University Students’ Attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca in a Multilingual Sustainable Society

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Abstract: The present study investigated Macao university students’ attitudes towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Macao maintains a diverse multilingual society, with speakers from several cultures converging into one city for work and travel. Traditionally, the common languages of communication have been Chinese and Portuguese, due to Macao’s historical connection with both mainland China and Portugal. However, with the development of tourism and economy, English has become a lingua franca in the city. Despite this, it is unclear what attitudes are held about ELF and whether these attitudes may differ according to academic interest, academic background, and experience with intercultural communication. To address this need, 303 university students completed a survey measuring attitudes towards ELF on five dimensions. Afterwards, nine participants were interviewed to expand on their survey responses. The descriptive results indicated that in general Macao university students’ attitudes towards ELF were positive in many aspects, but also included conservative attitudes. Results from t-tests showed that English minors, local Macao students, and students who have overseas intercultural communication experience held more positive attitudes towards ELF than English majors, mainland Chinese students, and those without overseas experience, respectively. Implications for English teaching in Macao are discussed.

Keywords: ELF; Macao; attitudes; English majors; intercultural communication experience

1. Introduction

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

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

Previous studies have investigated language issues in this multilingual sustainable society, especially the importance of English. Research [9,12] showed that Macao students' attitudes towards English became more positive after the handover, and they had a strong desire to enhance their English proficiency. Some studies claimed that English was becoming increasingly important [11,13]. However, these studies were undertaken more than a decade ago, and Macao society has changed tremendously after the handover. Also, previous studies mainly focused on the importance of English [8,9], whereas research on ELF in Macao is rare. In the context of globalization and the emergence of ELF, the tertiary students' attitudes towards ELF in Macao are still unknown. Notably, studies indicated that current English teaching did not cater to English use today [14]. From the perspective of ELF, fostering students' communication ability is important, and the current English teaching practices should fulfill students' real needs of improving their communication skills [15]. Some studies [5,6] revealed that in Hong Kong, a similar society to Macao, people's attitudes towards ELF were conservative, and this might imply that Macao people’s attitudes are also native-speaker oriented. It is critical for researchers to explore these issues to provide implications for English teaching in Macao, especially for tertiary education. In short, it is of great importance to investigate people's attitudes towards ELF in this multilingual society in the context of globalization and rapid economic development, and thus, to provide implications for English teaching practitioners and policy makers to improve Macao students’ English communication skills. In addition, previous studies indicated that the factors influencing people’s ELF attitudes included: academic interest (such as majors and individual English learning goals caused by majors) [16,17]; English education experience caused by academic background [18]; and intercultural communication experience [19]. Current Macao university students receive the same education in Macao, but they may come from different regions and have different academic interest and different intercultural communication experience. In light of this, Macao is a good place to investigate the factors influencing people’s attitudes towards ELF.

In sum, with this study, we hope to expand the research of ELF in the expanding circle, namely, Macao. Specifically, we aimed to explore Macao university students’ attitudes towards ELF, and examine possible differences among different groups depending on academic interest, academic background, and intercultural communication experience by employing a survey. In addition, this study tried to unearth the in-depth reasons for specific attitudes by implementing semi-structured interviews. The findings in this study have implications for current English teaching practices in Macao, and will also address a drawback in English teaching, i.e., it may not cater to English use today [14].

To sum up, the research questions of the present study are as follows:

(1) What are the Macao university students’ attitudes towards ELF?
(2) Are there differences in attitudes towards ELF between English majors and English minors?
(3) Are there differences in attitudes towards ELF between students from mainland China and those from local Macao?
(4) Are there differences in attitudes towards ELF between students who have overseas intercultural communication experience and those who do not?
(5) What are Macao university students’ in-depth attitudes towards ELF?
The following sections begin by a detailed literature review, followed by methodology, results, discussion of the results, and finally, a conclusion, limitations of the study and future directions are provided.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Attitudes towards ELF

