

Acknowledging the legitimacy of local practices: A study of communication challenges between Chinese and Australian university students

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English is an important medium for global communication but its use in different communities is inevitably shaped by their local languages and cultures. International education research shows that differences in English language practices could introduce difficulties and stress into intercultural communication between international and host students. This study examines how Chinese international students understand and deal with difficulties in communication with host students at an Australian university in relation to different English practices. Findings show that Chinese students tend to consider their own practices as less legitimate than those of Australians. Since intercultural communication is a process of negotiating shared meanings based on each other's "Local", linguistically and culturally, without acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their own local practices, Chinese students may find it difficult to utilize language and cultural resources to communicate with their Australian peers.

Keywords: English as a local practice; legitimate speaker; intercultural communication; international student

INTRODUCTION

Over half a million Chinese students travel abroad to study in countries like the US and Australia every year (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Ghazarian, 2014). Ideally, this should generate intercultural learning opportunities between them and students of the host country. However, almost unanimously, research shows that it is difficult for international students from China and other Asian countries to communicate with the locals (e.g., Henze & Zhu, 2012; Sovic, 2009; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wakefield, 2014).

Among other factors, the language gap between native and non-native English speakers is commonly seen as a barrier that hinders communication. Not only do non-native speakers find unfamiliar acronyms, slang, and speed difficult (Sovic, 2009), many also find talking to native speakers a tiring process and a major source of stress (Wakefield, 2014; Woodrow, 2006; Wright & Schartner, 2013). Since it is unrealistic to expect non-native speakers to achieve the fluency of a native speaker in the duration of their academic sojourn, it is timely to find solutions to communication difficulties based on their own experiences that suit their own needs.

In 2010, Chen proposed the concept of “Asia as method” for an Asian imaginary anchoring point that allows local knowledge and experiences to be mobilized and transformed for studies that suit local needs. Education researchers Zhang, Chan, and Kenway (2015) advocate for “translation” and “negotiation” between Western theories and Asian education contexts, “foreign” cultures and “Local” learning traditions. In other words, the West is no longer seen as “universal”; instead, it is itself one kind of Local. This dialectic process enables studies to effectively address Local issues in Asia without losing their connection with the Local theories of the West. In this way, a more inclusive and contextualized synthesis is created. Communication between Chinese and Australian students could probably be seen as a mimic of this dialectic process. While English originated from the West, its spread around the world suggests that practices of English would inevitably be Localised according to each community’s specific context.

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) define intercultural communication as “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system” (p. 24). When people from two different Locals speak, they ought to negotiate and translate each other’s Local to reach mutual understanding. However, is it always the case? The present study explores how Chinese students understand and deal with the Local as regards their own English and that of Australian students and how this, for some, might make talking to native speakers more stressful and difficult than it might otherwise be.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English as a local practice in intercultural communication

The ideologies of English as language have changed significantly among scholars and educators in the last few decades, manifested by the acknowledgment of local practices against the monolithic standard of “Western English”. To challenge the dichotomy between native and non-native speakers, Kachru (1992) proposes the three circles model: the Inner Circle represents the traditional bases of English; the Outer Circle includes countries like India and Malaysia where English has been institutionalized and used in daily life; and English in the Expanding Circle is not institutionalized and is used primarily as a foreign language. Predominantly examining the Outer Circle, Kachru and other World Englishes (WE) scholars argue for the inclusivity and pluricentricity of English study and advocate for the recognition and acceptance of national varieties of English which emerge from people’s daily lives in their local contexts (Bolton, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Findings by WE from intranational practices in Outer Circle countries, however, are relatively inadequate for addressing the needs of the Expanding Circle; in addition, problems occur in cross-national communication where two or more local varieties are involved. Since the early 2000s, these two issues have been taken up by English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) researchers who study English practices among people with different first languages, including native and non-native English speakers (Dewey & Jenkins, 2010). ELF researchers, on the one hand, try to identify core phonological and lexico-grammatical features of regional communication to safeguard mutual intelligibilities and, on the other hand, they account for an egalitarian model of English and international norms which are not from native speakers but through negotiation of speakers with different local practices (Jenkins, 2006).

