Article

✉ Fenwei Chen chenfane.br@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3554-4619

Chinese Postgraduates' Perceptions and Use of Standard English in EMI Courses at a Malaysian University

Fenwei Chen
Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Stefanie Pillai
Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the fact that non-native English speakers have become the dominant population, English learners are still expected to adhere to a native variety of standard English. This phenomenon is challenged by the Global Englishes paradigm, as the belief in native English as the standard norm ignores the diversity of today's English. While previous studies have primarily explored standard English in terms of its selection, codification, and elaboration in the educational setting, few have examined its practical use. Thus, this study aims to advance our knowledge of standard English by investigating Chinese postgraduates' perceptions and use of standard English during their English-medium instruction programmes at a public university in Malaysia. A two-part questionnaire was used to collect responses from a total of 50 Chinese postgraduate students from different faculties at this university. The responses were analyzed descriptively and interpreted from the Global Englishes paradigm. This study revealed a pluralistic and decolonialized perception of standard English. As for practice, standard English is employed in offline classroom interactions with lecturers, particularly in highly purposive communication. The findings yield a more detailed understanding of standard English in a higher educational setting, encouraging stakeholders to recognize a pluralistic perspective on standard English that empowers non-native English-speaking students.

KEYWORDS: Standard English Ideology, Global Englishes, Chinese Postgraduate Students, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

The global dominance of English has driven universities around the world to introduce degree programmes with English Medium Instruction (EMI) as part of the internationalization of education (Kuteeva, 2019). In alignment with this wave of higher education reform, a significant number of Chinese students opt to pursue their postgraduate studies at institutions abroad (Zhang & Lütge, 2024), including in Malaysia. To date, Malaysia has become a preferred educational destination for students from China (Education Malaysia Global Service, 2024), and the country welcomes international students as part of a national aspiration to become an education hub for international students (Rahman & Singh, 2021). As this aspiration is among the national key economic drivers, English, rather than the national language, Malay, is the main language of instruction in public higher education institutions (Pillai et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, EMI remains a topic of considerable debate especially in countries where English is not the dominant language. The prevailing view of American and British English as the standard and prestigious form of the language within EMI courses requires students to conform to these 'native' English varieties. Such a standpoint tends to favour those whose first language is English, i.e., those considered as native speakers and it devalues those who use the language as a second or other language, i.e., the non-native speakers (Kuteeva, 2019). However, this perspective of standard English being equated with native varieties of English is increasingly being challenged by the emerging Global Englishes (GEes) paradigm, which emphasizes the inclusivity and pluricentricity of English (Rose & Galloway, 2019).

Against the backdrop of EMI in higher education, an increasing number of studies have investigated the language-related experiences of students from China (henceforth referred to as Chinese students) during their education in various geographical locations, such as in Mainland China (Fang & Hu, 2022; Jiang et al., 2019; Si, 2023), Hong Kong (Sung, 2019; 2022), Germany (Zhang & Lütge, 2024), and Japan (Kim, 2021). These studies highlight the need for Chinese students to shift away from the belief that a native English variety is the sole acceptable standard towards a more critical understanding of the way in which English is used in today's global context (Kuteeva, 2019). Encouragingly, an emerging body of studies has demonstrated evolving perceptions among Chinese students. For example, some Chinese students who are studying in Mainland China and Hong Kong believe that standard English is not necessarily a native-speaker variety of English (e.g., Jiang et al., 2019; Si, 2023). Given that the majority of Chinese students would only have been exposed to standard British and American English in China (Chen, 2025), it would be pertinent to understand their perceptions about standard English and their own use of what they perceive as the standard variety in the post-colonial context where they may also come across the colloquial variety of Malaysian English (Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011) and other non-native English varieties. Such knowledge could help to better prepare Chinese students heading to pursue EMI academic programmes in countries like Malaysia. Yet, to date, there is a dearth of published research in this area.

In view of this knowledge gap, the present study aimed to find out how Chinese postgraduate students studying at a Malaysian university perceive and use standard English. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions about standard English among international postgraduate students from China at a Malaysian university?

2. To what extent do they use what they perceive as standard English in different course-related contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections set out to explore the extant research on several aspects of standard English, including standard English ideology, standard written and spoken English in formal contexts, and Chinese students' perceptions of native and non-native English varieties.

