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Article

Negotiating Cosmopolitan Identity Through English: Experiences of Chinese Students Abroad

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how language practices influence the cosmopolitan identity of Chinese students in the UK. Drawing on interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students, this research explores how English proficiency and attitudes toward English as a global language shape intercultural orientations and identity construction. Students with higher English proficiency and an awareness of its global nature actively engage with local and international communities, fostering openness and cosmopolitan outlooks. In contrast, those with limited language skills or who perceive English as belonging to a specific nation tend to remain within co-national networks, thereby limiting opportunities for intercultural development. The study positions English not only as a communicative medium but as a tool for negotiating cultural boundaries and constructing hybrid identities within globalised contexts. Implications are offered for higher education institutions and language educators to support intercultural competence, identity formation, and meaningful engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity among international students.

Keywords: cosmopolitan identity; global English; multilingualism; language and identity; cultural belonging

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, English functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a carrier of cultural identity and ideology (Piller, 2015). As the dominant global language, it facilitates interaction across diverse cultural backgrounds and serves as a medium through which individuals access global resources and opportunities. Beyond its communicative function, English shapes the ways individuals negotiate their identities in multicultural environments (Määttä et al., 2020). Its widespread use has also generated an acknowledgment of linguistic variation, such as accents, idioms, and localised expressions within global English use (Galloway and Rose, 2015). These variations highlight how English operates not as a single, uniform code but as a dynamic resource that reflects diverse identities and contexts. The ideological and symbolic power of English is particularly visible in the sphere of international higher education. English-medium universities, especially in countries like the UK, attract growing numbers of international students who pursue not only academic qualifications but also social mobility and global belonging. Within these spaces, English functions as a gateway to global networks and is deeply intertwined with the formation of cosmopolitan orientations and identities (Jacobsen, 2015; Ruane, 2022).

Cosmopolitan identity, defined as universality plus difference, captures openness to cultural diversity while maintaining a rooted sense of self (Appiah, 2010). Such identity moves beyond the single nation, culture and ethnic group, developing global-minded individuals. Since identity is dynamic, shaped through interaction and broader sociolinguistic contexts (Tieu, 2022), international students' identity formation has been argued related to their English language proficiency (Bond, 2019), social engagement and development of intercultural citizenship (Baker and Fang, 2021). Thus, cosmopolitan identity is a more founded psychological concept that can trigger skills and practices by building a global self-rounded concept seeing oneself as a 'citizen of the world'. Individuals with cosmopolitan identity are expected to have high English proficiency, linking the indigeneous

cultural traditions and international values. However, it has been acknowledged that the diversity and heterogeneity in international students' experiences can cause their identity (re)construction, leading to threat to their national identity (Sung, 2022); and the monolingual orientation perception, e.g., the pursuit of 'native-like' English undermine students' confidence in their own abilities as communicators, 'shame' in not being 'native like' (Fang and Baker, 2018). This situation has gained more attention recently in the speakers from non-Anglophone background, such as Confucian contexts, where English is taught as a foreign language and cultural orientations remain more local tradition-bound (Wang & Liu, 2010). This gap limits understanding of how international students from diverse backgrounds negotiate and reconfigure their identities in globalised environments. (not polished)

To address the gap, this study explores the experiences of Chinese international students in the UK, focusing on how they negotiate their national and cosmopolitan identities through language practices while studying abroad. Specifically, it investigates their perceptions of English as a global language and their ongoing relationship with their first language, Mandarin Chinese, and how the language attitude influences their intercultural communication behaviours. Through qualitative interviews, this research examines how the sample of Chinese students' cosmopolitan identity formation under the English dominance within globalisation and international education. Ultimately, this research seeks to address three research questions:

1. How do Chinese international students develop cosmopolitan identities through their language practices during study abroad?
2. In what ways do study abroad experiences shape the negotiation between cosmopolitan and national identities in Chinese students' language practices?