Simultaneously, the cultural aspect of Local in English has been studied. For instance, Sharifian (2012) argues that English is used in intercultural communication for people to express and communicate their unique cultural conceptualization of the world, and differences between these conceptualizations could impede communication. To deal with differences, intercultural speakers might negotiate a third space for flexible norms and practices (Canagarajah, 2006b), or use semantically transparent languages to avoid misunderstanding (Kecskes, 2007).

Intercultural communication conducted in English between people who have a different first language, then, inevitably includes the negotiation of their specific Local, linguistically and culturally. Pennycook (2012a) defines the use of English as local language practice as a process “that is constantly being remade from the semiotic resources available to speakers, who are always embedded in contexts and who are always interacting with other speakers” (p. 152). Arguably, the Local, here, refers to the Local in each speaker’s English, as well as the context in which they are communicating. Instead of trying to meet a native-speaker’s standard, a resourceful speaker who “[has] available language resources and is good at shifting between styles, discourses and genres” (Pennycook, 2012b, p. 99) may be better able to meet the challenge of dynamic Locals.

This conceptualization frames a balanced relationship between Self and Other as well as local features and mutual intelligibility in communication. To achieve this balance in practice, however, requires collaboration between speakers whose “locals are regarded as equally legitimate in the first place”.

The legitimate Local(s) in intercultural communication

A well-known definition of “legitimate” comes from Bourdieu (1992), the meaning of which is considerably different from that often used in English studies. As summarized by Pennycook (2012b), legitimacy, according to Bourdieu, is a result of the misrecognition of power and is achieved by symbolic violence. To Bourdieu (1992), legitimate language practices are the practices of those who are dominant, while speakers lacking legitimate competence would be excluded or condemned to silence.

The term, legitimate speaker, in English studies, however, is likely to take its literal meaning of “people who have the right to speak” and link it with a sense of ownership and the recognition of local creativity in the social domain (Higgins, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2006; Zheng, 2013). However, Norton (2018) argues that “what and who is considered ‘legitimate’ must be understood with respect to a given ‘field’ or social context that is often characterised by unequal struggles for meaning, access and power” , (para. 1). In other words, while the definition itself is innocent, the process of defining “what and who are legitimate” could be controlled by the dominant and, therefore, turns into the practice of symbolic violence.

Under the Standard English ideology, native-speakers are (mis)recognized as the sole legitimate speakers who control the authenticity and authority of English (Widdowson, 1994). Alongside the development of WE, Outer Circle speakers’ legitimacy has been (rightly) acknowledged in their own context. The local variety of English passes through phases of not-recognized to co-existence to eventually recognized in the society (Kirkpatrick, 2014), at which time individuals see themselves as legitimate members with authority over the language (Higgins, 2003; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011).

In ELF, as long as they are communicatively effective and appropriate to lingua franca use, first language (L1) related creativity and innovations of second language (L2) speakers that differ from native-speaker norms are entitled to linguistic legitimacy (Dewey & Jenkins, 2010), which grants legitimacy to practices in all three circles. In a debate with Yoo (2014) on whether the Expanding Circle could “own” English, Ren (2014) points out that the ownership of English rests with the people who use, adapt, and change it for their own purpose, which is not restricted to the Inner and Outer Circle. In short, every effective speaker is entitled to own English and their local adaptation of the language ought to be seen as legitimate. Yet, it is not clear if all these local practices are equally legitimate in intercultural communication between people from different circles. To put it another way, would dissimilarities be seen as differences rooted in each other’s Local that require negotiation on the part of all parties involved, or does one side have a greater responsibility to accommodate the other?

