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# Chinese pre-service English teachers' beliefs about English as an international language (EIL)

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## ABSTRACT

The global expansion of English has raised a call for English-language teachers around the world to frame English as an international language (EIL). This is especially true in rapidly developing contexts such as China, where teachers are expected to prepare learners to engage effectively in intercultural interactions. As such, the present study sought to investigate pre-service English teachers' beliefs about EIL and the impact of teacher education on informing these beliefs. Data were gathered from an online EIL perceptions questionnaire delivered to 75 Chinese pre-service English teachers who, at the time, were studying for an MA TESOL degree in the UK. Follow-up, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants. The findings indicate that although the participants generally held positive beliefs about EIL, and the MA programme had played a critical role in favourably influencing these beliefs, they were misaligned with the participants' imagined implementation in their future teaching practices. This misalignment suggests that the transition from theory to practice is often complex and is likely an issue that many teachers in similar situations experience. Thus, suggestions for future research are proposed alongside practical ideas for educators regarding how to integrate EIL into their teaching.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

English as an international language; world Englishes; global Englishes; theory practice divide; teacher beliefs; native speaker norms

## Introduction

With English being used as the primary language for global communication, changes in how English teachers perceive and teach the language have accompanied a global shift toward teaching English as an international language (EIL) (Rose 2021). In contrast to the teaching of other languages, the international use of English makes teaching and learning it unique. Responding to this uniqueness requires re-evaluating traditional English-language teaching (ELT) practices (Matsuda 2017; McKay 2002). Various researchers have highlighted the need to adopt teaching practices that match the reality of the English language in the twenty-first century (e.g. Galloway and Rose 2015; McKay 2002; Sharifian 2009). Consequently, a great demand for EIL and EIL-related pedagogy in teacher education has emerged. It aims to inform English teachers about what teaching EIL entails and provides pedagogical recommendations on how to prepare students for intercultural interactions (Rose and Galloway 2019; Matsuda 2017).

The shift from traditional ELT approaches towards adopting more EIL-oriented approaches has motivated many researchers to explore teachers' beliefs about the concept since beliefs are often

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linked with teaching practices (Lee, Lee, and Drajati 2019). As a result, an increasing amount of research has been conducted, especially in countries where English is not the first/primary language (L1). This work has predominantly focused on in-service teachers' beliefs (e.g. Nguyen 2017; Tajeddin, Atai, and Pashmforoosh 2020; Vodopija-Krstanovic and Marinac 2019), and, to a lesser extent, pre-service teachers' beliefs (e.g. Coskun 2011; Lee, Lee, and Drajati 2019; Ubaidillah 2018). Nevertheless, studies with the growing number of Chinese pre-service English-language teachers are rare, which is particularly problematic given the proclivity of Chinese students and teachers toward native-speakerism (Fang 2018).

Moreover, little is known about the role TESOL teacher education plays in shaping pre-service teachers' beliefs about EIL. This is important to rectify, since pre-service teachers represent an incoming group of practitioners new to the profession. In this early stage of their career, it is likely that their practice will be integrally linked with the beliefs they develop in their initial teacher education. This positions pre-service teachers as prime stakeholders in making English teaching and learning more inclusive and representative of the way the language is used globally. Thus, this study explored the beliefs of Chinese pre-service English teachers who, at the time, were studying for an MA TESOL degree in the UK. Additionally, it illustrates how the degree had potentially informed their beliefs.

## Literature review

### *English as an International Language (EIL)*

The use of English as a medium of international communication has prompted an increasing number of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to learn and use the language themselves (Graddol 1997). Doing so allows them to communicate effectively with users of other languages who also share English as a common language (Kirkpatrick 2010). As a result, many applied linguists have challenged conventional models of English and have proposed alternative models to conceptualise the global status of English today (e.g. Kachru 1985; Modiano 1999; Rose and Galloway 2019). Such attempts to explicate the use of English on a global scale served as the foundation for new research areas in applied linguistics, including World Englishes (WE), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as an International Language (EIL), and Global Englishes (GE). Although these terms are often used interchangeably, McKay (2018) and Friedrich and Matsuda (2010) argue that they differ with respect to their assumptions and foci. For the current study, EIL will be adopted. We use EIL as a general term to describe the use of the language for intercultural communication in the globalised world. This is inspired by Matsuda's (2017: xiii) definition suggesting that:

the current use of EIL is best conceptualized not as one specific variety of international English but rather as a function that English performs in international, multilingual contexts, to which each speaker brings a variety of English that they are most familiar with, along with their own cultural frame of reference, and employs various strategies to communicate effectively.

