of the ELF context, and the comparison of attitudes towards China English accent with students in different cultural environments.

Table 5 Participants' perceptions of ELF content

Accent environment types MUST	**Proportion(%)**
Diverse accents among campus staff	71.52
Diverse accents in campus stores	36.08
Diverse accents in education activities	81.65

In Q16 (Table 5), most people were aware of the existence of ELF content in MUST, especially in the classroom. Q26 shows that over 50% of participants felt that communicating in the multi-accented environment at MUST made them reevaluate their own English accent. In Q15 (Figure 2), more than 30% of the participants' attitudes toward their English accent had become more positive, and more than 40% of the participants maintained their positive attitudes in this environment. That means the ELF content of MUST provides an inclusive environment for the use of China English.

Further analysis of the data shows that the proportion of those with positive attitudes toward their English accent increases with grade (Figures 3 and 4). The largest proportion of positive attitudes was found in the group of participants in their junior year. This data showed a trend: the longer participants were in a multi-accented ELF content, the higher the tendency to develop positive attitudes. However, this data is flawed due to the sample of juniors being too large, so this analysis has reservations about the flaws in the within-school comparison.

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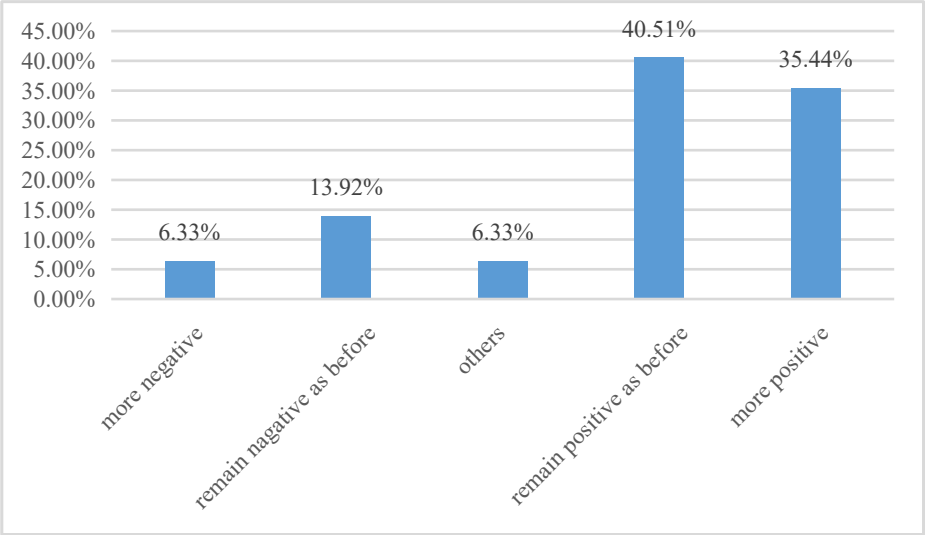


Figure 2 Participants' attitudinal tendencies toward their own China English accent.