Addressing these issues can contribute to the English language and cosmopolitan identity research in transnational contexts. By foregrounding students' real-life language practices, the study explores the lived realities of multilingual learners' identity negotiation in global settings. By highlighting the role of language in these identity processes, the study offers insights relevant to educators and institutions supporting international students, with implications for language use and intercultural engagement.

Literature Review

Global Englishes

English has become the dominant global language and a primary medium of communication across cultures and nations. Scholarly discussions about the nature of English have developed through several major paradigms, including English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes (WE), and, more recently, Global Englishes (GE). ELF research focuses on English as a contact language used among speakers who do not share a first language. WE highlights the localized varieties of English, emphasising how English evolves through interaction with local languages and cultures in "outer circle" contexts (e.g., India, Singapore) and "expanding circle" settings (e.g., China, Japan), where its presence stems from histories of colonization or processes of globalisation (Pennycook, 2016). While both ELF and WE foreground the pluricentric nature of English, they still largely reference norms associated with "inner circle" countries such as the UK and the US. GE moves beyond these boundaries by conceptualising English as a shared, fluid, and hybrid international resource that is shaped by global mobility, multilingual practices, and transnational communication. GE does not focus on identifying new varieties; instead, it emphasises the dynamic, emergent, and context-dependent ways English is used, the recognition of diverse speakers' identity, and the need to decentre native-speaker norms (Canagarajah, 2012; Galloway and Rose, 2015). In this view, English is not owned by any particular group but is continually transformed through global use, making variation, hybridity, and adaptability central features of the language.

This reconceptualisation has significant implications for the role of English in Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, where English is learned as a second language and overall

proficiency remains relatively low. In these Confucian-influenced cultural contexts, globalisation is often perceived as a threat to national harmony, traditional values, and security (Garside, 2024). Under such social belief, English, viewed as a medium of globalisation, is frequently associated with Westernisation, rather than being seen through a modern lens as a communicative tool (Dubin, 2023). This perception has been further reinforced by decades of traditional English language teaching in these areas, which has typically emphasised grammar, exam preparation, and standardised norms based on inner-circle English-speaking countries. Such approaches have limited learners' exposure to the socio-pragmatic aspects of English in authentic communication, leading to gaps in their understanding of speech act variations and communicative strategies (Ren and Han, 2016). Furthermore, from a national perspective, most people in Confucian-influenced countries have limited opportunities to use English in their daily lives or workplaces, and may never interact with a foreigner. This lack of real-world engagement reinforces the view of English as an exotic product and, in some cases, as a potential threat to the preservation of the native language and local culture (Dubin, 2023).

English and Identity

Identity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept, shaped by factors such as class, gender, age, race, and region, rather than being tied solely to national belonging (Fiske, 2010). For international students who are cultural travellers navigating multiple contexts, identity often takes on a hybrid form, reflecting attachments to both the home country and the host country. Gilbert (2010) emphasises that such hybridity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through interactions within diverse communities, producing shared cultural understandings.

English plays a central role in the development of these hybrid identities. Proficiency in English is frequently associated with global citizenship and intercultural openness (Benzehaf, 2021). Using English as a foreign language allows speakers to position themselves in relation to both their first language and English, while fostering cross-cultural connections and shared meanings (ibid.). At the same time, tensions may arise in some cases that English can diminish the first language's function as a marker of tradition and cultural history (Dengler, 2023). To navigate it, the localisation of English through regional accents, dialects, and integration with local languages has been suggested as a strategy to promote more inclusive, cosmopolitan identities (Fisher et al., 2024; Hickey, 2018).

The negotiation of identity through English also intersects with social positioning and structural inequalities. Historically linked to prestige and global power, English often necessitates significant investments in private tutoring or overseas education, which reinforces class stratification and shapes students' access to intercultural experiences, resources, and symbolic capital (Lie, 2017). Consequently, English use is never neutral: it mediates inclusion and exclusion within communities and highlights the interconnection between language choice, identity construction, and social hierarchy (Duranti, 2011; Wei, 2022).