Standard English Ideology

In the pursuit of establishing standards for English, linguists have attempted to set up a series of prescriptive rules in terms of spelling, grammar, and lexical selection since the eighteenth century (Kircher & Fox, 2021). Although this language standardization process enhances the linguistic uniformity, it has concomitantly given rise to a number of adverse consequences. From the linguistic perspective, standardization alludes to the regulation of potential variations across all aspects of the language (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). As a result, it has a tendency to suppress linguistic variability, thereby highlighting the monolithic nature of standard English (Shohamy, 2006). From the perspective of social power relations, the notions of clarity, acceptance, and correctness embedded in language standardization are not grounded in linguistic precision but rather on social prestige (Flores, 2016). While all language varieties are inherently equal, the label of standard emphasises the superior status of one variety within a social hierarchy (Crowley, 2003). Such an assumption about the legitimacy and authority of one specific variety within the language may influence speakers' evaluations of other varieties and thus enhance their adherence to this standard linguistic form (Crowley, 2003), giving rise to a standard language ideology. Languages are then dichotomized into 'right or wrong', 'correct or incorrect', and 'good or bad' varieties (Lippi-Green, 2012). Further, the use of a non-standardized form of language is often perceived as indicative of carelessness, rudeness, and a lower level of education (Speicher & Bielanski, 2000). This superiority and privilege persuade speakers that one specific form is the only 'correct' way to speak the language, and that this standard form of language should be fixed without any tolerance of variations (Walsh, 2021).

Standard Written and Spoken English in Formal Contexts

According to Trudgill's (1984, p. 32) definition, standard English is "a set of grammatical and lexical forms typically used in speech and writing by educated native speakers," which refers

to standard English as the written form due to the emphasis of grammar and lexis (Constantinou & Chambers, 2020). While numerous scholars endeavoured to codify standard written English (Kircher & Fox, 2021), it is challenging to define a uniform standard for spoken English due to the inherent variability in human speech, including geographical, social and situational factors (Crowley, 2003). Nevertheless, although standard English does not prescribe any specific accent, pronunciation has become a prominent linguistic feature distinguishing standard from non-standard spoken English (Kircher & Fox, 2021).

Additionally, one consistent finding throughout the literature on standard English is the close relationship between its use and the formal contexts (e.g., Bjorge, 2007; Lasan, 2024; Pereira, 2011; Qin & Uccelli, 2020; Savić, 2018). In fact, the level of formality of a communication context is typically influenced by three factors, namely the interlocutors' social status, the purpose of interaction, and the communication setting (Lasan, 2024). Standard English is more likely to be used when interacting with interlocutors holding higher social roles to mitigate the status gap and gain acceptance from higher-status speakers (Pereira, 2011). For instance, in a study of email exchanges between students and lecturers at a Norwegian university, Bjorge (2007) found that international students from cultures with high power distance tended to use English in a more formal and standardized way in their emails. Similarly, Lasan (2024) discovered that English learners from Canada and Slovakia perceived lawyers, representatives, and receptionists as higher-status interlocutors, and therefore, communicated with them using standard formal written English. On the contrary, speakers tended to use non-standard spoken English to enhance mutual connections when interacting with peers, suggesting that the desire for solidarity might supersede status considerations in this situation (Creber & Giles, 1983).

Previous studies have also proved that standard English is frequently employed in communicative situations that involve a certain degree of purposiveness (Pereira, 2011). Savić (2018) found that students were more likely to use standard written English to enhance the politeness and appropriateness of their communication when requesting to reschedule meetings or seeking feedback on assignments.

Furthermore, formal settings, such as the classroom, significantly impact English speakers' language attitudes and evaluations of different varieties, which in turn affects their use of the language (e.g., Creber & Giles, 1983; Qin & Uccelli, 2020). Sung's (2022), for example, found that Chinese students preferred to use standard English in formal academic settings, such as international conferences and classroom lectures, to enhance their academic performance. Notably, with computer-mediated communication (CMC) gaining importance in today's communication (Qin & Uccelli, 2020), the medium of communication has also been found to be a crucial component of the communication setting. CMC is often considered less formal, and unconventional (Herring et al., 2013), which suggests that informal and non-standard English is likely to be used. Nevertheless, the role of communication medium in shaping the way students use English may be less significant than the influence of other factors, such as the interlocutors, purposes, and locations (Savić, 2018).

Chinese Students' Perceptions of the Relationship between Native and Non-Native English Varieties

Studies have explored Chinese students' English language ideology within EMI programmes, revealing an imbalanced relationship between native and non-native English varieties (Fang & Ren, 2018; Sung, 2022). Chinese students regard a native English variety as the sole standard form and highlight the significance of conforming to native-speaker norms (Zhang & Lütge, 2024). Such a perception elevates native English speakers to the status of an ideal language speaker, while perceiving non-native speakers from a deficit perspective (Boonsuk et al., 2023). This ideology is particularly evident with regard to English accents. Fang and Ren (2018) discovered that Chinese students linked their accent with lower proficiency and attempted to disguise it by imitating British or American English accents.