ELF refers to any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option [20]. In the past decade, in the context of globalization, research on ELF has emerged [21], and a number of studies have been undertaken in this field [22,23]. One of the divers of this line of research is that the number of non-native speakers has surpassed that of native speakers, and most studies have been undertaken in the expanding circle [24]. Nowadays, Asia is considered one of the important regions for the development of English as a lingua franca [3,4]. The reality of English use in the 21st century is that there are varieties of English. All varieties of English enjoy equal status [25,26]. However, teaching materials are still based on native English norms, and due to this, the current English language teaching practices may not fulfill the realistic needs of English learners from the perspective of ELF [27]. Some studies investigated the effects of courses that introduce ELF on students’ attitudes towards ELF, and showed that these kinds of courses were effective [24,28]. These courses introducing ELF main concepts and aiming at raising students’ awareness of ELF were integrated into English learning and teaching contexts. Studies revealed that in many parts of the world, including Asia, attitudes towards ELF are native-speaker oriented [29,30], and people still prefer native English as the norms. Despite the negative attitudes towards ELF existing in the Asian context, there are still many positive attitudes in this expanding circle [5,31]. For example, Sung [32] investigated 30 local Hong Kong undergraduate students’ attitudes towards ELF, and found that Hong Kong university students’ attitudes towards ELF were very complicated. Specifically, some people held positive attitudes, some negative, whereas others held an ambivalent attitude. Their attitudes towards ELF depended on different contexts and scenarios, such as the person they were talking to, in class or after class.

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

2.2. Factors Affecting Attitudes towards ELF

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

2.2.1. Academic Interest

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

2.2.2. Academic Background

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

2.2.3. Intercultural Communication Experience

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

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 303 university students, including undergraduates, master students and doctoral students (188 females; 62%) in Macao took part in this study. Among those, 115 were English majors, and 188 were English minors. A total of 114 students were from mainland China, and 176 students were from the local Macao context (i.e., who have been educated in the secondary school in Macao for at least 6 years). A total of 123 students had overseas intercultural communication experience. Nine participants were interviewed afterwards. Among those, seven were females, and four were English majors.

3.2. Instrument

The attitudinal survey was adapted from Barzegar Rahatlou, Fazilatfar [40], Fang [29], Curran and Chern [17], and Ren et al. [18], which was a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The adaptation made to the instrument was minor, and the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient in a previous study was 0.78 [40], reflecting moderate internal reliability. Participants indicated their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree, and 5 representing strongly agree. There were 29 items in total. The survey measured five dimensions. For specific items included in each dimension, please see the results section for detail.

The first dimension is attitudes towards different English accents (e.g., I will keep my own accent even though it does not sound like an English native speaker (e.g., British, American) which is pure and fluent). This dimension was designed to tap participants’ attitudes towards different English accents.

The second dimension is attitudes towards different English models (e.g., I think English belongs to English native speakers (e.g., British, American, and New Zealanders) only). The purpose of these items was to tap participants’ attitudes towards different varieties of English, i.e., whether native English should be the only model for English learning.

The third dimension is attitudes towards teaching/learning goals of English (e.g., I think the major goal of learning English is to communicate with foreigners in English effectively).

The fourth dimension is attitudes towards the role of language and culture (e.g., As an English learner, I think it is important to be aware of intercultural differences and be willing to talk about such differences). This dimension was designed to tap participants’ awareness of the role of culture in language learning, such as whether they agree that learning English native-speakers’ culture is important in language learning, and whether they are aware of the importance of their own culture in English learning.

The fifth dimension is attitudes towards the language used in class (e.g., I think English should be used as the only medium of instruction in class). This dimension is related to the strategy of code-switching in language learning.

To elicit attitudes of ELF, a follow-up semi-structured interview was administered. The interviews were designed to delve into the participants’ in-depth attitudes towards ELF and to create an opportunity for the participants to express their thoughts and attitudes about ELF and its related issues more freely than their responses in the questionnaire. The interview prompts were adapted from Matthew [41] and Barzegar Rahatlou et al. [40]. See Appendix A.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire survey was administered in a classroom setting. The participants were required to complete the survey independently within 20 min. After the survey,
the interview was conducted by the first author. Nine participants, selected based on convenience sampling, took part in the interview section, and each interview lasted for about half an hour to answer the questions. All audio information was recorded and transcribed and translated (if the answer was Chinese) verbatim later before the formal data analysis.

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0. Specifically, to answer RQ 1, descriptive statistics were obtained. To answer RQs 2, 3 and 4, independent sample t-tests were conducted between English majors and English minors, between students from Macao and those from mainland China, and between students with intercultural experience and those without. Participants’ interviews were coded based on content analysis with the help of NVivo 10 software using a bottom-up coding approach. The coding included two stages: (1) descriptive coding for the transcripts in order to extract themes. (2) creating generalizations and grouping the initial codes into the themes.