Individuals from the Expanding Circle, for example, might not consider their own practices as equally legitimate to those of the Inner Circle. Firstly, their use of English in daily life is quite restricted compared to the other two circles (Kachru & Nelson, 2006a); therefore, they would normally not have the same level of proficiency (Ren, 2014) or, in the words of Pennycook (2012b), not have as many language resources. ELF advocates for the acknowledgement of legitimacy of “local creativity” instead of dismissing all such usage as error (Jenkins, 2006); but an objectively defined line between the two is difficult to draw. When differences occur, it may be difficult for Expanding Circle speakers to be confident they are demonstrating local creativity or exhibiting a problem caused by their lack of language resources. Moreover, the native-speaking model and its codified materials are widely spread in and out of the classroom but it is not the same for local varieties (Kachru, 1986; Kirkpatrick, 2006). As a result of this imbalanced exposure, English learners in the Expanding Circle tend to be prejudiced against their own practices, such as their accents (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011) and expressions, again being reluctant to accept their local variety as legitimate (Wang & Gao, 2015).

The legitimacy of their practices faces more challenges when individuals from the Expanding Circle become students at universities in Inner Circle countries. Canagarajah (2006a) and Pennycook (2012b) argue for the need to see language as a social practice and to measure proficiency not in native-speaker terms but by one’s ability to utilize language resources and communicative repertoire according to local conventions. Yet, the scenarios these authors refer to are likely to be native English speakers visiting Outer or Expanding Circle countries, in which case to emphasize the importance of local context helps encourage negotiation between them and non-native English speakers. For international students in Inner Circle countries, however, to emphasize the importance of local context is to emphasize native-speaker legitimacy, which would consequently further disadvantage their own practices. This might partly explain why international students often feel a lack of confidence when facing native speakers and find the conversation to be stressful and intimidating (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wakefield, 2014; Woodrow, 2006). To make the conversation less daunting, then, requires acknowledgement from both sides that international students are speakers as legitimate as their native peers.

Chinese students

Since the 1990s, English has been embraced across China and considered a vital element for success at both the individual and societal levels (Pan, 2015c). People believe that,

without efficient English, they would be denied opportunities in education and career development; English is also considered essential for the modernization and internationalization of China (Hu & Adamson, 2012; Pan, 2015b).

However, there are continuing concerns over China's English education. For instance, it is often regarded as examination-oriented, paying little attention to students' communicative competence (e.g., Fang, 2010). And it relies heavily on native-speaker norms—both linguistically and culturally. Although current policies show more awareness of the need to include cultural knowledge of home and other non-native countries in English education, the emphasis is still on English-speaking countries and policy seems to deliberately avoid acknowledging its local variety, “China English” (He & Li, 2009; Pan, 2015a). Classroom teaching and learning are dominated by American or British English and their cultures (Wen, 2012). While students prefer native-English accents and expressions (He & Li, 2009; Pan, 2015b; Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016; Wang & Gao, 2015; Xu, Wang, & Case, 2010), they lament they do not get to use English to talk about their local experiences and culture since these are seldom part of the English textbook (Liu, Zhang, & May, 2015; Wang, 2010). As a result, they tend to construct their L2 ideal self around native-speaker norms rather than norms of competent ELF users who utilize Local creativities (Zheng, 2013).

In recent years, the acceptability of “China English” has increased since it is considered to be useful for communication and is a show of Chinese identity (Edwards, 2017; Wang & Gao, 2015). For example, students found Chinese sayings useful for describing their overseas learning experience (Liu, 2017). Many of the sayings are distinctively Chinese (Kachru & Nelson, 2006b) and can only be expressed in English via loan translation (He & Li, 2009). Many teachers and students believe there is a need to include more features of “China English” and Chinese culture in their English-language textbooks (Liu & Fang, 2017; Pan, 2015b). Nonetheless, preference for native-speaker English prevails and learning English remains one main reason for Chinese students studying overseas (Counsell, 2011; Zhang, Sun, & Hagedorn, 2013). As mentioned previously, however, when conversing with native English speakers, and not recognizing the Local in practices of others and their own, it can be difficult for Chinese students to maintain an equal status with a legitimate speaker.