Further to this view of EIL is discourse surrounding the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers—namely, that such terms, do not accurately reflect the reality of the language and its speakers in the twenty-first century. Instead, it suggests that there is a standardised variety of English that all speakers should strive to imitate (Galloway and Rose 2015; Jenkins 2009; Kachru 1985; Modiano 1999; Matsuda 2012; McKay 2002). In light of this, Dewaele's (2018) terms, L1/LX user, will be adopted in this study—whenever possible—to avoid the outdated labels of 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker', which may connote negative ideological undertones and are rich in ambiguity (see also Thomas and Osment 2020). The term 'L1 users' will be used to describe individuals who have acquired English before the age of three and may have learnt other additional languages, while the term 'LX users' will be used to refer to individuals who have learnt English after the age of three as a second/foreign language and have acquired other languages, too, including their L1 (Dewaele 2018).

### **English teachers' beliefs about EIL**

During the last decade, there has been a surge in research on LX English teachers' beliefs about EIL. Teachers' beliefs are deemed an indicator of their teaching practices and willingness to incorporate EIL-related activities in their classes (Bayyurt and Sifakis 2015). Moreover, teachers who hold positive beliefs are more likely to adopt EIL practices than those who have neutral or negative beliefs (Lee 2018; Tanghe 2014).

Although English has for some time been recognised as 'the' international language (Holliday 2005; McKay 2002), research consistently suggests that LX English teachers around the world are still inclined to prefer standardised 'native' English varieties and tend to hold deficit views towards other varieties (Seargeant 2016). For instance, in a recent study conducted by Tajeddin, Atai, and Pashmforoosh (2020) investigating the beliefs of 210 Iranian English teachers, the researchers found that even though the teachers acknowledged the ownership of English by both L1 and LX users and accepted the existence of other English varieties (if they are intelligible), the participants still preferred to implement 'native' varieties in their classrooms. Similar results were also observed in Vodopija-Krstanovic and Marinac's (2019) study, in which the attitudes of 53 Croatian English teachers towards EIL were explored. The results showed that while the participants were receptive to the notion of EIL, when it came to ELT, they primarily depended on L1-user models in their classes. The findings of these studies indicate that although English teachers have started to become more aware of the concept of EIL, many still hesitate to integrate EIL-related practices in their teaching.

Furthermore, research findings consistently indicate that the ideology of native-speakerism is present. Native-speakerism is the term that Holiday (2006) used to describe the perception that L1 English teachers 'represent a "Western culture" from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology' (365). It often influences accent preferences, leading to negative attitudes towards other English varieties. For example, Sifakis and Sougari's (2005) study examining the beliefs of 421 Greek state-school teachers regarding ELT revealed that most of the participants regarded L1 users as the 'rightful owners of the English' and promoted the adoption of a 'native-like' accent (481). These views are also echoed in Ubaidillah's (2018) study in Indonesia, where 50 pre-service English teachers' beliefs regarding EIL were examined; the findings showed that most of the respondents considered L1 English teachers as the 'providers of better English' and favoured them in the teaching of speaking and pronunciation classes (1188). Similarly, in Coskun's (2011) study exploring 47 Turkish prospective English teachers' attitudes towards EIL, the results revealed that most of the participants perceived L1 English speakers' accents as the ideal pedagogical model. Therefore, if EIL is to be taken seriously as an *applicable* paradigm for ELT, incorporating EIL pedagogy in teacher education is essential.

### **The ELT context in China**

The English language has a long history in China, dating back to the early seventeenth century when it was predominantly employed by select groups of Chinese people and foreign traders (Bolton 2003). However, it was not until the late 1970s that English started to gain prominence with China's reform and opening policy in which English started to be viewed as a tool for the modernisation and internationalisation of the country (Fang, Hu, and Jenkins 2017; Lam 2002). Although English is regarded as a foreign language in China from the WE perspective, the language plays a critical role in people's lives as it is linked with better career opportunities and economic affluence (Bolton and Graddol 2012). Furthermore, owing to globalisation, Chinese development in areas such as business, technology, and tourism, and the importance of learning English in the Chinese educational system, the number of people learning/using English in China has surpassed 400 million (Wei and Su 2015). This gives China the largest population of English learners/users in the world, where English is a compulsory subject in Chinese schools from Grade 3 (primary), and it

is also one of three compulsory subjects for the university entrance exams (*Gaokao*) (Haidar and Fang 2019).

Despite the growing importance of English in China—often for communication with other LX users—studies show that native-speakerism is deeply ingrained in Chinese ELT, with standardised English varieties and L1 English teachers being preferred by many students and teachers (Fang 2018; He and Zhang 2010; Wang 2015). For example, He and Zhang (2010) explored the beliefs of 984 university students and their teachers at four universities in different parts of China. The authors found that while the learners and teachers accepted the existence of *China English*, ‘native speaker’-based norms were still the most desirable in the universities’ English classrooms. Similar findings were also identified in Wang’s (2015) study investigating the attitudes of Chinese university students and teachers towards China English. The findings indicated that despite most of the participants recognising China English as a legitimate variety, they were reluctant to accept it as a pedagogical model. These studies provide evidence that L1 users’ norms may be prevailing in the Chinese educational context. This perspective fosters L1 users’/teachers’ privilege, while LX teachers are often marginalised (Fang 2018). The marginalisation of LX teachers can have a significant impact on their professional confidence and teaching attitudes.