5. Results

5.1. Attitudes towards ELF

Considering the attitudes towards English accent (see Table 1 for details), the results revealed that Macao university students’ attitudes were ambivalent. They rated Statements 6 and 8 the highest, indicating that they cared about others’ opinions on their English accent, and expected to have native-like accents. In other words, Macao university students were quite sure that they preferred native accent, and they were eager to achieve native-like accent. However, they also rated Statement 12 and 15 high, suggesting that they agreed with having non-native accents is acceptable. Specifically, they believed that their English was intelligible (Statement 15), and they did not think a native-like accent was necessary for communication (Statement 12).

Table 1. Attitudes towards different English accents.

| Statement                                                                 | Mean | SD  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 4. I will keep my own accent even though it does not sound like English native speaker (e.g., British, American) which is pure and fluent. | 3.37 | 0.94 |
| 5. I do not care about pronunciation (whether pure or not) when communicating with others in English as long as it does not affect understanding. | 3.08 | 1.03 |
| 6. I feel happy when others find my English sound more like native speakers (e.g., British, American). | 4.19 | 0.78 |
| 7. I am satisfied with my English accent. | 2.87 | 0.89 |
| 8. I would like to strive to sound like a native speaker (e.g., British, American) of English, which is pure and fluent. | 3.99 | 0.83 |
| 12. I do not think it is necessary for non-native speakers to sound like a native speaker of English when communicating in English. | 3.82 | 0.80 |
| 15. I think my accent is intelligible to others when I speak English. | 3.69 | 0.72 |
| 16. I expect to maintain my English accent as long as it is intelligible to others. | 3.18 | 0.85 |
| 21. Being proficient in English means being able to sound like a native speaker of English (e.g., British, American), whose English is pure and fluent. | 3.12 | 0.93 |

Their ambivalent attitudes were also revealed by the interview results:

Extract 1:

I think my accent is ok, I do not think I have a thick Chinese accent, currently, I think I am quite satisfied with my accent, and I think my accent is intelligible to native speakers, because I assume that native speakers know different kinds of English ... Well, to me, of cause, I hope the person I am talking to will treat me as a native speaker by my accent, because this can prove my English learning, so I
hope they regard me as a native speaker. (#5, female, mainland China, master student, English minor).

Extract 2:
It depends, in the test scenario, I want to be treated as native speaker, because I want to get a good score. Otherwise, I prefer to keep my Chinese identity. (#2, female, mainland China, master student, English minor).

Table 2 shows Macao university students’ attitudes towards different English models. They ranked Statement 10 and 17 the highest, supporting that Macao university students were more positive towards ELF in terms of different English models. However, the results of Statement 19 and Statement 20 revealed that when it comes to the teaching materials, they were not sure whether varieties of English should be included.

Table 2. Attitudes towards different English models.

| Statement                                                                 | Mean | SD  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 9. I think English belongs to English native speakers (e.g., British, American, New Zealanders) only. | 2.08 | 0.94 |
| 10. I think non-native speakers (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Korean) also have the authority to own the English language. | 4.30 | 0.71 |
| 13. I think only native speakers of English (e.g., British, American) can be the role model for Chinese students. | 2.38 | 1.03 |
| 14. I think non-native speakers of English (e.g., Indian, Korean, Japanese) can also be a role model for Chinese students. | 3.82 | 0.83 |
| 17. As an English learner, I think it is necessary and important to be exposed to many different English accents (both native and non-native, e.g., Indian English, African English, Korean English, Japanese English). | 3.73 | 0.84 |
| 18. I think students should learn English only from native English speakers (Canadian, New Zealanders). | 2.32 | 0.94 |
| 19. I think it is important that classroom materials (text book and multimedia resources) provide a single model of English, either American or British. | 3.04 | 1.02 |
| 20. I think it is important that classroom materials (text book and multimedia resources) provide a variety of English (e.g., Japanese English, Indian English, Arabic English). | 3.21 | 0.94 |

The qualitative data echoed with this finding:

Extract 3:
I think students should learn about the different varieties of English, because nowadays we need to communicate with people from different language and culture background, if we can only understand British English or American English, maybe in the real scenario we can still struggle ... maybe ... to communicate with people from different cultures. (#3, male, mainland China, doctoral student, English major).