The hierarchical relationship between the perceived standardness of native-speaker English and the non-standardness of non-native English varieties has had an effect on Chinese students' classroom participation. As a result of their self-deprecation regarding their English proficiency, Chinese students tend to be restrained during lectures, lacking the confidence to communicate with lecturers and peers, and especially with native English speakers (Zhang & Lütge, 2024). Moreover, native English has also been associated with high scores, academic success, and better employment opportunities (Chen, 2024). In a similar vein, Chinese students tend to imitate the speech patterns of native English speakers in job interviews, as the standard English enables them to construct a professional and competent self-image (Kim, 2021).

However, the standard English language ideology is fraught with issues. With a total of 1.1 billion non-native English speakers, native English speakers are no longer the dominant English-speaking population (Boonsuk et al., 2023). Further, British English and American English may no longer represent the mainstream variety of English (Rose & Galloway, 2019). In light of these changes, GEes was introduced by Galloway and Rose (2015) to provide a critical lens for understanding the perception and use of English from a dynamic and plural perspective. This paradigm views English as a pluricentric entity, highlighting the diversity of different English varieties in terms of phonology, lexis, and pragmatics (Galloway & Rose, 2015). In essence, it challenges the notion of native English as the sole norm, emphasizing its global ownership of English and advocating for a more inclusive perspective on its use (Fang & Ren, 2018; Rose & Galloway, 2019).

Echoing the GEes paradigm, recent studies have reported a pluricentric perception of English that embraces different kinds of English varieties co-present in communication (Sung, 2019). There is, on the one hand, scepticism about the effects of a native English variety on classroom interactions with international lecturers and students (Jiang et al., 2019). On the other hand, there is an acceptance of non-native English as an efficient variety for English communication (Si, 2023). These different findings underscore inconsistent perceptions of standard English among Chinese students. Furthermore, although numerous studies have highlighted how standard English ideology permeates educational policies, assessments, and textbooks, it is still essential for further research to explore this issue from a practical

perspective. Thus, these gaps necessitate this study's investigation into the perceptions and use of standard English among Chinese students within an educational setting.

METHODOLOGY

The following sections start by explaining how the conceptual framework informs the study to design the instrument for data collection. It then elucidates other aspects of the methodology, including the research setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis process.

Conceptual Framework

This study is situated within the conceptual framework of GEes and language ideology. The GEes paradigm serves as a critical lens for investigating standard English. This paradigm acknowledges the evolving nature of English and the diversity within the language (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Furthermore, the GEes paradigm challenges the native speaker norm that privileges inner circle varieties (Fang & Ren, 2018). On the other hand, language ideology constitutes a collective system of beliefs related to the role of language, and the appropriateness of its use in different social contexts (Silverstein, 1979). In this sense, language ideology serves as an interpretive approach to facilitate an understanding of Chinese students' perceptions and use of standard English.

Research Setting and Participants

As discussed in the introduction, Malaysian higher education is characterized by its adoption of EMI and an international student population from many countries (Pillai et al., 2021; Rahman & Singh, 2021). The largest international student population is from China (Education Malaysia Global Service, 2024). In this context, Chinese students may undergo a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of their perceptions and usage of standard English during their EMI courses in Malaysia.

The participants in this study were international postgraduate students from China. A convenience sampling method was employed to select participants, with the recruitment message posted in three WeChat groups. These groups consisted of a total of 1089 students from different faculties and departments in the target university. A total of 50 Chinese postgraduate students responded to online questionnaire via a link provided in the message. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30, with the majority having initiated their English language education at the level of primary education. The participants hailed from various provinces across mainland China and were enrolled in different postgraduate programs at the university. In particular, approximately half of the participants were from English language studies programs (henceforth referred to as ELS students), while the other half were from non-English-related fields (henceforth referred to as non-ELS students), such as Engineering, Education, and Business. The participants had an intermediate level of English language

proficiency, with an average score of 6.72 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The participants in this study were informed of the research background and purpose through the introductory section of the questionnaire. The students gave their informed consent to participate in this study on a voluntary basis and were informed that they could withdraw at any time.

Questionnaire Design

As an efficient instrument to investigate individuals' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of languages, a self-designed bilingual (English-Chinese) questionnaire was used in this study. Informed by Silverstein's (1979) concept of language ideology which encompasses not only perceptions of language but also how these perceptions influence language use, this questionnaire explored both participants' perceptions of and practices related to the use of standard English to better understand their standard English ideology.