### **The purpose of the study**

It is evident from the literature discussed above that it is becoming increasingly important to accommodate the evolving role and function of EIL. To achieve this, the beliefs of English teachers about EIL play a crucial role in implementing EIL-related practices. Despite the growing interest in research focused on English teachers’ beliefs about EIL, studies with Chinese pre-service teachers, the largest population of future English language teachers, are still underexplored. Moreover, there is a paucity of studies discussing the influence of teacher education in shaping these beliefs (cf. Nguyen 2017). Therefore, this study explores the beliefs of Chinese pre-service English teachers who, at the time of the study, were MA TESOL candidates in the UK. It is guided by the following research questions:

1. What forms Chinese MA TESOL pre-service teachers’ beliefs about English as an international language (EIL)?
2. How did the experience of studying for the MA TESOL in the UK inform their beliefs?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This exploratory study collected data from 75 Chinese pre-service English teachers who were enrolled in an MA TESOL programme at a leading university in the UK. Participants were mostly female, in their early twenties, and were selected based on a purposive sampling technique. The main reason for selecting Chinese pre-service English teachers for this study was that China has the largest population of LX English learners and teachers in the world today (Fang 2017; Wei and Su 2015). Consequently, the beliefs of the Chinese pre-service teachers contributing to this study may be reflective of an impactful stream of future teachers who come to the UK for TESOL qualifications before returning to China (see also Zhu and McKinley 2021).

### **Instruments**

To investigate the Chinese pre-service teachers’ beliefs towards EIL, a sequential mixed-methods research design was adopted. Data were collected via an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

### ***English as an International Language Perception Scale (EILPS)***

All participants were asked to complete the EIL Perception Scale (EILPS) developed by Lee and Chen Hsieh (2018). The 14-item scale was administered online and measures perceptions of EIL based on four dimensions: 1) the current status of English (CSE; 3 items); 2) varieties of English (VE; 4 items); 3) strategies for multilingual/multicultural communication (SMC; 4 items); and 4) English speakers' identity (ESI; 3 items). The EILPS was considered a reliable and validated instrument (see Lee and Chen Hsieh 2018 for validation information) that had been used in several previous studies, including similar studies on pre-service English teachers' beliefs about EIL (Lee, Lee, and Dražati 2019). All items were thoroughly examined and considered to be appropriate for the topic and context of the current study (see Appendix A). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree' was used to evaluate the participants' responses. Since Cronbach alpha values are sensitive to the number of items in a scale, Pallant (2020) states that reporting mean inter-item correlation may be more appropriate for scales with fewer than ten items. The mean inter-item correlation for each dimension was .37 (CSE), .46 (VE), .36 (SMC), and .30 (ESI), respectively, showing high internal consistency (see also An and Thomas 2021; Botes et al. 2022).

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

To gain deeper insights into the participants' beliefs about EIL and triangulate the questionnaire findings, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants. The interview questions covered aspects such as participants' interpretation of EIL, attitudes towards L1 and LX English teachers, potential implementation of LX language models, and varieties of English in their future teaching practice. The participants were also asked about whether the MA TESOL course they were enrolled in contributed to shaping their views on the topics mentioned above. The interview questions were piloted with a pre-service English teacher from the cohort who was also an LX English user but was excluded from the main study (non-Chinese). The participants signed consent forms and were assured that their participation would remain confidential. All interviews were conducted in English, since English was the shared language between the researcher and the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes for each participant. Interviewed participants are labelled A-H, respectively, in the Findings section below.

### ***Ethics and data analysis***

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the researchers' university's Ethics Review Committee. All participants gave their consent to participate in the study voluntarily and signed consent forms prior to data collection. To protect the participants, the questionnaire responses were anonymized and identifying information from the interviews was removed.

After the participants completed the EILPS, the data were submitted to SPSS for statistical analyses. All 75 participants completed the EILPS successfully, and all questionnaires were considered valid for statistical analysis. The mean value (M) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for each construct and each individual item to assess the participants' perspectives towards EIL. The follow-up interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and analysed using qualitative content analysis, which focuses on examining, identifying, and interpreting that data within deductive (pre-specified) and inductive (emergent) thematic topics (Selvi 2020). The transcripts were first read closely for data familiarisation. Then, the participants' responses were re-read and segments containing possible answers to the research questions were coded (i.e. their beliefs towards EIL and their views on how the MA TESOL programme had influenced them, if at all). Then, their coded responses within the main categories were grouped into salient sub-categories and are presented below. Initial coding/categorizing was done by the first author, checked by the second and third authors, and disagreements were discussed until resolved.

## Findings

Overall, the findings indicated that the participants generally held positive beliefs about EIL and that the MA TESOL programme had played a crucial role in favourably influencing these beliefs. However, despite their positive beliefs about EIL, the findings suggested a misalignment between what participants believed and the implementation of these beliefs in their future teaching practices. The findings are presented and then discussed in the sections that follow, organised by their relevance to the research questions.