Extract 4:
Because if students want to communicate well in English with people from other countries, they need to learn some standard thing, standard rules, to master or command this language. (#9, female, mainland China, undergraduate student, English major).

Extract 5:
We need a standard. However, things will be bad if you can only understand British or American English, you will have some challenges. Communicating with different people is good. However, in reality, it is hard to conduct. So, when we come back to the class, we must choose an accent, or the students will be confused. (#4, male, local Macao, master student, English major).
Next, Macao university students’ attitudes towards teaching and learning goals for English is displayed in Table 3. They ranked Statements 11, 22, and 24 very high, suggesting that they stressed the importance of English as a communication tool. The goal of obtaining the ability of communication was more important than academic achievement. This is also supported by their low rating on Statement 23, in terms of learning English to pass the exam.

Table 3. Attitudes towards teaching/learning goals of English.

| Statement | Mean  | SD   |
|-----------|-------|------|
| 11. I think the main goal of learning English is to communicate effectively rather than achieve native-like (e.g., British, American) proficiency, which is pure and fluent. | 3.94  | 0.86 |
| 22. I think the major goal of learning English is to communicate with foreigners in English effectively. | 3.85  | 0.85 |
| 23. I think the major goal of learning English is to pass the exam and get a good score. | 2.62  | 1.01 |
| 24. I think an important focus of learning English is to obtain the ability to communicate effectively with people who are not English native speaker (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian). | 3.78  | 0.71 |

The qualitative data echoed with this finding:

Extract 6:

I think teachers should help students to achieve this goal, but for me maybe the nativeness should be defined more broadly, like your fluency in a certain language, not something that very close to native speakers. The pronunciation is not that important. If you can let others understand what you are saying, the pronounce is okay, and I can tolerate some grammatical mistakes. The communication is more important than, perhaps, the accuracy or the pronunciation or the narrowly defined native like use of language. (#3, male, mainland China, doctoral student, English major).

Table 4 shows Macao university students’ attitudes towards the role of culture in language learning. They rated all four statements very high, indicating that for most students, they were aware the importance of the role of their own culture in language learning.

Table 4. Attitudes towards the role of language and culture.

| Statement | Mean  | SD   |
|-----------|-------|------|
| 25. As an English learner, I think it is important that students become familiar with the culture and traditions of English speaking countries (e.g., Britain, America, Australia). | 3.78  | 0.77 |
| 26. As an English learner, I think it is important to be aware of intercultural differences and be willing to talk about such differences. | 3.95  | 0.70 |
| 29. I think it is important that students can use English to share information about their own culture and traditions. | 3.88  | 0.78 |
| 1. I think it is important that teachers help the students to better understand the exchange students from other countries in the class. | 3.90  | 0.70 |

The interview also revealed that students had the awareness of the importance of their own culture in language learning.

Extract 7:

If you can understand the culture better, you can learn the language better, and another point is that, for students, I think they need to know more about different cultures from this world, it does not mean that if you want to learn English, you
need to learn the culture behind English, you need to know, maybe different
cultures in this world, so if you can broaden horizon and you can have a more
unbiased understanding of the world. (#8, female, mainland China, master
student, English minor).

Table 5 presents students’ attitudes towards the language used in class. They rated
Statement 28 and 3 the highest, indicating that Macao university students supported code-
switching as a useful technique in language teaching. This was also supported by their low
rating on Statement 2, in terms of not using Chinese in class.

Table 5. Attitudes towards the language used in class.

| Statement                                                                 | Mean | SD  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 27. I think English should be used as the only medium of instruction in class (teaching activity, communication between students). | 3.24 | 0.97|
| 28. I think a bilingual approach where Chinese/Cantonese is used as a support in class is necessary and more effective for Chinese students. | 3.67 | 0.90|
| 2. It is better not to use Chinese in English class because it will make me confused. | 2.86 | 0.88|
| 3. I think it is acceptable to use Chinese in case cannot come up with English in class. | 3.64 | 0.92|

The qualitative data echoed with this finding:

Extract 8:

I think in class, first language can be used to explain the target language. (#2, female, mainland China, master student, English minor).

