

University Students' Attitudes towards ELF

Subjects: **Linguistics**

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Macao university students' attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) were investigated. Macao maintains a diverse multilingual society, with speakers from several cultures converging into one city for work and travel. Traditionally, the common languages of communication have been Chinese and Portuguese, due to Macao's historical connection with both mainland China and Portugal. However, with the development of tourism and economy, English has become a lingua franca in the city.

ELF

Macao

attitudes

English majors

intercultural communication experience

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English is no longer exclusively used by traditional English speaking countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom ^[1]. Nowadays, the number of English users in the expanding circle is much larger than that in the inner circle, as evidenced by the majority of English-communication users being non-native speakers ^[2]. Specifically, Asia is considered a critical region for the development of English as a lingua franca (ELF) ^{[3][4]}, and research on ELF in the context of Asia has been emerging in recent years ^{[5][6]}.

Macao, located in East Asia, is a multilingual sustainable society, which was once the Portuguese colony, with Portuguese as the official language. After the handover to mainland China in 1999, the Chinese government provided a great deal of support for the development of Macao. With the development of globalization and economy, especially the casino and tourism industries, and growing international investment coming to Macao, English is becoming increasingly important in this society in many aspects of life. In addition, the Macao government calls for sustainable development ^[7], which requires development in all aspects of the economy, leading to the emphasis on the importance of English. In fact, English is regarded as the de facto official language ^[8], whereas Portuguese is only used in the judicial system. Moreover, its importance is emphasized in the educational field. First, English is a subject taught from kindergarten to high school ^{[9][10]}, indicating that English is crucial for Macao students, both for their academic achievements and future career development. Second, in tertiary education, most institutions choose English as the medium of instruction ^{[11][12]}, which is treated as an essential aspect of internationalization ^[9]. Third, universities are recruiting professors from English speaking countries to promote internationalization to attract potential students ^{[9][10]}. English is used as the main lingua franca for Macao people to communicate with people from the rest of the world. For example, English is one of the languages spoken in the public transportation system (e.g., the bus) in Macao, and even the government website has its English version. In local tertiary institutions (e.g., the University of Macau), the language used for

communication between teachers and students is English. Besides, even many citizens in Macao use English to communicate within government departments, or for business purposes.

Previous studies have investigated language issues in this multilingual sustainable society, especially the importance of English. Research [9][12] showed that Macao students' attitudes towards English became more positive after the handover, and they had a strong desire to enhance their English proficiency. Some studies claimed that English was becoming increasingly important [11][13].

However, these studies were undertaken more than a decade ago, and Macao society has changed tremendously after the handover. Also, previous studies mainly focused on the importance of English [8][9], whereas research on ELF in Macao is rare. In the context of globalization and the emergence of ELF, the tertiary students' attitudes towards ELF in Macao are still unknown. Notably, studies indicated that current English teaching did not cater to English use today [14]. From the perspective of ELF, fostering students' communication ability is important, and the current English teaching practices should fulfill students' real needs of improving their communication skills [15]. Some studies [5][6] revealed that in Hong Kong, a similar society to Macao, people's attitudes towards ELF were conservative, and this might imply that Macao people's attitudes are also native-speaker oriented. It is critical for researchers to explore these issues to provide implications for English teaching in Macao, especially for tertiary education. In short, it is of great importance to investigate people's attitudes towards ELF in this multilingual society in the context of globalization and rapid economic development, and thus, to provide implications for English teaching practitioners and policy makers to improve Macao students' English communication skills. In addition, previous studies indicated that the factors influencing people's ELF attitudes included: academic interest (such as majors and individual English learning goals caused by majors) [16][17]; English education experience caused by academic background [18]; and intercultural communication experience [19]. Current Macao university students receive the same education in Macao, but they may come from different regions and have different academic interest and different intercultural communication experience. In light of this, Macao is a good place to investigate the factors influencing people's attitudes towards ELF.

2. Attitudes towards ELF

ELF refers to any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option [20]. In the past decade, in the context of globalization, research on ELF has emerged [21], and a number of studies have been undertaken in this field [22][23]. One of the divers of this line of research is that the number of non-native speakers has surpassed that of native speakers, and most studies have been undertaken in the expanding circle [24]. Nowadays, Asia is considered one of the important regions for the development of English as a lingua franca [3][4]. The reality of English use in the 21st century is that there are varieties of English. All varieties of English enjoy equal status [25][26]. However, teaching materials are still based on native English norms, and due to this, the current English language teaching practices may not fulfil the realistic needs of English learners from the perspective of ELF [27]. Some studies investigated the effects of courses that introduce ELF on students' attitudes towards ELF, and showed that these kinds of courses were effective [24][28]. These courses introducing ELF main concepts and aiming at raising students' awareness of ELF

were integrated into English learning and teaching contexts. Studies revealed that in many parts of the world, including Asia, attitudes towards ELF are native-speaker oriented ^{[29][30]}, and people still prefer native English as the norms. Despite the negative attitudes towards ELF existing in the Asian context, there are still many positive attitudes in this expanding circle ^{[5][31]}. For example, Sung ^[32] investigated 30 local Hong Kong undergraduate students' attitudes towards ELF, and found that Hong Kong university students' attitudes towards ELF were very complicated. Specifically, some people held positive attitudes, some negative, whereas others held an ambivalent attitude. Their attitudes towards ELF depended on different contexts and scenarios, such as the person they were talking to, in class or after class.