English, Study Abroad, and Cosmopolitan Identity

Language choice mediates inclusion in local, co-national, and global communities. In this context, English functions as a cosmopolitan tool, facilitating communication across linguistic boundaries while allowing speakers to maintain connections to their cultural roots. For international students, study abroad experiences often shape hybrid identities and foster cosmopolitan orientations, enabling them to navigate multiple cultural contexts and develop intercultural capital (Marginson, 2014). Cosmopolitan identity is generally understood as a sense of global citizenship, characterized by open-mindedness, cultural tolerance, and inclusivity (Taniguchi, 2021; Balebas, Eshuis & Scholten, 2020). Watson (2018) highlights its key dimensions: appreciation of cultural diversity, solidarity with strangers, and mobility beyond the nation-state, reflecting a worldview that transcends national or cultural boundaries (Appiah, 2010). In higher education, cosmopolitan identity can be cultivated through students' English proficiency and linguistic resources (Karhunen et al., 2023), extended

engagement in foreign cultures that encourages self-reflection (Brown, 2009), and active participation in intercultural learning experiences (Wu and Tao, 2024).

However, cosmopolitan identity is not without critique. Being cosmopolitan can be a form of privilege, unequally accessible and functioning as a marker of social distinction in Bourdieu's sense. International students' English proficiency and the financial capacity required to study abroad reflect socioeconomic advantages that many families cannot attain, creating a gap between globally mobile students and those who remain in their home country. Moreover, the embrace of new cultural norms and critical re-evaluation of one's original cultural assumption can conflict with strong national or ethnic identities, sometimes eliciting xenophobic attitudes and resistance to cosmopolitan openness (Hill, 2023; Taniguchi, 2021).

Empirical research highlights the link between English and cosmopolitan perspectives. For example, Hickey (2018) documents an "English fever" in Thailand, where English teachers promote localized cosmopolitanism to foster inclusivity amid discourses of self-development and global competitiveness. Lankiewicz (2021) shows that multilingual speakers in Poland construct hybrid, cosmopolitan identities through translanguaging practices. Similarly, Jacobsen (2015) finds that global English courses in Denmark enhance students' cosmopolitan sensitivity. Despite these insights, the relationship between English, study abroad, and cosmopolitan identity remains underexplored in the Chinese context. Scholarship has largely emphasized tensions between cosmopolitanism and national identity, shaped by discourses of patriotism and citizenship (Kong, 2019). As China's global presence grows, investigating how Chinese students negotiate their cultural identities and cosmopolitan orientations through English in international education settings could offer nuanced insights into how language functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as a site for cultural negotiation and self-positioning.

Methodology

To explore Chinese students' cosmopolitan identity construction through their language practices in the UK, this study involves 40 Chinese students who have study abroad experience at tertiary level in the UK, including undergraduate, Master's, and PhD students. Participants were partway through their programs or have completed their studies within one year to ensure they had sufficient intercultural experiences and feelings while living in the UK. Recruitment details were shared through university email and Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat. Ethical approval was obtained by presenting participants with a consent form prior to data collection. Participants provided written consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded and used for research purposes.

Each participant did one-to-one interview lasting one hour. The interviews were conducted in either Mandarin Chinese as their first language or English as the second, depending on the participant's preference. Their language choice reflects students' English proficiency and their attitudes towards the global use of English. For example, when asked about their feelings about study abroad, such as 'How do you feel about your study abroad experience?' most students presented their challenges with English skills and concluded that they should have come with better English. Data were thematically analysed to uncover implicit and explicit ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2022), given the study's emphasis on the social and linguistic aspects of experiences in foreign communities. Interview transcripts, including a Mandarin one, were coded in English using Nvivo 14 for language consistency. Having all the codes in the same language can contribute to the overview of the whole picture. The codes were iteratively refined through naming, renaming, deleting, and merging, resulting in a comprehensive list. Broad themes were developed by grouping codes into smaller categories, then into four wider themes: functions of English, language proficiency, awareness of global English, and expression of global selves. These themes summarise subjective meanings and reflect participants' developed knowledge (Tuckett, 2005).