5.2. t-Test between Students with Different Academic Interest

In the following section, results on testing differences in attitudes depending on different groups are displayed. Table 6 shows the mean comparison results between English majors and English minors (only significant results are included in the table). English majors rated Statement 17 and 18 lower than minors, indicating that compared to English minors, English majors were more conservative on whether learners should be exposed to different English accents.

Table 6. t-test results for mean comparison across two academic interest groups.

| Statement                                                                 | Majors | Minors  | t     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|-------|
| 17. As an English learner, I think it is necessary and important to be exposed to many different English accents (both native and non-native, e.g., Indian English, African English, Korean English, Japanese English). | 3.65   | 3.86    | 2.14  |
| 18. I think students should learn English only from native English speakers (Canadian, New Zealanders). | 2.49   | 2.21    | 2.43  |

Note: majors = English majors; minors = English minors. *p < 0.05.

The interview also echoed this finding:

Extract 9:

Because they know I am English major, so they may have a little bit higher requirement on me. Sometimes I feel that I should have speak English a little better. (#4, male, local Macao, master student, English major).
Extract 10:
Certainly, I will feel a little unhappy if I am identified as non-native speaker by my accent, because English is my major, so I have higher requirement for myself. (#1, female, mainland China, master student, English major).

Extract 11:
My answer to this question is quite certain, I think native speaker, especially standard should be the model, because if we want to learn a language; we want to speak it well, and we want people understand us clearly without any misunderstanding, so there should be a standard for learners to learn. American or British accent. (#4, male, local Macao, master student, English major).

5.3. t-Test between Students with Different Academic Background
Table 7 shows the mean comparison results between students from mainland China and students from local Macao in many aspects. First, for the attitudes towards English models, students from mainland China had higher means on Statements 9, 18, and 19 than local Macao students, indicating that students from mainland China were more negative towards ELF in terms of different English models compared to their counterparts. Second, in terms of the attitudes towards learning goals of English, students from mainland China had higher means on Statement 23, and lower means on Statement 24, indicating that they stressed the goal of learning English to pass the exam rather than as a communication tool. Third, for the attitudes towards the role of culture in language teaching, mainland China students had lower means on Statements 25, 26, and 29, indicating that they had less awareness of their own culture in English learning.

Table 7. t-test results for mean comparison across two academic background groups.

| Statement                                                                 | Mainland | Macao | t       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|---------|
| 9. I think English belongs to English native speakers (e.g., British, American, New Zealanders) only. | 2.30     | 1.75  | 0.84    | 4.96 *** |
| 16. I expect to maintain my English accent as long as it is intelligible to others. | 3.29     | 3.01  | 0.89    | 2.78 **  |
| 18. I think students should learn English only from native English speakers (Canadian, New Zealanders). | 2.43     | 2.11  | 0.92    | 2.84 **  |
| 19. I think it is important that classroom materials (text book and multimedia resources) provide a single model of English, either American or British. | 3.16     | 2.80  | 1.08    | 3.01 **  |
| 23. I think the major goal of learning English is to pass the exam and get a good score. | 2.76     | 2.50  | 0.98    | 2.15 *   |
| 24. I think an important focus of learning English is to obtain the ability to communicate effectively with people who are not English native speaker (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian). | 3.68     | 3.89  | 0.77    | 2.51 *   |
| 25. As an English learner, I think it is important that students become familiar with the culture and traditions of English speaking countries (e.g., Britain, America, Australia). | 3.64     | 3.94  | 0.82    | 3.36 **  |
| 26. As an English learner, I think it is important to be aware of intercultural differences and be willing to talk about such differences. | 3.85     | 4.12  | 0.77    | 3.27 **  |
| 29. I think it is important that students can use English to share information about their own culture and traditions. | 3.73     | 4.09  | 0.77    | 3.94 *** |
| 32. I think it is acceptable to use Chinese in case cannot come up with English in class. | 3.75     | 3.50  | 1.03    | 2.18 *   |

Note: Mainland = university students in Macau who are from mainland China; Macao = university students in Macao who are from local Macao. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.
The qualitative data echoed with this finding:

Extract 12:
Actually, I am not quite proud of my accent. I used to want to mimic native accent, especially American accent, but later I found that I cannot totally sounds like American native speaker. So I give up and keep my own Chinese accent. So I am not quite proud of it. I want to sound like American accent. (#6, female, mainland China, master student, English major).