The first part of the questionnaire aimed to address the first research question by primarily using nine five-point Likert scale items to explore participants' perceptions of standard English, where 1 meant 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree'. Additionally, there were another three multiple-choice items. This first part of the questionnaire focused on four key aspects highlighted by the literature, namely (i) the monolithic nature of English (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Shohamy, 2006); (ii) nativeness (Fang & Ren, 2018; Sung, 2022; Zhang & Lütge, 2024); (iii) the codification of written and spoken forms (Constantinou & Chambers, 2020; Crowley, 2003; Kircher & Fox, 2021; Trudgill, 1984); and (iv) formality (Lasan, 2024; Qin & Uccelli, 2020). Thus, participants were initially assessed on their perceptions regarding the concept of a singular form of standard English (item 1) and its relationship with native varieties (item 2, 3). They were then questioned about standard English in both written and spoken forms (item 4, 5), and its usage in formal settings (item 6, 8). Finally, they were requested to specify the criteria to evaluate standard written and spoken English (item 7, 9).

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to address the second research question by delving into participants' use of standard English through 14 Likert scale items. The questions were based on four main dimensions according to the literature. As discussed in the literature review, previous studies have found a close relationship between the use of standard English and formal contexts that are shaped by (i) the social roles of interlocutors (Bjorge, 2007; Savić, 2018; Qin & Uccelli, 2020); (ii) location (iii) medium (Creber & Giles, 1983; Savić, 2018); and (iv) communicative purposes (Lasan, 2024; Pereira, 2011; Qin & Uccelli, 2020). In accordance with these dimensions of formality, a series of paired question items were developed. Four pairs of items were employed for the dimensions of social status, conversation location and medium, with some items overlapping (see Table 1). For communication purpose, four independent items were used, as they were too distinct to be designed as paired items (see Table 2).

Table 1. Paired Items in the Second Part of Questionnaire

Dimensions		Pair 1	Pair 2	Pair 3	Pair 4
Interlocutors	Lectures	Item 1	Item 4	Item 9	Item 14
	Course mates	Item 2	Item 5	Item 11	Item 13
Location	In classroom	Item 1	Item 2	Item14	Item 13
	Outside classroom	Item 4	Item 5	Item 10	Item 12
Medium	Offline	Item 1	Item 2	Item 4	Item 5
	Online	Item 14	item13	Item 10	Item 12

Table 2. Non-Paired Items in the Second Part of the Questionnaire

Dimensions			
	Presentations		Item 3
	Conventional assignments	written	Item 6
Purposes	Multi-modal assignments	written	Item 7
	Request emails		Item 8

Data Analysis Process

Upon the completion of data collection, all responses were tabulated for subsequent analysis. Since participants indicated their extent of agreement with different statements by selecting a number from 1 to 5, most responses were readily usable without the need for further processing. With regard to the three multiple-choice items, the participants' responses were processed in Google Form. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha being 0.74 for questions regarding standard English perceptions and 0.93 for standard English practice, which indicated the reliability of the questionnaire (Hair et al., 2010). Given the limited sample size, only descriptive statistics were used in the data analysis (Savić, 2018), namely means and standard deviations. In the case of the multiple-choice items in the first part of the questionnaire, the frequency and percentage were used for data analysis.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in relation to perceptions and the use of standard English by the participants.

Perceptions of Standard English

The first section of the questionnaire primarily investigated international Chinese postgraduate students' perceptions of standard English (RQ 1) (see Table 3). The participants generally regarded standard English as a pluricentric notion that included more than one particular variety (item 1, $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1$). Furthermore, most respondents adopted a neutral stance regarding the alignment of standard English with native English (item 2, $M = 2.30$, $SD = 1$). In spite of this, they still identified British ($N = 33$, 63.50%) and American

English (N = 28, 53.80%) as unequivocal representatives when considering the connection between standard English and native varieties, while overlooking New Zealand English (0%), Canadian English (0%) and Australian English (0%).

In relation to the written and spoken forms of standard English, the participants displayed divergent perceptions. While most of them strongly concurred with there being a standard written English form (item 4, M = 3.94, SD = 0.98), they held a relatively neutral stance towards standard English in the spoken form (item 5, M = 2.28, SD = 1.18). In a similar vein, the participants held an agreeable position towards the use of standard English in formal written contexts (item 6, M = 3.20, SD = 1.96), but maintained a neutral stance towards its use in formal oral communication (item 8, M = 2.66, SD = 1.24).