### Questionnaire findings (RQ1)

The descriptive statistics for the EILPS are summarised in Table 1. Overall, the results indicate that participants held positive beliefs about EIL, as there was an above-average agreement with the four constructs. A deeper examination of the individual survey items reveals that item ESI2 (*I don't mind if people laugh at my English accent when I speak because it is my own English*) was rated the lowest overall ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). This, along with data gleaned from the interviews, suggests that although the participants believed that teachers should not push students to sound like 'native' English speakers (ESI1) and that it is not necessary to adopt a 'native-like' accent (ESI3), a number of the participants were still somewhat self-conscious about their English accent. These and other findings will be expanded upon with the interview findings below.

### Interview findings (RQ1)

The participants' beliefs about EIL were further explored through semi-structured interviews. Major findings derived from the interview responses were classified into three categories and are reported in turn: a) attitudes towards L1 and LX English teachers, b) understanding of EIL and awareness of different English varieties, c) potential implementation of LX models and teaching materials in their own future practice. Changes to participants' beliefs owing to their participation in the MA TESOL programme are discussed in relation to RQ2.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the EILPS Items.

Constructs	# of items	M	SD
CSE	3	4.43	0.81
VE	4	4.08	0.93
SMC	4	4.08	0.88
ESI	3	3.90	1.12
	<b>Items</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
CSE	CSE1	4.80	0.43
	CSE2	4.04	0.98
	CSE3	4.44	0.74
VE	VE1	4.25	0.72
	VE2	4.08	1.05
	VE3	3.97	0.91
	VE4	4.01	0.98
SMC	SMC1	3.79	0.93
	SMC2	3.83	0.99
	SMC3	4.60	0.57
	SMC4	4.11	0.73
ESI	ESI1	4.20	0.89
	ESI2	3.09	1.22
	ESI3	4.40	0.72

CSE = Current Status of English, VE = Varieties of English, SMC = Strategies for Multilingual/Multicultural Communication, ESI = English Speakers' Identity.

### ***Attitudes towards L1 and LX English teachers***

Most participants reported having neutral attitudes towards what constitutes an ideal teacher, regardless of being an L1 or LX English user. They described the ideal teacher as someone who is experienced, professional, has exceptional teaching skills, and is approachable and friendly. However, when participants were asked to choose between L1 and LX English teachers to see whether they had a subconscious preference towards a particular type of English teacher, they agreed that there are many variables that need to be considered, such as the students' learning goals and the types of classes they take (i.e. exam preparation classes versus conversation classes).

Overall, however, the participants preferred LX English teachers. One of the primary reasons for this preference, which was expressed in the majority of the participants' responses, corresponded with the exam-oriented education system in China. As participants disclosed, LX English teachers, especially Chinese teachers, are familiar with the structure of the university entrance exam. Therefore, they have an insider's perspective on the difficulties of learning English and can prepare students for the exam. For example:

During my junior and high school years, I definitely preferred non-native English teachers because the learning environment in China is heavily exam oriented. The learning revolves around the Gaokao exam, the international university entrance examination we take during our final year of school. Since we concentrate only on this exam, I am not so sure if native English speakers are familiar with this exam and how well they could prepare us for this. (Participant B)

Similarly, another participant further elaborated on the importance of explicit grammar and vocabulary knowledge, which comprise a large portion of these exams.

In China, we focus more on learning grammar and vocabulary so that we can have better grades in the exams. I believe Chinese English teachers are better at explaining these concepts, and if you struggle with something, they can always explain it in our L1 to help us understand it better. (Participant E)

Nonetheless, participants tended to prefer L1 English teachers when the class was not exam focused. Specifically, they stated that when the focus of the learning is on developing fluency and communicative competence, L1 English teachers are favoured because of their perceived better command of idiomatic English, their pronunciation, and the provision of extensive information about English-speaking countries' cultures. One participant described this in stating the following:

Assuming that the purpose of learning is to develop communicative competence and in general to become a fluent speaker of the language, I think native English-speaking teachers would be ideal since they can teach you native-like expressions, idioms and slang that are more frequently used in everyday communication. (Participant A)

Another participant noted that:

If the course focuses on improving oral communication skills, I would prefer native English-speaking teachers because they know more about the pragmatic use of the language and the English culture. (Participant H)

Thus, as can be seen from the excerpts above, the participants' attitudes were highly dependent on the nature of the teaching involved, with clear preferences based on the aims of the course.

### ***Understanding of EIL and awareness of different English varieties***

The second category based on participants' responses was related to their understanding of EIL and their awareness of different English varieties. All participants were familiar with the notion of EIL and considered it an essential tool for global communication. When asked to elaborate on their understanding of EIL, participants were able to provide their own interpretations and distinguish EIL from ideologies representative of native-speakerism. For example:

In my understanding, EIL includes more varieties of English and emphasizes the communication of people from different countries and cultures. The concept of EFL focuses only on the native English varieties from countries such as USA, Canada, and UK, and promotes the cultures of these countries. (Participant G)



Furthermore, the participants accepted alternative varieties of English, including their own (Chinese English), if they are intelligible. Due to the popularity of English and its use among LX users, the participants held positive attitudes towards LX English varieties and considered them as a normal progression of the language. Instead of attempting to achieve native-like pronunciation, participants argued that intelligible communication should be the aim of LX users, as this will enable them to interact with people from different backgrounds and accommodate different English varieties.