5.4. t-Test between Students with Different Intercultural Communication Experience

Table 8 shows the mean comparison results between students with different intercultural communication experience. In relation to the attitudes on English accents, students with more intercultural experience had higher means than their counterparts on Statements 7 and 15, indicating that they were more satisfied with their accents. When asked about whether non-native speaker has the authority to own English language, students who had overseas intercultural communication experience were significantly more positive (Statement 10, \( t = -2.42, p < 0.05 \)).

| Statement                                                                 | None M  | SD  | Have M | SD  | \( t \) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----|--------|-----|---------|
| 7. I am satisfied with my English accent.                                 | 2.78    | 0.87| 2.99   | 0.91| -2.02 * |
| 10. I think non-native speakers (e.g., Chinese, Indian, Korean) also have the authority to own the English language. | 4.22    | 0.74| 4.42   | 0.67| -2.42 * |
| 15. I think my accent is intelligible to others when I speak English.   | 3.61    | 0.67| 3.81   | 0.76| -2.50 * |

Note: none = does not have overseas intercultural communication experience; have = have overseas intercultural communication experience. * \( p < 0.05 \).

The qualitative data echoed with this finding:

Extract 13:
Yes, I think so, because according to my knowledge and according to my understanding, when I started to learn English, we Chinese people usually want to learn standard English, and the native speakers, they own their standard English, but non-native speakers, they just have their ability to learn from native speakers’ language. But with one year’s exchange experience in Canada, these days my minds, my opinions have changed a little bit, as long as people can communicate with each other, I think people from other countries have the authority to use English. (#5, female, mainland China, master student, English minor).

6. Discussion

6.1. Macao University Students’ Ambivalent Attitudes towards ELF

The first aim of this study was to investigate Macao university students’ attitudes towards ELF. The results revealed that students’ attitudes were quite ambivalent, rather than straightforward. This result was consistent with Sung [32]. In Sung’s [32] study, attitudes of people in Hong Kong towards ELF were much more complicated, i.e., ambiguous and self-contradictory. In the current study, Macao university students’ ambivalent attitudes were demonstrated in the following aspects. Regarding the English accent, Macao university students were quite sure that they prefer native accent, and they were eager to achieve native-like accent. However, they also believed that their accent was intelligible in the communication, and they agreed that it was not necessary to have native-like accent to achieve communication effectiveness. These ambivalent attitudes suggest that they were not very confident with their own accent, or that they were not sure whether
they should keep their own accent or not. In terms of different English models, Macao university students’ attitudes were also ambivalent. They believed that English did not belong to native speakers only and that people in the world had the authority to own this language. They also agreed that as EFL learners we should be exposed to different English accents. However, when it comes to the teaching model in class, students were not sure whether they should choose native English (e.g., American English or British English) as the learning standard, and whether the classroom should provide a variety of English. This result indicated that students agreed that as students, they should become familiar with different varieties of English to achieve communication effectiveness. However, in English class, they were not sure whether English varieties should appear or not, and whether they should learn the standard English only or not.

Students’ attitudes were positive with regards to their learning goals for English and regarding the role of language and culture. They all agreed that the English learning goal of effective communication was more important than academic achievement. Additionally, they had the awareness that sharing their own culture was as important as learning the culture of native speakers.

They also supported the idea that the standard English or native English can ensure the intelligibility of communication between people who have different L1 backgrounds, which implied that university students in Macao were native-speaker oriented in some respects.

The concept of ELF has been emerging in recent decades [42]. The expanding circle has the largest population of English users [43]. There are many varieties of Englishes, and these English share the same status [22]. Native English is no longer treated as the standard of English norms [26]. These ELF concepts have been accepted widely. Macao is an international city, and people use English as a lingua franca for intercultural communication. University students in Macao also regard English as a lingua franca, and their attitudes towards ELF are positive in some respects. However, the native-speaker norms are still deep-rooted in the expanding circle [44], with the teaching materials, and teacher education still native-oriented [45]. All these notions underlie Macao university students’ conservative attitudes towards ELF.

6.2. Attitude Differences Caused by Academic Interest

There were significant differences in several aspects between English majors and English minors. First, English majors considered learning English more important, compared with English minors. Second, English minors were more positive in that students should be exposed to many different accents. In addition, with regards to whether students should learn English only from native speakers, English minors were more conservative in relation to this statement. This implied that English minors agreed that students could learn English from people who have different L1, rather than English native speakers only.