Table 3. Perceptions of Standard English

Items		Means	Standard deviations
1	Only one type of standard English	2.00	1.00
2	Native English varieties as the standard	2.30	1.11
4	Written standard English	3.94	0.98
5	Spoken standard English	2.28	1.18
6	Written standard English in the formal setting	3.20	1.96
8	Spoken standard English in the formal setting	2.66	1.24

In terms of the assessment criteria for standard English, while the participants opted for a more comprehensive evaluation of standard written English, pronunciation emerged as the primary criterion for assessing standard spoken English. In other words, while the participants regarded each linguistic aspect as equally essential for evaluating standard written English, including spelling (N = 37, 71.2%), vocabulary (N = 33, 63.5%), collocation (N = 31, 59.6%), grammar (N = 39, 75%), and coherence/cohesion (N = 34, 65.4%), only pronunciation (N = 40, 76.9%) was emphasized as the key criterion for evaluating spoken English.

It is noteworthy that despite coming from different academic programmes, the participants displayed similar responses to the majority of the questions in the first part of the questionnaire. Non-ELS students demonstrated greater agreement than ELS students regarding the belief that there is only one standard form of English (item 1, ELS: M = 1.79, SD = 0.93; non-ELS: M = 2.20, SD = 1.04) and that a standard spoken variety of English exists (item 5, ELS: M = 1.92, SD = 1.00; non-ELS: M = 2.64, SD = 1.25).

Use of Standard English

The second section in this questionnaire explored the use of standard English by the participants (RQ2). In terms of different interlocutors (lecturers and course mates) (see Table 4), the results indicated that the participants strongly agreed with using standard written and

spoken English when communicating with lecturers rather than with course mates. Specifically, they slightly agreed with using standard spoken English with lecturers in the classroom (item 1, M = 3.02, SD = 1.04) but showed lower agreement when using it with non-Chinese classmates (item 2, M = 2.84, SD = 1.06). Outside the classroom, they were neutral about using standard spoken English but still agreed more with using it with lecturers (item 4, M = 2.64, SD = 1.03) than with non-Chinese classmates (item 5, M = 2.42, SD = 1.00). A similar pattern was observed in computer-mediated communication, where the participants agreed about using standard written English with lecturers in Telegram or WhatsApp (item 9, M = 3.10, SD = 1.08) but were neutral about using it with non-Chinese classmates (item 11, M = 2.66, SD = 0.99). Additionally, a higher level of agreement was found with using standard spoken English in online lectures with lecturers (item 14, M = 3.30, SD = 1.00) compared to non-Chinese classmates (item 13, M = 2.96, SD = 0.97).

Table 4. Use of Standard English (Interlocutors)

Context	Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Offline oral communication in classrooms	1 L	3.02	1.04
	2 C	2.84	1.06
Offline oral communication outside classrooms	4 L	2.64	1.03
	5 C	2.42	1.00
Online written communication outside classrooms	9 L	3.10	1.08
	11C	2.66	0.99
Online oral communication in classrooms	14 L	3.30	1.00
	13 C	2.96	0.97

Note. L = Lecturers, C = Course mates

Regarding location (inside and outside classrooms), four pairs were analysed (see Table 5). The participants generally showed stronger agreement with using standard spoken English within the classrooms than outside it. They agreed with using standard spoken English for face-to-face communication with lecturers inside the classroom (item 1, M = 3.02, SD = 1.04) but were neutral to its use outside the classroom (item 4, M = 2.64, SD = 1.03). They also showed a slight agreement with using standard spoken English with non-Chinese students inside the classroom (item 2, M = 2.84, SD = 1.06) but maintained a neutral attitude outside the classroom (item 5, M = 2.42, SD = 1.00). Similar patterns were observed in CMC contexts. While they agreed about using standard English with lecturers outside the classroom (item 10, M = 3.08, SD = 1.05), they showed stronger agreement about its use inside the classroom (item 14, M = 3.30, SD = 1.00). However, they were neutral about using standard spoken English with non-Chinese course mates outside the classroom (item 12, M = 2.62, SD = 0.92) but slightly agreed about its use inside the classroom (item 13, M = 2.96, SD = 0.97).

Table 5. Use of Standard English (Locations)

Context	Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Offline oral communication with lecturers	1 I	3.02	1.04

	4 O	2.64	1.03
Offline oral communication with course mates	2 I	2.84	1.06
	5 O	2.42	1.00
Online oral communication with lecturers	14 I	3.30	1.00
	10 O	3.08	1.05
Online oral communication with course mates	13 I	2.96	0.97
	12 O	2.62	0.92

Note. I = Inside the classroom, O = Outside the classroom

Regarding the medium of communication, the results from four item pairs indicated that the participants slightly agreed with using standard written and spoken English in online environments rather than in offline contexts (see Table 6). They agreed about using standard spoken English with lecturers in both online (item 14, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.00$) and offline classrooms (item 1, $M = 3.02$, SD = 1.04), with stronger agreement for online settings. They also agreed on using standard spoken English with non-Chinese students in both virtual (item 13, $M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.97$) and real classrooms (item 2, $M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.06$). For communication outside the classroom, students agreed on using standard spoken English with lecturers online (item 10, $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.05$) but were neutral to its use for offline interactions (item 4, $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.03$). Similarly, they held a neutral attitude towards using standard spoken English with non-Chinese course mates both online (item 12, $M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.92$) and offline (item 5, $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.00$).