Additionally, most participants believed that students should be exposed to both L1 and LX varieties from an early stage of their learning, as this could give them the opportunity to prepare for international communication. For instance:

Learners should be exposed to models from all over the world. It is important for students to be able to understand people with different English varieties and accents and not only native ones. (Participant E)

Conversely, others believed that LX varieties should be introduced to students in a later stage, once they have already mastered the language by being exposed only to L1 varieties. For example:

At the beginning, if you present too many English accents and varieties to your students, they may get confused. I believe that at first, we need to introduce a single model of English such as either American or British English and then, in more advanced levels to introduce the concept of EIL and include more English varieties. (Participant C)

According to the findings in this section, participants demonstrated understanding of what EIL entails, were aware of different varieties of English, and agreed that learners should be exposed to these varieties. Although there was some disagreement about when this exposure should take place, the interview findings help to explain the participants' relatively high levels of agreement with the CSE ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) and VE ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) sections of the questionnaire.

### ***Potential implementation of LX models and teaching materials in participants' future practice***

In moving from fostering awareness of LX models to direct application of such models in their future classroom practice, participants had conflicting views. Although most of them held positive beliefs about other English models and were keen on implementing them in their own teaching practice, participants still prioritised a standardised variety of English (e.g. AmE or BrE). Some reported that their preference towards the implementation of L1 models in their teaching practice was inevitable since the educational system in China is still heavily reliant on L1 norms, and there is significant pressure on teachers to adopt L1 models/accents.

Although I would love to teach to my future students a combination of NE and NNE models and varieties, I guess I will probably focus only on either British or American English. This is because the learning context in China still focuses on native English varieties, and I guess I have to adapt my teaching to the schools' curricula and parents' and learners' preferences. But if I had more freedom, I believe that I would prefer to use various English varieties. (Participant A)

In terms of the implementation of either locally produced teaching materials or materials from English-speaking countries, the findings indicated that the participants were fonder of Chinese-produced teaching materials, without excluding the use of other materials completely. Particularly, the participants exhibited positive attitudes towards Chinese teaching materials as they considered them to be more accessible for their students, while also being a way of promoting Chinese culture. Nevertheless, participants understood the importance of incorporating materials from English-speaking countries as well, since these will help them raise awareness towards the cultures of the target language. For example:

If I teach in Chinese public schools, I will have to use locally published materials as these are the materials suggested by the Ministry of Education. This is not necessarily bad since these materials are often well designed and include activities that promote the Chinese culture instead of focusing only on native

English-speaking countries' cultures. Actually, nowadays, China advocates the teaching of Chinese culture, so the material designers gradually include more and more Chinese elements in the textbooks, and I think this may have positive results on embracing Chinese English varieties. (Participant B)

I think that I would choose a combination of both locally published and from English-speaking countries teaching materials. The materials from English-speaking countries include language that is more authentic such as phrases and expressions, and they also familiarize students with American and British cultures. On the other hand, locally published materials include things that are closer to the life of China and may reflect students' daily lives and interests. (Participant D).

Based on the excerpts above, it may be stated that participants had conflicting views regarding simply building awareness of different varieties of English and applying them in practice. These views were often influenced by contextual factors the participants anticipated in their future teaching such as the exam-oriented education system in China and the nature of the available textbooks.

### ***Interview findings (RQ2)***

The second research question aimed to explore how the experience of studying for the MA TESOL in the UK had influenced the participants' beliefs about EIL, if at all. In this section, changes in participants' beliefs before and after the course are evident in their reflections. According to the interview data, the participants' beliefs were mainly impacted by two key factors: 1) the development of domain-specific knowledge and 2) exposure to different varieties of English.

#### ***Domain-specific knowledge***

The participants reported that the MA TESOL programme provided them with useful, domain-specific knowledge regarding the global spread of English and its pluricentric nature. They felt that this helped to shape their views towards EIL. During the MA programme, many EIL issues were incorporated into the content of different modules, allowing students to be exposed to content on topics concerning the ownership of the language and the emergence of different English varieties. For instance:

My beliefs towards ELT changed drastically during the MA program. For example, when we were introduced to the concept of English as an international language, I started to perceive the English language as a communication tool... as long as we can communicate effectively, we do not need to stick with only the native-English varieties, but we can adopt other non-native English varieties and learn more about different cultures, too. (Participant A)

Gaining knowledge regarding different English varieties has also encouraged some participants to focus more on intelligibility and on becoming more self-confident regarding their own accents. For example:

Before I started this program, I was aiming to sound like a native speaker because I believed that people would understand me better. But, [during the course,] I realized that it would take someone years to sound like this, and it would be a waste of time. What matter the most is to be intelligible. Your accent does not really matter. (Participant F)

Notably, one of the participants still believed in adopting an L1-like accent, despite acknowledging the emergence of different English varieties and understanding that language competence does not equate to having that accent. As disclosed in the interview, this is related to a long-standing belief that English teachers should strive to sound like L1 users in order to ensure better career prospects and to act as exemplar models for their students.