When intercultural communication occurs in the Expanding Circle, the “English as a local practice” ideology reduces the dominance of native-speaker norms and grants legitimacy to the practices of local speakers in the local context. However, when communication happens in the Inner Circle, the dominance of the native norms combines with preference for the local context. This, then, requires Expanding Circle speakers to develop different strategies to maintain a balanced conversation. Based on Chinese international students' communication experiences with Australian students at an Australian university, this paper explores how students understand and deal with the linguistic and cultural Local of English in this Inner Circle context.

METHODS

This paper is part of a larger research project carried out by the authors on what hinders intercultural communication between Chinese and Australian students at an Australian university. The project uses a mixed-methods approach, which began with a quantitative component to enhance the generalizability and validity of the qualitative study by obtaining a more representative sample and providing a context for the qualitative data

(Hesse-Biber, Rodriguez, & Frost, 2016). Data were gathered via an online survey (n=124) and a series of focus groups (N=16).

A multiple-choice survey was administered online via the Qualtric platform. A link to the survey was sent to students through the newsletters of student associations. In the meantime, students on the two main campuses of the university were randomly invited to take part in the study. In total, 124 students completed the survey (49% Chinese, 51% Australian; 41% male, 58% female, 1% rather not say). From the online survey, nine Chinese (3 males, 6 females) and seven Australians (3 males, 4 females) were recruited to participate in focus groups. Of the five focus group discussions held, two were mixed Chinese and Australian participants and three were co-national groups of participants. Three (the 2 mixed and one co-national) were conducted in English while the other two co-national were in a mix of Chinese and English.

Data were drawn from both Chinese and Australian participants, but, since Chinese students are the main focus of this paper, the analysis here is mainly about the experiences and perceived difficulties of the former. For the survey, statistics from Chinese and those from Australian students were summarized respectively then juxtaposed in tables or charts. For focus groups, transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and recurring themes such as “rely on Australian norms” and “acknowledgement of local legitimacy” were identified. Eventually, it became clear that two different types of understanding and possession of Local in English linked closely to two different types of intercultural communication experiences. They are presented respectively in the next section after an overall analysis of differences and difficulties identified in Chinese-Australian communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The signs of Local: Differences and difficulties in intercultural communication

The majority of Chinese and Australian survey participants considered they were, at least, somewhat different in accents and choices of words when speaking English (see Tables 1 and 2). In focus group interviews, Chinese students said they had a recognizable non-native accent, were not familiar with Australian slang and had a rather limited vocabulary compared to Australians. Australian participants noticed differences in pronunciation and intonation, as well as the choice of filling words in a phrase and even keywords in a sentence. When it comes to cultural knowledge, the majority of both Chinese and Australians were aware their understanding of their own and each other’s country could be different.

Table 1: Perceived differences in the use of English – Chinese students (n=61)

	No different	Slightly different	Somewhat different	Different	Very different
Our accents	3.3%	27.9%	36.1%	23.0%	9.8%
Our choices of words	3.3%	11.5%	39.3%	31.1%	14.8%
What we know about China	1.6%	14.8%	36.1%	37.7%	9.8%
What we know about Australia	1.6%	23.0%	47.5%	23.0%	4.9%

Table 2: Perceived differences in the use of English – Australian students (n=63)

	No different	Slightly different	Somewhat different	Different	Very different
Our accents	11.1%	15.9%	30.2%	28.6%	14.3%
Our choices of words	6.4%	30.2%	42.9%	17.5%	3.2%
What we know about China	6.4%	17.5%	17.5%	34.9%	23.8%
What we know about Australia	9.5%	36.5%	33.3%	14.3%	6.4%

Around 60% of Chinese survey participants reported that they were confident or very confident in English listening but only 43% said the same for their speaking. Despite their varied proficiency, the phrase “my English is not good” was mentioned by eight out of nine Chinese focus group participants. To them, one reason to talk to Australians is that it helps them improve their English, which would then benefit their study and future career.

