

ABSTRACT

Given the international status and importance of English, English language study has attracted millions of Chinese learners. Apart from those who study abroad, more and more Chinese students are motivated to study in English-medium Transnational Higher Education (THE) programmes inside China.

English is a diversifying and fragmenting language that has various functions and can be used for different purposes. Whilst, according to many scholars, English has broken free from the ownership of ‘native English’ speakers, Chinese learners of English are still worried about conforming to ‘native-speaker models’ of English and so falling victim to an English linguistic imperialism project, driven by English-medium THE programmes. Accordingly, this research sets out to investigate, the extent to which Chinese learners, in a UK affiliated THE programme in China, feel the need to orientate to or identify with ‘native English’ and its speakers, and run the risk of becoming victims of English linguistic imperialism.

Results from a combination of methods: questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews, show that students’ orientations towards and identification with English and its speakers are diverse, complex and multi-dimensional, and have gone beyond affiliation with ‘native English’ speakers. Studying in English-medium THE programmes does not necessarily lead to English linguistic imperialism, but is a process of interaction where learners may consciously mediate ‘native English’ norms and express individual, local, national or international identities, literally taking advantage of the programmes’ material benefits and deliberately learning the language for international communication. This research suggests that learners in THE programmes are conscious of the overall context individually, nationally and internationally and feel free to orientate to English in ways that are suitable for their own purposes and which represent their preferred identity.