To be honest with you, I still believe that I need to improve my accent so I can sound more native-like. I think that when I go to a job interview, even if my English is at a good level, if I do not sound like a native speaker, they will not employ me. So, the MA has helped me become aware of the term English as an international language and not push my future students to sound like natives, but I don't think this applies to us who are English teachers. We will act as role model to our learners. (Participant C)

Therefore, it is clear than when participants were introduced to course content promoting the EIL perspective, in which intelligibility and multilingualism were encouraged, they developed a more positive attitude towards EIL. However, beliefs about teachers' use of English (shaped by native-speakerism) were difficult for one participant to change. These interview findings help to explain the somewhat agreeable nature of the participants' responses to the ESI construct ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) on the questionnaire, which had the highest standard deviation among the four constructs.

### *Exposure to different varieties of English*

The participants reported that the learning experience of being part of a multilingual/multicultural MA programme and being exposed to different varieties of English had influenced their beliefs about EIL. This coincided with participants moving to London during their studies, a city with an ethnically and linguistically diverse population. For example:

I was able to meet lecturers and classmates from different nationalities and backgrounds, and be exposed to their different accents, too. This made me more comfortable with my own Chinese accent. (Participant H)

Furthermore, living in a multicultural city like London helped the participants understand the importance of being exposed to diverse varieties of English, and in some cases, it motivated them to incorporate various English-speaking models into their future teaching practices. For instance:

After living in London in a student accommodation with people from other cultures and language backgrounds, I understood the importance of being able to understand different English varieties. For example, when I first moved to the student accommodation, I was not able to understand my flatmates completely. But after a month, being exposed to their own accents and varieties, I didn't have a problem understanding them. Having this experience myself, I think we should give our students various English-speaking models from all over the world so they can understand everyone who speaks English and not just native-English speakers (Participant C)

However, understanding in multilingual/multicultural interactions did not always occur without the use of additional communication strategies. In one particularly rich example, Participant E described a time she asked a staff member for help logging into her student account:

I struggled because he had a heavy accent. However, this is my problem. I didn't spend a lot of time becoming familiar with other accents. We both had to slow down, that's for sure. And I would repeat about half of his sentence and then ask him to repeat certain words. Sometimes, even if he repeated, it'd still be hard to understand, so he would paraphrase immediately. (Participant E)

Interestingly, despite mentioning the staff member's 'heavy accent' (everyone has an accent of one form or another), Participant E attributed communication breakdowns to herself rather than to the staff member. However, both interlocutors used basic but effective communication strategies such as slowing their rate of speech, repeating key words, checking their interpretations, and paraphrasing. This and other similar experiences help to explain the students' general level of agreement with the SMC construct on the questionnaire ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) and the importance of ensuring all language users can be successful strategy users (Thomas, Bowen, and Rose 2021).

The experiences reported in this section increased participants' awareness of the international use of English and highlighted the importance of being exposed to diverse English varieties in order to be able to engage in meaningful interactions.

## **Discussion**

While previous research investigating English teachers' beliefs about EIL in a range of contexts has emphasised the importance of addressing the evolving role and function of English, studies with Chinese pre-service teachers are still under researched. The influence of teacher education in shaping these beliefs, especially in international contexts, is also under researched (Nguyen 2017).

Therefore, this study explored the beliefs of Chinese pre-service English teachers while they were MA TESOL candidates in the UK. Rather than highlighting minute differences across similar studies, for us, the most important takeaway is the resonance of the findings with those in different contexts, such as Nguyen's (2017) study with pre-service English teachers in Vietnam and other studies mentioned below.

Overall, the findings indicated that the participants generally held positive beliefs about EIL and that the MA TESOL programme had played a crucial role in favourably influencing those beliefs. However, the findings suggested a misalignment between participants' reported beliefs and the implementation of these beliefs in their future teaching practices.

With regard to the first research question, when participants' positive beliefs about EIL were triangulated with their interview responses, three main categories were identified based on salience. The first category pertains to the participants' attitudes towards L1 and LX English teachers. Although many stakeholders in the ELT industry in China may subscribe to the assumption that L1 English users are ideal language teachers regardless of their teaching qualifications and experience (Wang 2011), the understanding that English has become an international language had influenced the participants' beliefs in maintaining neutral attitudes towards L1 and LX teachers. They agreed that both L1 and LX teachers have something different to offer based on the students' learning goals and the types of classes they teach. Similar findings have been echoed in other studies (e.g. Beckett and Stiefvater 2009; Walkinshaw and Oanh 2014), indicating that not all stakeholders fall victim to the native-speaker fallacy. Rarely is there a clear, general preference for L1 and LX English teachers when nuanced understandings are considered.