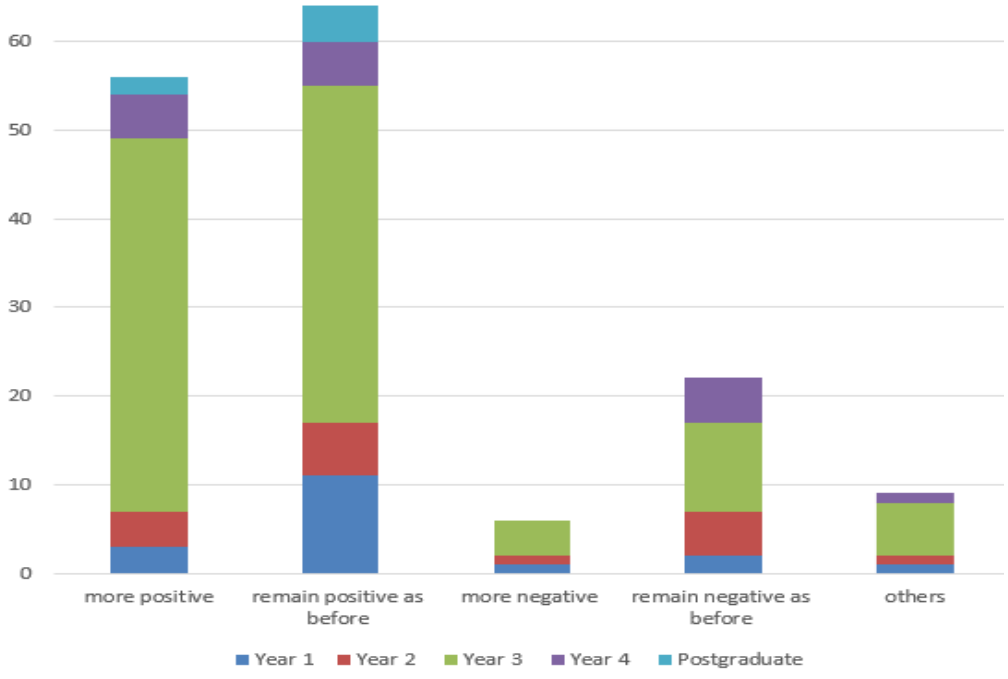


Figure 3 On-campus English accent attitude comparison

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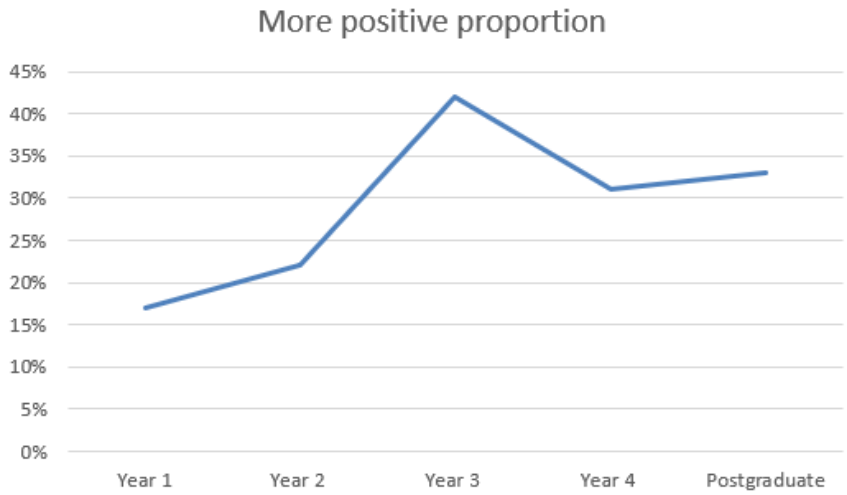


Figure 4 Trend

Compared with the research we have mentioned before, which was done by Fang on students' attitudes towards CE accents in a mainland China university. in terms of satisfaction with their own CE accent, MUST students have 20% more percentage of approval than mainland students, while mainland schools have 50% more percentage of dissatisfaction with their own English accent than MUST. which shows that students' attitudes toward CE accent can be positively affected by a multi-accented environment (Table 6 &7). However, this comparison is flawed. Firstly, the data were not collected in the same year, and secondly, the total sample size could not be consistent, thus a t-test could not be conducted to further corroborate. Therefore the analysis has reservations about the validity of this proof.

Table 6 Respondents' self-perception of English accents and their aspired accents

Evaluation	Response Count (%)	Accents to Aspire to	Response Count (%)
Not Satisfied at all	34 (11.0%)	Sound like a native speaker of English (NSE)	245 (79.3%)
Not Very Satisfies	186 (60.2%)	Keep my own English accent	33 (10.7%)
Uncertain	36 (11.6%)	I do not care about my English pronunciation	3 (0.9%)
Satisfied	49 (15.9%)	Others,please specify	28 (9.1%)
Very Satisfied	4 (1.3%)		

Table 7 Comparison of participants' attitudes towards self-perception of English accents in two schools

	Not satisfied at all（%）	Not very satisfied（%）	Uncertain（%）	Satisfied（%）	Very satisfied（%）
MUST	1.3	13.9	39.9	37.3	7.6
University in mainland China	11.0	60.2	11.6	15.9	1.3

4.2 Interview findings

Based on questionnaire results, researchers conducted in-depth interviews for some questions in the qualita-

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tive research. Similarly, the results suggest that: 1. Chinese students in MUST accepted others' China English accents and had a certain degree of tolerance for other English accents. Their tolerance for other English accents also reflected their attitude towards China English accent. 2. Interviewees acknowledged and accepted their own accent and were satisfied with their own accent, but more or less would express a preference for the NSE accent. 3. In terms of influence, all the participants admitted that the EFL environment of MUST or Macau affected their perception of accent.

4.3 Participants Perception and Preference of Accents

Like previously mentioned, participants tend to make their own accent to be more similar to the NSE accent. To trace the underlying reason, researchers found an interesting phenomenon through interviews: in the minds of the respondents, they were likely to classify different English accents into different classes. Even though the respondents were informed before and after the interview that there was no hierarchy among different accents in the academic field, they still build different levels of preference for specific English accents.