Table 6. Use of Standard English (Mediums)

Context	**Item**	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**
Oral communication with lecturers in classrooms	1 Off	3.02	1.04
	14 On	3.30	1.00
Oral communication with peers in classrooms	2 Off	2.84	1.06
	13 On	2.96	0.97
Oral communication with lecturers outsides classrooms	14 Off	2.64	1.03
	10 On	3.08	1.05
Oral communication with peers outsides classrooms	5 Off	2.42	1.00
	12 On	2.62	0.92

Note. Off = Offline, On = Online

In terms of communicative purposes, the four items with high communicative purposes demonstrated the highest means in the questionnaire (see Table 7). Specifically, Chinese students strongly agreed with using standard spoken and written English in contexts like assignments, presentations, and request emails. For example, they agreed about using standard spoken English for oral presentations during lectures (item 3, $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.13$). Compared to oral presentations, they showed even stronger agreement with using standard written English in PowerPoint slides and academic posters (item 7, $M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.06$), as well as in written assignments like reports, essays, and research proposals (item 6, $M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.11$). Additionally, they agreed about using standard written English in requests in the form of emails related to assignments, attendance, and leave of absence (item 8, $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.11$).

Table 7. Use of Standard English (Purposes)

Context	Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Oral presentations	3	3.54	1.13
Written assignments	6	4.00	1.11
Written slides, posters	7	4.02	1.06
Request emails	8	3.72	1.11

DISCUSSION

In the following sections, the findings are discussed with reference to the conceptual framework of this study.

Perceptions of Standard English

Although non-ELS students exhibited a more neutral stance, ELS students demonstrated an awareness of multiple standardized forms of English. Such a pluralistic perception of standard English challenges the longstanding view of standard language as a singular form, as the process of language standardization is to foreground the superiority of one particular language variety (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Moreover, this study suggests a reduced reliance on native English norms, which is evidenced by a neutral attitude toward native English as the standard form among Chinese students (see also Jiang et al., 2019; Si, 2023). Indeed, the so-called native speaker norm has been challenged by the GEes paradigm, given the considerable diversity of English varieties and the reality that non-native English speakers constitute a significantly larger proportion of the global population than native speakers (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Furthermore, the language standardization process of written English has significantly enhanced students' perceptions of standard English in the written form (Constantinou & Chambers, 2020), which accounts for the participants' strong agreement with standard written English and neutrality towards standard spoken English. Additionally, literacy education in schools may also reinforce their recognition of standard written English (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). In a similar vein, the intertwined relationship between school education and standard English is evident in the connection between standard English and formality (Shohamy, 2006). As standard written English is typically presented in formal and official contexts (Qin & Uccelli, 2020), it is commonly assumed that standard written English is used in all formal settings (e.g., Bjorge, 2007; Savić, 2018).

Another salient finding is the distinct approach to evaluating standard written and spoken English. Despite the fact that pronunciation or accent is not a defining feature of standard English (Kircher & Fox, 2021), based on the findings, pronunciation serves as a prominent criterion for evaluating standard spoken English (Zhang & Lütge, 2024). However, the GEes paradigm does not privilege any particular accent. Instead, it advocates for a critical

awareness of accents, emphasizing mutual understanding in communication rather than mere pronunciation accuracy (Fang & Ren, 2018).

Use of Standard English

From the perspective of interlocutors, Chinese students demonstrated a greater inclination towards using standard spoken and written English when engaging with lecturers compared to interacting with peers. As the implementer of educational policies and as classroom manager, lecturers hold a higher hierarchical position than students within educational settings (Shohamy, 2006). Influenced by this asymmetrical relationship, Chinese students tended to employ standard English when communicating with lecturers, as it could mitigate the status gap and gain acceptance from higher-status speakers (Pereira, 2011). However, students adopted a neutral stance towards the use of standard English with course mates, as perhaps solidarity matters the most when interacting with peers (Creber & Giles, 1983).