A significant portion of participants encountered difficulties in intercultural communication. Around 40% of the Chinese survey participants found communication with Australians was likely to be difficult and stressful, and a similar percentage of Australians reported that conversation with Chinese was likely to be difficult and confusing. According to focus group participants, many problems stemmed from comprehension difficulties and a lack of things to talk about.

Comprehension issues were often clearly related to language differences. For instance, Peta (Australian, female) described an unsuccessful conversation with two Chinese students who asked for directions: “I just could not comprehend what that [key]word was, and they could not comprehend what the Australian way of saying it was”. But differences in cultural knowledge also occurred as a barrier. For example, Chinese students often felt lost when the name of a suburb or a person was brought up in a conversation, in contrast to the Australians who clearly understood them as “far away” or “a famous athlete/news anchor”.

For survey and focus group participants alike, the most common theme was the university. By comparison, only around one third as many would talk about aspects of life outside university such as “jobs”, “Chinese/Australian news” or “Chinese/Australian customs”. This, as observed by Michael (Australian, male), “can be restrictive and make it hard to get the conversation to flow”. Some Australians felt that talking about shared experiences was a safer routine compared to topics around unfamiliar cultures. For Chinese, the lack of knowledge made talking about Australian events challenging. Vivian (Chinese, female) reflected on her confusion over the comment “I am a Collingwood fan”, that “if you know nothing about it [a team in the Australian Football League (AFL)], you just don’t know what to say”. To talk about Chinese customs and culture, on the other hand, could lead to the struggle of turning unique Chinese expressions into English that Australians could understand. Liqiu (Chinese, female) once tried to explain Chinese cooking to an Australian but soon realized, from cooking techniques to utensils and spices, there seemed not to be a specific English word for any of them: “it was so difficult for both us, so we soon gave up”.

Largely aligned with existing research (e.g., Henze & Zhu, 2012; Holmes, 2005; Sovic, 2009; Wright & Schartner, 2013), students were aware of their differences in language practices and cultural knowledge. Things, such as unfamiliar expressions and the lack of background knowledge does make communication rather stressful and tiring. The problem is how these challenges should be interpreted and dealt with. Firstly, unique practices of Chinese and Australian English (Burrige, 2010; He & Li, 2009) should be treated as equally legitimate from the perspective of WE and ELF (Dewey & Jenkins, 2010; Kachru, 1992). Understanding issues, according to Sharifian (2012), could be caused by differences in cultural conceptualizations. As a cultural schema, “Collingwood” could evoke AFL knowledge among Australians who are familiar with Australian football but would not do the same for Chinese who do not share the culture. Similarly, in the cooking discussion, difficulties occurred partly because students were not familiar with each other’s local practices. Therefore, it is essential for both sides to negotiate and utilize available language resources to enhance mutual intelligibility (Canagarajah, 2006a; Pennycook, 2012a).

Yet, it seems to be common for Chinese students to hold the idea that “Australian students speak the right English”. It might be true to a certain point since Chinese simply do not use English as much as Australians do in daily life (Kachru & Nelson, 2006a). On the other hand, it might also be due to their preference for native-speaker norms (Pan, 2015b; Ren et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2010) and perceived deficits of English education in China (Fang, 2010; He & Li, 2009). Such beliefs could prevent students from rightly acknowledging the legitimacy of their own local practices, instead, holding themselves solely responsible for difficult intercultural communication.

“My English is not good”: The missing Local

As already noted, some Chinese students saw themselves as the cause of difficulties in intercultural communication. Several participants were concerned that words they used were “weird”. Qing (Chinese, female) remembered one exchange about swimming that made her feel slightly embarrassed:

So, I told him (the Australian student) that I could swim, but I can’t do it well because my movement is not standardized. He’s like: “um, I understand what you try to say, but, it’s kind of strange when you say it that way”.

Some students considered their English as “weird” because Australian students “would use a different word” or “looked confused”. Although none of the Chinese participants felt any unfriendly intention from their Australian peers, the sense of not knowing the common way of saying something affected their willingness to speak.