The second category pertains to the participants' understanding of EIL and their awareness of different English varieties. All participants were aware of the notion of EIL and recognised it as an important tool for international communication. They appreciated the existence of other English varieties and prioritised intelligibility over the adoption of native-like accent. In general, these findings align with previous studies (e.g. Jenkins 2012; Soruç and Griffiths 2021; Tajeddin, Atai, and Pashmforoosh 2020) that indicated that LX English teachers are starting to put a greater emphasis on intelligibility and comprehensibility. This suggests that they are beginning to deviate from native-speakerism. The need to adopt linguistic features that are widely intelligible across speakers of English from different L1 backgrounds, rather than focusing on L1 forms, is a topic that has greatly concerned EIL literature. Alptekin (2002), for example, has described the native model as utopian and unrealistic since it does not reflect how English is currently used in multicultural settings. Similarly, Jenkins (2006) highlighted that it is entirely unnecessary for LX users to speak like L1 users, since English is often used primarily to communicate with other LX users; instead, she suggested that LX users should start embracing their own accent, which will reflect their linguistic and cultural identities. From an SLA perspective, Saito (2011) found that although explicit instruction had a significant effect on comprehensibility for the L1 Japanese English learners in his study, the reduction of the participants' Japanese-English accent was not obtained. Taken together, Jenkins' (2006) and Saito's (2011) findings (among others) suggest that the adoption of L1 norms for LX users is not only unnecessary for global communication, but, even with explicit training, it is likely unattainable. Intelligibility and comprehensibility are considerably more important and are aspects LX users can work to achieve.

Furthermore, although most of the participants believed that both L1 and LX varieties should be included in the classroom, their views as to when students should be introduced to different English varieties varied. These conflicting views have also been expressed in other studies. For example, Vodopija-Krstanovic and Marinac (2019) found that although most of the Croatian English teachers in their study tended to believe that LX varieties should be introduced to learners at the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, there were some teachers who thought LX Englishes should be implemented earlier. Interestingly, one of the participants argued that learners should not be introduced to LX Englishes and accents in the classroom at all, since students are inevitably exposed to them in the outside world.

The third category pertains to the potential implementation of LX models and teaching materials in participants' future practice. Here, it is evident that China's English-language educational system, which is still strongly based on L1-English norms, may be the key reason as to why participants face a pedagogical dilemma between their positive beliefs about EIL and the hesitancy of integrating these beliefs in their future ELT practice. This dilemma has been discussed in other studies, too (e.g. Ahn 2014; Lai 2008). Ahn (2014) found that although Korean English teachers were aware of the global spread of the language and held positive views towards LX varieties, they generally favoured L1 varieties in their teaching due to the high demand for focusing on standardised, high-stakes English tests. Similar findings were observed in Lai's (2008) research on Taiwanese English teachers, suggesting that government-mandated high-stakes English exams could influence LX English teachers' beliefs about EIL, as well as their teaching practices.

Moreover, participants viewed the Chinese-produced teaching materials as a useful means of manifesting their own culture and considered them more suitable for their learners since they reflect the students' everyday lives and interests. The fact that Chinese public schools only use locally published materials exemplifies China's desire to preserve its own cultural identity, which has been mirrored in prior research (Fang 2016). However, the participants acknowledged the significance of materials from English-speaking nations, too, and regarded them as an indispensable tool for raising awareness towards these cultures. The realisation that both domestic and internationally produced materials play a crucial role in the English classroom indicates the participants' awareness of the EIL ideology. This emphasises that the cultural content of EIL teaching materials should not be limited to L1 English-speaking countries; instead, local cultures should also be addressed (McKay 2002).

Regarding the second research question, it is clear that when participants were introduced to course content promoting the EIL perspective, in which intelligibility and multilingualism were encouraged, they developed a more positive attitude towards EIL. These findings underline the benefit of similar TESOL teacher education that has been highlighted in other studies (e.g. Boonsuk, Ambele, and McKinley 2021; Galloway and Numajiri 2020; Nguyen 2017). For one participant, however, it was difficult to escape from views influenced by native-speakerism. These views, which have also been observed in other studies (e.g. Jenkins 2005; Nguyen 2017), may be attributed to the LX English teachers' negative beliefs towards their own linguistic competence, especially in terms of their pronunciation and accent. It is these areas especially in which many LX teachers feel they are lacking in comparison to their L1 counterparts (Butler 2007; Jenkins 2005; Park 2012).

Finally, living and studying in the UK positively influenced participants' EIL beliefs. These experiences increased participants' awareness of the international use of English and highlighted the importance of being exposed to diverse English varieties to engage in multicultural interactions—demonstrating that personal experiences play a crucial role in belief formation (Garrett, 2010). Overall, the findings for RQ2 echo Nguyen's (2017) findings in the Vietnamese context, further illustrating that these may be key factors regardless of context.