With the result that all respondents accept different accents, all respondents indicated that they would prefer to be close to the NSE accent when given the opportunity to do so. Then they put their national accent at the second place, which is followed by other countries' accents. Based on this, we explored why they had this accent preference. Two examples are included:

" Well... I always have such kind of feeling...that English comes from the U.K. So maybe British accent would be better. Other NSE accent is good as well, for they are also from English-speaking countries. They are all standard."(p2)

"Aya! Let me think for a little bit... I never really thought about it before. Let me see see.(His original words) How to say? I feel that it is the problem of the previous idea. Our teachers ask us to set the ultimate goal as becoming the native speaker. This notion lingers, and even now I don't care about my own accent, but I still have the desire to intimate the native accent. "(p5)

Related researches also confirm why Chinese students tend to prefer native speaker accents. According to Kung and Wang's research, the reality of English education in China is that high-circulation English teaching materials and high-pressure English exams are largely based on British and American English, or the combination of both. Therefore, for Chinese college students, they will prefer these two accents.

In addition, as to why the students thought the Chinese accent would be superior to other accents, there are some other supporting researches. In the Asian context, university students from Thailand and Japan tend to priories their own national accent beyond other accents. Our respondents also have such preference, one of the participants had strong desire to say:

Apart from NSE accents, I would definitely rank the CE accent higher. In fact I think compared to other countries our accent is better, not even significantly weaker than NSE. Because compared to other Asian countries, especially Indian, Japanese and Korean English, our pronunciation is very clear and explicit. We just lack of the English speaking tone, which is not bad. But for others, for example, Korean accents is totally a mess. I myself really like KPOP music very much. There is a group called Red Velvet. When their Korean American member pronounces their English name correctly on TV shows, the other Koreans would make

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fun of her. And induce her to speak in Korean accent as “laidebeibei”. Although this segment is really funny, when I watch Korean programs without subtitles, such Korean pronunciation really affects my understanding. Especially the Koreans really like to use English as an imported word, and I was really confused by what I heard.(p1)

This participant expressed a strong accent preference. Her resistance to other accents may be intensified. However, it still represents a consensus among the six respondents that preferring CE accent. The reasons for this preference were not given clear answers by all the respondents, only participant one give the affirmative disclosure that other accents were difficult to understand. This may because participants, as Chinese, are better able to understand our national accent in the Chinese environment. But it could also be due to other factors that my influence people’s perception . Further researches are needed in this area.

In addition, it should be noted that, although all interviewees prefer NSE accents, only participant 4 clearly stated that she had made practical efforts, while the other five all said that they wanted to imitate NSE, but would give up due to various objective factors.

4.4 The Effect of the ELF Context on CE Accent Acceptance

All the six participants reached the consistent endorsement that studying in MUST has positive impact on their perception of CE accent. Different majored participants were influenced by different variables. It could be concluded as three aspects, which is teacher, school staff and foreigners.

“I would like to say my teacher's attitude influences most, perhaps? Since I entered the college, they kept telling us “Don't be nervous about English presentations, I don't care about your accent and prouniciation. As long as I can understand, everything is fine.” What’s more, some of my teachers have strong accent either, it’s common among English majors, there is no need to be ashamed.” (p1)

“It has changed a little bit. Since I am a communication major myself, studying in MUST or a multicultural environment will further make me realize that the world is diverse. This dispelled my prejudice. Speaking of that, I feel it is easy to reach people in different countries, and then hear different accents in MUST. Also when learning the cross-cultural communication lesson our teacher will deliberately to teach culture in different countries, and especially this kind of language and culture in different countries, such as English variety in China. This is a combination of localization in different countries. I think I have received some systematic knowledge of this thing, which makes me more aware of linguistic diversity, which is an existing phenomenon and a very normal thing.” (p4)

The two participants mainly talked about their teachers' influence on them. The first participant even used a variety of facial expressions and body language during the interview to express her shock at their teacher's attitude. She also mentioned in a follow-up interview that this was against her previous learning concept in high school. Also, their teachers’ CE accents also cheered her up to be more confident of her own accent. About participant 4, she talked about how her teacher affect her by delivering cross-cultural communication lessons. The courses of MUST are more in line with international academic frontiers. At the same time, students can often communicate with foreigners in Macao, and the official teaching language is English. All of these enhanced her favorable impression to CE, and even enhanced her tolerance to other accents.