At the same time, a few Chinese believed that they should take responsibility because difficulties occurring in their communication with native speakers would not occur in communication among native speakers themselves. As Celine (Chinese, female) put it:

I think it is my responsibility, and it is due to problems of my accent that they don’t understand me. Usually locals do not have problems communicating with each other, but when I say something they might need to think for a while, repeat the word and say, “oh that’s what you mean”. [translated from Chinese]

Similarly, at least three participants said they spoke rather slowly compared to Australians. Not wanting to keep them waiting, these Chinese students would keep their own answers short, or just remain quiet.

Acknowledging the legitimacy of local practices

Some had even more negative interpretations for difficulties they experienced. Natalie (Chinese, female) said:

I think most of the time I don't understand them maybe because I am not familiar with Australian culture or my English is terrible? There are some things I just don't know about it, and when they talk about it to me in English, I just assume that I don't understand because my English is not good.

In fact, Natalie did the whole focus group interview in English, and her competent expression (transcribed verbatim above) is strong counter-evidence against her own belief.

In scenarios described here and the previous sub-section, Local is missing for Chinese students in three ways: firstly, the legitimacy of their own local practices has not been properly acknowledged; secondly, it did not occur to them that instead of having low English proficiency they might just be unfamiliar with Australian local practices; and thirdly, language resources for expressions of their own cultural Local seem not to be sufficient.

Higgins (2003) noticed that Outer Circle speakers referred to their own norms for deciding if a sentence is acceptable. By contrast, Chinese students in this study seemed to rely more on Australian norms. In Qing's story, "my movement is not standardized" is an adaptation of the Chinese phrase "我的动作不标准" used to describe swimming strokes. Although in native-speaker terms the equivalence might be "my style is wrong" or "my stroke is bad," the Australian student clearly had no problem understanding Qing. Following the ELF ideology, being able to achieve mutual intelligibility means the phrase should be seen as legitimate (Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, the difference is arguably not a language issue but an example of different cultural metaphors (Sharifian, 2012) since the criteria for measurement are different (correctness versus efficiency). However, instead of upholding its legitimacy, Qing agreed with the Australian student that it is "strange".

While Celine and Natalie held themselves responsible for comprehension difficulties occurring in communication, they evaluated their own performance against the Australian standard. Instead of trying to negotiate a third space for flexible norms and practices (Canagarajah, 2006b), they showed a strong tendency to accommodate Australian practices and blamed themselves for not being able to do so. They seemed to assume that one should understand Australian English and having comprehension issues meant that their English was "not good". Getting used to relying on native norms (Wang & Gao, 2015; Xu et al., 2010) and constructing their L2 ideal self around these norms (Zheng, 2013) make them place the legitimacy of Australian practices over their own practices, without realizing that difficulties might not be caused by their lack of proficiency but by differences between local varieties and cultural knowledge.

Both Widdowson (1994) and Ren (2014) argue that to own a language is to be able to turn it to one's advantage, adapt and change it for one's own purpose. The struggle experienced by Liqiu shows that she had not truly owned English since it was difficult for her to utilize English to express her own cultural Local. This might be caused by the lack of opportunity for her to talk about her own life and culture in the English classroom (Liu et al., 2015; Wang, 2010).

Without their local practices rightly acknowledged, difficulties caused by unfamiliar Australian local practices properly addressed, and capacity of expressing their local culture sufficiently built, it might not be a surprise that a significant number of Chinese

survey participants found communication with Australian students difficult and stressful. Based on focus group interviews, some would blame themselves and take their voice out from a conversation. As pointed out by Norton (2018), the process of defining “legitimate” often happens in a social context characterized by unequal struggles for meaning, access and power. In a social context where Australian English was preferred by both Chinese and Australian speakers, Chinese students were disadvantaged in the struggles. The misrecognition of the power of native-speaker English made some of them feel like being excluded or condemned to silence (Bourdieu, 1992). While WE and ELF scholars have been advocating a more equal relationship between native and non-native speakers, greater effort might be required to spread the advocacy across English classrooms and university campuses.