In the context of Macao, to researchers knowledge, there is no study of students' attitudes towards ELF. In light of the increasing importance of English in this society and the fact that English has a status as lingua franca, as mentioned above, it is of important to have a clear understanding of their attitudes in order to improve English teaching in Macao.

3. Factors Affecting Attitudes towards ELF

Based on previous studies in other societies, there are a variety of factors that may play a role in affecting people's ELF attitudes, such as (a) academic interest (e.g., major), which may cause different English learning goals or motivation for different individuals ^{[16][17]}; (b) academic background, which may cause different English education experience ^[18]; (c) intercultural communication experience ^[19]. Therefore, it is critically important to take those factors into consideration when investigating students' attitudes towards ELF. In the following section, these factors were reviewed in detail.

3.1. Academic Interest

Studies showed that students from different majors might have different attitudes towards ELF ^[17]. For example, English majors and English minors may have different attitudes. First, due to the competitiveness of the job market, it is fiercely competitive to get a teaching position for English majors after graduation. If a pre-service English teacher has native-like pronunciation, she/he is supposed to have higher English proficiency, and thus, has advantages in job-hunting ^[17]. The situation is the same with English majors who aim to get other jobs. In contrast, for English minors, students primarily consider English a tool for intercultural communication, and they are aware that they can use English in other contexts, rather than academic achievement ^[33]. Hence, they are more open to English learning ^[34]. They do not think they need to speak standard English and have a native-like accent. In other words, it is acceptable to have L1 accent, provided it does not affect intercultural communication.

3.2. Academic Background

Different English learning experiences and different educational systems caused by academic background can also affect people's attitudes towards ELF ^[19]. Students from mainland China and those from local Macao were educated in different English education systems and had different English learning experiences, which may lead to

their different attitudes towards ELF. First, in mainland China, English is one of the three most important subjects from elementary to secondary schools. After China joined the WTO, the Chinese government stressed the importance of English learning, and subsequently, English became a mandatory subject from Grade Three. To a large extent, for most mainland Chinese students, English learning goals are examination oriented, leading to the examination-based syllabus [35]. English academic achievement is very important for these students. In contrast, the motivation of Macao students' learning English is not just to pass exams, but is also driven by the benefits in relation to career development [11]. Similarly, Botha [13] reported that compared with mainland Chinese students, local Macao students emphasized the instrumental value of English, because they believed that advanced English ability was very important for communication in the workplace after graduation. Second, English teaching in mainland China is also stricter than in the other areas of Greater China [18][36]. Compared with other areas (e.g., Macao), English teaching in mainland China is more native-speaker oriented, suggesting that mainland Chinese students preferred standard English varieties. Ren, Chen, and Lin [18] implies that in areas other than mainland China, including Macao, the English teaching tends to accept English varieties. In another study by Wang [19], Chinese university students and teachers' attitudes towards China English were explored. Although most participants reportedly understood expressions with China English features (e.g., "people mountain people sea"), only one third would accept these expressions, and most of them were reluctant to accept China English as the study norms. These studies indicated that native-speaker norms still dominate the mainland China context. Third, because Macao is an international city, local Macao students have more opportunities to use English as a communication tool [8], and local Macao students are more likely to encounter ELF than mainland Chinese students.

3.3. Intercultural Communication Experience

Jenkins [22] and Garrett [37] claimed that personal experience provided a major source for attitude formation. Previous studies showed that the experience of intercultural communication could affect one's attitudes towards ELF [38]. For example, Wang [19] reported that teachers held more positive attitudes towards expressions with China English features than students. The author argued that teachers had more experiences in intercultural communication, and they were aware that there are varieties of English. Therefore, they could accept other English accents. Sung [32] also pointed out that participants with very limited ELF communication experience might be more likely to attach the importance of "standard" English to ensure intelligibility, and thus, might hold more conservative attitudes towards ELF. In another instance, Wang [39] stressed the importance of personal intercultural experience in shaping a person's attitudes towards ELF, i.e., if the experience of intercultural communication is smooth and successful in most cases, people will be more likely to hold a positive attitude towards ELF. On the contrary, if the communication is negative, people's attitudes towards ELF may become negative or conservative. These findings indicate that students who have overseas intercultural communication experience may hold more positive attitudes toward ELF, because these students have more opportunities of intercultural communication by using English, whereas those who do not have any overseas intercultural communication experience may be more native-speaker oriented.

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