In relation to communicative locations, the classroom environment influences the manner in which individuals use standard English (Creber & Giles, 1983). The Chinese students in this study agreed with using standard spoken English within classrooms, whereas there was less agreement about using standard spoken English outside the classroom. Due to the well-documented relationship between standard English and formality (e.g., Lasan, 2024; Qin & Uccelli, 2020; Savić, 2018), classroom, as a representation of formality (Creber & Giles, 1983), enhances students' use of standard English in various classroom activities.

As for communicative mediums, CMC is usually perceived as a less formal communication medium without editing and planning (Herring et al., 2013), which suggests the use of a less standardized form of English. However, in this study, nearly identical levels of agreement with the usage of standard spoken English in digital and face-to-face oral interactions were found. This finding is consistent with Savić's (2018) assertion that communication expectations are shaped by communication targets and purposes, rather than the communication channel itself.

In terms of communicative objectives, students employed standard written and spoken English in highly purpose-driven scenarios. In pursuit of high scores and positive feedback, Chinese students strongly agreed to use standard written and spoken English in formal and academic settings, such as lectures, presentations and assignments (Zhang & Lütge, 2024; Kim, 2021), as standard English has long been associated with academic success (Fang & Hu, 2022). As for request emails, the desire to elicit responses also motivates Chinese students to employ standard English, as the formal and standard language conveys requests in a more polite and appropriate manner (Savić, 2018).

Most importantly, the findings echo previous research in which Chinese students view standard English as a means of attaining academic success rather than as a linguistic target for language learning (McLelland, 2021). In Sung's (2022) study, students were flexible in their standard written and spoken English to bridge status gaps with interlocutors, adapt to the formality of the communication settings, and achieve their communicative purposes.

Similarly, the participants in this study accorded standard English symbolic value and viewed the standardized form of English as an instrument for academic interactions (Fang & Hu, 2022; Flores, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The present study employed a two-part questionnaire to investigate the perceptions and use of standard English of international Chinese postgraduates at a Malaysian public university. Regarding perceptions, this study found a pluricentric and decolonialised conceptualization of standard English, which highlights various types of standard English that derive from non-native varieties. Consistent with previous findings, the Chinese students perceived standard written English as a variety to be used in formal contexts. Furthermore, standard spoken English was primarily judged based on pronunciation, while evaluation criteria of standard written English was more comprehensive. In terms of practice, standard English, perceived as a tool and symbolic capital of academic success, was used in a flexible manner with the Chinese students tending to use it in offline classroom interactions with lecturers, particularly in highly purposive communication.

This study encourages lecturers, students, policy makers and other stakeholders who are involved in EMI programs to adopt a pluralistic perspective on standard English that empowers non-native English-speaking students. It also encourages them to recognize that "repertoire acquisition and communicative competence are far more important than mastering some imagined standard (Speicher & Bielanski, 2000, p. 159)". The acquisition of standard English should be regarded as an enhancement to the linguistic repertoire of English speakers, rather than being taught as a solution to perceived linguistic deficiencies (Lockwood, 2012). However, it must be acknowledged that the present study is subject to certain limitations. Constrained by the small-scale nature of the study, it is challenging to generalize the findings to a broader context. Moreover, this study used the questionnaire as the sole data collection instrument. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of standard English, interviews or classroom observations should be conducted.

REFERENCES

Bjorge, A. K. (2007). Power distance in English Lingua Franca email communication. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 17*(1), 60–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2007.00133.x.

Boonsuk, Y., Wasoh, F., & Waelateh, B. (2023). Whose English should be talked and taught? Views from international English teachers in Thai higher education. *Language Teaching Research.* [Online First]. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688231152194

Chen, F. W. (2024). 'Foreign education and companies are superior to local ones': Nativeness preferences are also found amid non-English teaching positions in China's job market, but with different focus. *Asian Englishes, 26*(2), 546-563. https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2023.2301628

Chen, F. W. (2025). Naming practices in Chinese private language schools: insights into English language Ideologies and teaching approaches. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*. [Online first]. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2025.2475097

Constantinou, F., & Chambers, L. (2020). Non-standard English in UK students' writing over time. *Language and Education, 34*(1), 22-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2019.1702996

Creber, C., & Giles, H. (1983). Social context and language attitudes: The role of formality-informality of the setting. *Language Sciences, 5*(2), 155-161. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001(83)80020-5

Crowley, T. (2003). *Standard English and the Politics of Language* (2nd ed). Palgrave Macmillan.