English majors and English minors are very different in many aspects, such as the learning goals, learning motivation and English education they received [17]. All these facts affect the differences in the attitudes towards ELF between English majors and English minors. The learning achievement regarding the subject of English is more important for English majors, and the language ability is more important for English majors in their future career development [17]. Students who have a native-like accent are always considered to have a higher level of proficiency [46,47]. For English majors, they have a higher expectation of achieving native-like accents. In the fierce competition of the job market, it becomes more and more difficult to hunt for a teacher position [17], so applicants with native-like proficiency enjoy more advantages. In order to secure a job after graduation, students prefer to achieve native-like proficiency. This is especially true for English majors. This result was also consistent with Wang [48] and Young and Walsh [49], which claimed that both teachers and students still preferred the traditional native-speaker model. Studies on attitudes towards ELF of English pre-service teachers also found the same result. In the study of Kirkpatrick [50] and Kirkpatrick [30], pre-service English teachers’ perspective
were more conservative, i.e., they still supported that native-speaker English should be the standard English taught in schools.

6.3. Attitude Differences Caused by Academic Background

The results revealed that local Macao university students held significant positive attitudes, compared to their counterparts. This may be explained by the same L1, but different social and political system can also affect people’s attitudes towards ELF [18]. The social and political system in China is different from that in Macao. From elementary school to secondary school, most English courses in mainland China tend to be examination-oriented. For students, passing exams and achieving good scores are very important. The teaching materials in China prefer either British or American English as the standard [51]. Additionally, students from mainland China have less opportunities in intercultural communication, compared with students from local Macao.

Due to the fact that Macao is an international city, if a person has good English proficiency, he/she may have advantages in the job market and the promotion. English serves as a communication tool, rather than just a subject. In addition, for local Macao students, there are more opportunities to communicate with people from other countries; they have more opportunities to access different varieties of English. Therefore, it is more likely that local Macao students hold positive attitudes towards ELF.

6.4. Attitude Differences Caused by Intercultural Communication Experience

The results in this study revealed that, compared with students who have no intercultural communication experience, students who have intercultural communication experience held more positive attitudes towards ELF. It is consistent with previous studies that people’s perceptions towards ELF are highly related to their intercultural communication experience [22,52]. If students have negative experiences or very rare intercultural communication experience, she/he may have some negative or conservative attitudes towards ELF [37,39]. With more opportunities and more experiences of intercultural communication, students can have more opportunities to talk to people from different regions with different English accents, thus their attitudes towards ELF may become positive. In addition, when the interlocutors are non-native speakers, people always do not care about their own accent. On the contrary, if the interlocutors are English native speakers, people will care about their own accent and try to speak English close to native speakers [32]. Compared with their counterparts, students who do not have overseas intercultural communication experience learned English in the classroom settings. In the current teaching practices, the teaching materials and English teacher education are usually native-speaker oriented. Therefore, in this teaching context, students who do not have overseas intercultural communication experience will be more native-speaker oriented.

6.5. Implications for English Teaching Practices in Macao

The implications from the findings in this study are as follows. First, in terms of the English learning goals, academic achievement should not be the only goal for EFL learners, no matter for students from mainland China or those from local Macao. From the perspective of ELF, another important goal of learning English is to improve students’ intercultural communication skills. The teaching should align with the reality of English used in today’s world, rather than force students to pass exams solely. In fact, the learning goal of achieving native-speaker accent is unattainable and not practical, and it does not cater to English usage today [53].

Second, teaching materials, language assessment, and English teacher education are the three barriers for the formation of ELF concepts [54,55]. At the current stage, there is something we as English teachers can do. As is shown in the qualitative data, courses or seminars on ELF can help students develop positive attitudes towards ELF. Previous studies by Fang and Ren [24] and Galloway and Rose [28] also showed that the courses introducing ELF were effective in promoting students’ positive attitudes towards ELF.
Therefore, it would be good for English teachers to implement some courses introducing ELF concepts [36], or integrate relevant concepts into English teaching and learning. In addition, they can design seminars or online discussion, which includes different varieties of English [16,56]. In summary, these teaching methods may be effective in helping EFL learners to obtain the ability to adapt to the real intercultural communication.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Directions