## Conclusion

This study endeavoured to identify what forms Chinese pre-service English teachers' beliefs about EIL near the end of their MA TESOL studies in the UK. The study also explored how the experience of studying for the MA may have informed their beliefs. We found that the participants generally held positive views about EIL, and three factors were key in forming their beliefs, namely, their attitudes towards L1 and LX English teachers, their understanding of EIL and awareness of different English varieties, and the potential implementation of LX varieties in their future practices. Moreover, findings revealed that the students' enrolment and attendance in the MA TESOL programme in the UK favourably influenced their views in terms of their knowledge development and their exposure to different English varieties by living in a multicultural environment. However, we detected a misalignment between what the participants believed and their imagined

implementation of these beliefs in their future teaching practices. This misalignment suggests that the transition from theory to practice is often complex and difficult to implement. Most interesting to us, however, was how much resonance the findings had with studies from a wide range of contexts, indicating how important it is to overcome these issues globally. Below, we provide some suggestions.

### **Practical implications**

To mitigate the challenge of belief-theory-practice alignment, specific training on how to integrate EIL practices within teachers' institutional constraints could be offered. Teacher education programmes could incorporate EIL content in their curricula by informing their students about its core principles and its implications in the learning and teaching of English. Specifically, pre-service and in-service English teachers could be informed about what the EIL teaching approach entails and how to prepare students for effective global communication. To do this, greater emphasis should be placed on mutual intelligibility between English users and the acceptance of alternative English varieties as legitimate forms of English. Recognition of the difference between a 'variety' and an 'accent' (which everyone has) would also be beneficial, as the participants in the current study sometimes conflated these terms. Information about how English functions globally is not enough for English teachers to adopt EIL teaching practices, however. It is equally important for teachers, teacher trainers, policy makers, and even students/students' parents to liberate themselves from long-standing beliefs they may have such as native-speakerism. Even if English teachers encourage their learners to focus on intelligibility instead of adopting L1-like accents, teachers' views towards their own accents are still highly impacted by these beliefs. Hence, critical discussions on these issues should be part of the learning content of the MA TESOL programmes, aiming to help students reflect on and potentially challenge their views. MA TESOL programmes could also integrate more practical modules in their programmes in which students would learn to evaluate and design EIL lessons within similar constraints as those they will be working under if they plan to teach in different contexts after graduation. They could then put these lessons into practice through microteaching.

Despite its rich findings, this study is not without limitations. First, the study did not consider demographic variables such as age and gender for the data analysis. Thus, we were unable to make inferences as to whether such variables would have a significant impact on participants' EIL beliefs. Second, the influence of teacher education into the participants' beliefs was only examined by semi-structured interviews. Future research could explore actual lesson planning and classroom practice via lesson observations. Future research could also expand to more contexts so that the experiences of pre-service English teachers outside the UK could be considered. Hopefully, this will contribute to a greater focus on EIL-aware pedagogy and encourage a greater awareness of the diversity that exists in the English language and in English-language teaching today.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendices

### **Appendix A: English as an International Language Perception Scale (EILPS)**

(Lee and Chen Hsieh 2018)

CSE1: English is used today as an international language to communicate effectively with people from around the world.

CSE2: Many non-native English-speaking countries currently use English as their official or working language.

CSE3: English is the language of business, culture, and education around the world.

VE1: Different varieties of English, such as Hong Kong English, Indian English, and Singaporean English, are acceptable today.

VE2: Teachers can use English listening materials that are recorded by people who have different kinds of English accents.

VE3: Different varieties of English, such as Indonesian English, Taiwanese English, and Japanese English, are acceptable today.

VE4: Teachers can include the interaction between non-native and non-native English speakers (e.g. Indonesian-Japanese speakers) in English listening materials.

SMC1: I can adjust my conversational style according to my interactions with people of other cultural backgrounds.

SMC2: I can explain my own culture and customs clearly in English to people from other cultures.

SMC3: I am open-minded about accepting speaking/pronunciation patterns that are different from those of my home country.

SMC4: I can behave appropriately according to English users I speak with.

ESI1: English teachers should not push me to speak like a 'native' English speaker.

ESI2: I don't mind if people laugh at my English accent when I speak because it is my own English.

ESI3: It is unnecessary to speak like American or British English speakers as long as my English is intelligible (or understandable) to others.

### **Appendix B: semi-structured interview questions**

1. Based on your learning experience, did you prefer native-English speaking teachers or non-native when selecting courses? What other factors affected your preference?
2. Do you think native speakers are ideal English teachers? Why/Why not?
3. What is your understanding of the difference between English as an International Language (EIL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)?
4. What 'Englishes' have you learnt? What 'Englishes' would you like to teach to your future students?
5. How has the MA programme shaped your views on teaching EIL, if at all?
6. Should we give English language learners native-speaker models from English-speaking countries such as England, Australia, and the USA or non-native speaker models from all over the world? Why?
7. How likely will you implement Chinese-English varieties in your teaching?
8. What materials would you use in your future teaching? Would they be locally produced or from English-speaking countries? Why?