Education Malaysia Global Service. (2024). *Statistics on International Student Applications for Malaysia's Tertiary Education*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from https://educationmalaysia.gov.my/student-data/

Fang F., & Ren W. (2018). Developing students' awareness of Global Englishes. *ELT Journal, 72*, 384–394. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy012

Fang, F., & Hu, G. (2022). English medium instruction, identity construction and negotiation of Teochew-speaking learners of English. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development.* [Online First]. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2051711

Flores, N. (2016). A tale of two visions: Hegemonic whiteness and bilingual education. *Educational Policy, 30*(1), 13–38. *https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815616482*

Galloway, N., & Rose, H. (2015). Introducing Global Englishes. Routledge.

Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2010). *Multivariate data analysis* (7th ed). Prentice Hall.

Herring, S., Dieter, S., & Virtanen, T. (2013). *Pragmatics of computer-mediated communication*. De Gruyter Mouton.

Jayapalan, K., & Pillai S. (2011). The state of teaching and learning English pronunciation in Malaysia: A preliminary study. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research, 7*(2), 63-81.

Jiang, L., Zhang, L. J., & May, S. (2019). Implementing English-medium instruction (EMI) in China: Teachers' practices and perceptions, and students' learning motivation and needs. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 22*(2), 107–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1231166

Kim, S. (2021). English as a lingua franca in Japan: multilingual postgraduate students' attitudes towards English accents. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 45*(2), 536–550. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1909053

Kircher, R., & Fox, S. (2021). Multicultural London English and its speakers: A corpus-informed discourse study of standard language ideology and social stereotypes. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 42*(9), 792-810. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1666856

Kuteeva, M. (2019). Revisiting the 'E' in EMI: students' perceptions of standard English, lingua franca and translingual practices. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 23*(3), 287-300. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1637395

Lasan, I. (2024). Expression of formality in writing: English-dominant speakers' and English learners' knowledge, preferences, and other-language influence. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 27*(1), 98–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2157204

Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States*. Routledge.

Lockwood, M. (2012). Changing standards revisited: Children's awareness and knowledge of features of written Standard English at Ages 10–11. *Changing English, 19*(3), 359-371. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2012.704586

Milroy, J., & Milroy. L. (2012). *Authority in language: Investigating Standard English* (4th ed). Routledge.

McLelland, N. (2021). Language standards, standardisation and standard ideologies in multilingual context. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 42*(2), 109-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1708918

Pereira, S. S. (2011). Standard versus non-standard: An analysis of language used for formal business communication through e-mails. *Vidyodaya Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 3,* 155-176. http://dr.lib.sjp.ac.lk/handle/123456789/1887.

Pillai, S., Kaur, S., & Chau, M. H. (2021). The ideological stance of multilingualism in education in Malaysia in the press 2000-2020. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 14*(2), 173-193. https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0058

Qin, W., & Uccelli, P. (2020). Beyond linguistic complexity: Assessing register flexibility in EFL writing across contexts. *Assessing Writing, 45*(1), 100465. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2020.100465.

Rahman, M. M., & Singh, M. K. M. (2021). English and Malay language policy and planning in Malaysia. *Training, Language and Culture, 5*(4), 36-46. https://10.22363/2521-442X-2021-5-4-36-46

Rose, H., & Galloway, N. (2019). *Global Englishes for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Savić, M. (2018). Lecturer Perceptions of im/politeness and in/appropriateness in Student e-mail requests: A Norwegian perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics, 124*, 52–72. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.12.005

Shohamy, E. (2006). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches.* Routledge.

Si, J. H. (2023). Lost in the EMI trend: Language-related issues emerging from EMI practice. *SAGE Open, 13*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231181494

Silverstein, M. (1979). Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. R. Clyne, W. F. Hanks, & C. L. Hofbauer (Eds.), *The elements: A parasession on linguistic units and levels* (pp. 193–247). Chicago Linguistic Society.

Speicher, B. L., & Bielanski, J. R. (2000). Critical thoughts on teaching Standard English. *Curriculum Inquiry, 30*(2), 147–169. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3202094

Sung, C. C. M. (2019). English as a lingua franca in the international university: Language experiences and perceptions among international students in multilingual Hong Kong. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 33*(3), 258-273. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2019.1695814

Sung, C. C. M. (2022). English only or more?: Language ideologies of international students in an EMI university in multilingual Hong Kong. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 23*(3), 275-295. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2021.1986299

Trudgill, P. (1984). Standard English in England. In P. Trudgill (Ed.), *Language in the British Isles* (pp. 32–44). Cambridge University Press.

Walsh, O. (2021). Introduction: in the shadow of the standard. Standard language ideology and attitudes towards 'non-standard' varieties and usages. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 42*(9), 773-782. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1813146

Zhang, X., & Lütge, C. (2024). Understanding Chinese international students' language ideologies and multilingual practices in English-medium instruction programs in Germany. *Language and Education*, *38*(5), 881–899. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2348594