This study investigated university students’ attitudes towards ELF in a multilingual sustainable society with the rapid development of globalization. English is of vital importance in Macao society and serves as a lingua franca in intercultural communication. This study found that university students attitudes towards ELF were quite ambiguous. Specifically, (a) for different English accents, Macao university students preferred a native accent and aimed to achieve a native accent. However, they also believed that their accent was intelligible, and it was not necessary to have a native accent for effective communication; (b) For different English models taught in class, they agreed that non-native speakers also have the authority to own the English language. However, they were not sure whether English class should provide different varieties of English, or students should be taught the “standard English” only; (c) For English learning goals, they concurred with many of ELF concepts. Although they agreed that academic achievement was one of the learning goals, they also supported that to achieve the communication ability was more important in English learning; (d) For the role of language and culture, they were aware that learning their own culture was as important as learning the culture of native-speaker countries; (e) For the language used in class, they supported that using learners’ L1 as a supporting language was acceptable in English class. In summary, university students in Macao supported many of the ELF concepts, although they also had some conservative attitudes.

The t-test analysis found that students from local Macao, English minors, and students who have overseas intercultural communication experience held more positive attitudes towards ELF compared to those from mainland China, English minors, and those without overseas experience respectively. As English teachers, we can design courses or seminars on introducing ELF main concepts or imbed relevant concepts into existing classes to help students build the awareness of ELF. In this way, students can be better equipped to obtain English communication skills to cater to the English use today.

In summary, this study contributes to the field in several aspects. First, it broadens the research of ELF in the context of Asia. This study is the first study to probe ELF attitudes in Macao, an important multilingual society that is underexamined. Second, it reveals important factors influencing people’s attitudes towards ELF, and provides implications for future research and education to comprehensively consider these factors. Third, this study investigated attitudes towards ELF with calling for sustainable development from the Macao government, and thus, it provides implications from the perspective of social linguistics.

Although this study was carried out in the context of Macao tertiary education with a large number of participants, including undergraduate students, master students and doctoral students, the results may not be generalized to the whole Macao university students. Additionally, elementary students and secondary students may have different attitudes towards ELF. To draw a more convincing conclusion, participants of other age groups (e.g., children and adolescents) should be examined. Second, this study did not explore attitudes towards ELF in terms of gender differences. Females play different roles in society, which may impact their objective and motivation of English learning, and this may affect their attitudes towards ELF [14]. Future research may explore gender differences in the context of Macao. Third, as is indicated in this study, courses introducing ELF concepts have an effect on people’s perceptions, so future research on the effects of those courses on people’s ELF perceptions in the context of Macao is warranted [16].
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Informed Consent Statement: Page: 15 Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to signed consent of the research participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Prompts of Interview

(1) Are you proud of your English accent? Why/Why not?
(2) Do you think your accent is intelligible to NSs and NNSs when you speak English? Why/Why not? What about the acceptability of your accent to them? Please give your reasons.
(3) Would you like to be identified as a native speaker of English or non-native speaker of English (a Chinese speaker of English) when you communicate in English? Please give your reasons.
(4) Do you think people can tell you are Chinese from your English accent? How do you feel when someone recognizes that you are Chinese through your English accent?
(5) Do you think non-native speakers of English have the authority to own the English language? Why/Why not?
(6) Do you think non-native speakers of English have the authority to modify English based on their needs? Why/Why not?
(7) Do you think non-native speakers of English can use other languages to avoid misunderstanding when communicating in English? Why/Why not?
(8) Do you think teachers should help students communicate effectively or help them achieve a native like proficiency? Please give your reasons.
(9) Which one can be a good role model for Chinese learners of English—a native or a non-native speaker of English?
(10) Do you think students should get familiar with the cultures and traditions of native speakers of English? Why/Why not?
(11) Do you think it is necessary for students to have a native-like accent if they want to communicate successfully in English? Why/Why not?
(12) Do you think students should be exposed to both native and non-native English accents? Why/Why not?
(13) Can you share with me some of your experiences of using English for intercultural communication with foreigners and/or international students?
(14) How do you feel when you speak English with foreigners and/or international students? What do you think about them and their English?
(15) Do you want to maintain your Chinese identity when you speak English with foreigners and/or international students?

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