A resourceful speaker: Negotiating between Locals

To acknowledge the Chinese Local is not to refuse practicing English in an Australian context. On the contrary, being able to keep their Local empowers Chinese students to explore the Australian Local further, since talking to Australians become easier and more enjoyable. Vivian (Chinese, female), stopped feeling nervous talking to Australians when she realized that: “I don’t have to know everything, it’s not like my English not good enough that’s why I don’t know how to answer; it’s just because I don’t know, I don’t know that in Chinese as well.”

Students like Lucas (Chinese, male) went even further by making conversation with Australians the platform for cultural exchange. To him, what makes intercultural communication difficult is our lack of competence to compare, analyse, and, eventually, synthesize two different cultures. Noticing that Australians love AFL as much as Chinese love soccer, Lucas liked to discuss the similarities and differences between the two sports:

My ultimate target is to convey my messages to them, and theirs to me. Even though it is a complicated process, we need to use dictionaries, to try different words, and to repeat several times, when we eventually make it the whole thing would feel like a rewarding experience of conquering challenges. [Translated from Chinese]

Just like for Lucas it is “we” instead of “I” who need to conquer challenges. Acknowledgement and negotiation require effort from both sides. Australian students’ responses play an important role in keeping both Locals in communication. Celine (Chinese, female) described a scene to explain why she always feels comfortable and confident to talk to her Australian friend, Jasmine:

She would always slow down, try her best to explain everything to me. And she’s curious about my life back in China. Once we were talking about the similarities between an Australian dance and a Chinese dance but felt difficult to explain to each other. Then Jasmine said, “wait a second, let me grab my laptop and show you the picture”, which made me feel that she was really into that conversation. [Translated from Chinese]

To be able to differentiate one’s English proficiency from one’s knowledge of the host culture is arguably a crucial step for international students in Inner Circle countries. Realizing that she does not need to take responsibility for not knowing the part of Australian Local in a conversation helps Vivian recognize herself as a legitimate speaker and subsequently reduces her anxiety, which could significantly affect her performance (Woodrow, 2006).

As for Lucas, English is a real Local practice since he becomes a resourceful speaker who utilizes his language resources and communicative repertoire to convey his Local to Australians in a way that is effective and appropriate in the Australian context (Pennycook, 2012b). And what Jasmine did was to acknowledge the legitimacy of Celine's Local, including her talking style and the content she talked about, by demonstrating her interests and willingness to put an equal amount of effort into making the communication work. The scene between them shows that good intercultural communication requires interlocutors to work collaboratively to ensure each other's Local is properly acknowledged and understood.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we look into how Chinese students understand and deal with language difficulties occurring when communicating with Australian students. By focusing on their (lack of) awareness regarding the legitimacy of "local" practices, we hope to develop insight into how intercultural communication between native and non-native English speakers could be improved.

A significant percentage of Chinese and Australian participants did find intercultural communication difficult. It might not be easy to eliminate such difficulties since they are rooted in barriers caused by language and cultural differences. To achieve better mutual understanding, both parties should negotiate for shared meanings by utilizing their language resources, and to do so requires them to treat each other as equally legitimate speakers.

While in the field of English studies there is a clear trend of recognizing different English varieties as equally legitimate, the ideology of standard English still seems to be popular in and out of the English classroom. Both Chinese and Australian participants were likely to consider Australian English to be more legitimate than Chinese English. For some Chinese students, this could make conversations with Australians even more difficult. In Bourdieusian terms, the misrecognition of sole legitimacy in native English practices turned equal negotiation into unequal struggles, with these Chinese students becoming dominated by symbolic violence.

To facilitate intercultural communication, then, requires both Chinese and Australian students to recognize the legitimacy of each other's local practices, and to demonstrate it by making efforts together to create shared meanings. Chinese students need to embrace and develop their own Local, but Australian students also need to embrace the Local of others. Following a similar logic, one may argue that it is the same for "Asia as method" proposed by Chen, since "translation" and "negotiation" between the West and the Asia always require efforts from both ends.

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