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As for the school staff factor, most respondents admitted to hearing a wide range of English accents on campus, with a predominance of Southeast Asian accents.

"I don't think the accent is a problem. You see those southeast Asian security guards on campus, they have multiple accents, but it doesn't affect their daily communication and understanding. They are still confident. I was a little self-conscious about my accent, Seeing them, I don't think I need to be."(p3)

This participant drew confidence from the Southeast Asian accent and felt that it was not a big problem as long as it did not interfere with understanding. Similar arguments can also be seen in the foreigner aspect:

"I have also been in touch with some foreigners. I found that when I communicate with them, people only care about whether they can understand or not. They don't care much about accent or something, at least they don't show anything in front of me. And some of them have different accent themselves."(p4)

The participant felt that many foreigners who actually did not care about accents as long as they could understand. At least among her foreign friends and teachers, none of them had ever made fun of her accent. And each of her friends has their own distinctive accent, so CE accent is actually not that important.

5 Discussion

Through these findings, it can be acknowledged that most participants hold a relatively positive perception of CE accent. ELF context did generate external influence on their perceptions. Especially through in-depth interviews, respondents hold an unanimous perspective of language using. They believed that language is an communication tool, understanding is the priority. As long as CE accent will not affect people's understanding, it will not be a big problem. Also, as mentioned before, even most people is having a NSE accent preference, few will make real imitating actions. This can be regarded as their satisfaction towards CE accent. Although their accent does have an improving space, that is not necessary. Such satisfaction mainly comes from the ELF learning context, which gives less motivation to adjust CE accents. It is also the importance of this study. Most of the research on CE accents has been conducted in mainland China. Our study is set up in Macau, an ELF learning environment, which will fill the research gap.

6 Implications and Conclusion

Although the study was conducted with a small group of students, it provides some empirical evidence about the attitudes in a special ELF context. Based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as well as theoretical support from relevant academic literature, the conclusion of this survey on Chinese students' attitudes toward CE accent at MUST is that the majority of Chinese students at MUST have positive or neutral attitudes toward CE accent. They agree that CE accent is a linguistic and cultural feature that should be respected. Also, they agree that there is no need to be embarrassed about either CE accent or other accents as long as the communication purpose of mutual understanding can be achieved. However, many of these samples showed a preference for native speaker pronunciation. Regarding whether their attitudes are influenced by the ELF environment at MUST, the result is positive, and the more positive the sample held as the grade level increased.

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This study achieves the following objectives. First, this study expands the breadth of research on CE accent and even China English to a certain extent, and fills the gap in the field of ELF environment and accent attitude. In addition, this study also explores the role of CE accent in the teaching process and calls for more attention to China English. Second, this topic opens up some discussions about the stereotypes of CE accent, which is enlightening for its de-stigmatization. Thirdly, based on the experiences gained from the questionnaires and interviews, this topic provides ideas for intercultural communicators to improve their cultural adaptability, i.e., to conduct intercultural communication with an open, tolerant and respectful cultural attitude, which helps people to improve their cultural adaptability and reduce unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts. Finally, it makes a contribution to the development and application of the discipline of intercultural communication, because it is necessary to study the attitudes of people from different cultural backgrounds toward communication tools in the context of the discipline's purpose to serve intercultural international and interpersonal communication.

Regarding the limitations of this topic, during the study, it was not possible to determine whether the appropriate questionnaire respondents were reached. Thus, the results of this study may have problems related to sample bias, i.e., the participating sample is not representative of the parent population under study. Secondly, the sample size collected in this study was not sufficient compared to the number of Chinese students in the group of MUST in the subject, so it is more difficult to prove the accuracy of the findings using limited data. Furthermore, the limited methods, tools, and technical conditions for data collection in this study limited the comprehensiveness of the results of the analysis. Finally, due to personal assertion bias and different personal factors, the researchers may have acted to bias the research process in order to support their own endorsed hypotheses.

Therefore, future research in this direction is recommended to make additions and corrections from the following three points. First, expand the sample size to reach a suitable sample and cover a wider geographic area, and demonstrate the significant relevance of the study content by having a sufficient sample size to represent the parent and sufficient data. Second, optimize the conditions of data collection, such as improving questionnaires, using professional interview transcription equipment, and standardizing data collection methods to avoid the influence of personal assertion bias of researchers on the reasonableness of the results. Third, consider more comprehensive theoretical support, such as looking for ideas from more related fields such as phonetics and psychology.

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