Findings

Functions of English

Interview data reveals that about half of the participants demonstrated an awareness of language-nation connection, reporting a strong national identity with their first language (L1), which fosters bonds with fellow Chinese or 'home' peers. In contrast, English as a second language (L2) primarily serves academic and professional functions. Additionally, L2 use reflects speakers' English proficiency and intercultural competence, reinforcing their identity as cosmopolitan citizens to some extent. When participants were asked to choose English or Mandarin for the interview:

Of course Mandarin. Why do I have to speak English with Chinese people?

(Ru, female, returnee undergraduate student, original in Mandarin)

I think English is for chatting with foreigners. Chinese (language) should be spoken between Chinese (people).

(Lin, male, undergraduate student, original in Mandarin)

These responses indicated that both participants felt it was more natural to speak Mandarin with another Mandarin speaker which suggested that these students perceived language closely bound to countries. The idea that a 'certain language links to a particular country' is driven by socio-political awareness and is "constructed, maintained and regulated" (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015, 286). According to Han (2011), national identity manifests a sense of belonging to the ethnic group, and this arose from the self-reviews and reflective activities (e.g., interview questions) in this study and showed individuals' self-categorisation. Participants who believed that language has a connection to their national identity considered a foreign language as being outside of their group, almost as a 'foreign body', which suggests distance and even resistance. This perspective may overlook the cosmopolitan view of English language as a shared resource and a fluid and adaptive tool for connection across cultural boundaries. Recognising language as a dynamic social practice rather than a fixed national symbol aligns with cosmopolitan ideals and better reflects the multilingual realities of global interaction (Rasman 2018).

In addition to its connection with national identity, Liang sees language primarily as a tool for social interaction and professional use, as shown in the following extract:

I always speak English in public, such as a social activity, a party. I think I have to speak English for socialising here in the UK. And I also use English in the class, even with my Chinese classmates because English is the university language, and it is the shared language among international students and local students... I don't feel that 'I have to' or am forced to do it. It is just what it should be.

(Male, PhD student, original in Mandarin)

Liang's quote reveals his view of language as transcending national boundaries, functioning instead as a neutral and strategic tool that brings people together. He presents himself as a cosmopolitan subject, identifying not solely with a national community but as part of a transnational, multicultural sphere. For him, English serves as a marker of belonging within this international space, both in practical terms and as an ideological stance. His lack of resistance to using English with the quote "it is just what it should be", reflects an alignment with global norms rather than any sense of linguistic imperialism or cultural displacement (Breckenridge, 2002; Sonntag, 2009).

Language proficiency

Language proficiency is the most common factor that may hinder students from using the target language to communicate. Guo, a fourth-year PhD student in Linguistics (Translation) in the UK, demonstrated fluency in English, choosing it confidently as the language of the interview.

Either English or Mandarin would be fine. I can do both, but maybe English is more convenient for your research?

(male, PhD student, original in English)

This quote reflects Guo's linguistic flexibility, a key aspect of successful intercultural communication. The speaker demonstrates awareness of the interviewer's cultural and linguistic context, adapting their language choice to facilitate mutual understanding. The offer to speak either language, followed by a consideration of what might be more "convenient" for the interviewer, shows both linguistic competence and intercultural sensitivity. Guo's readiness to accommodate the needs of an international research context (by defaulting to English) indicates a global orientation and a hybrid identity that transcends national boundaries, embracing both local (Mandarin/Chinese) and global (English-speaking) affiliations. His long-term study in English and overseas experience offered him high English proficiency and becomes comfortable and competent in navigating multiple cultural and linguistic spheres. Argued by Jackson (2011), cosmopolitan citizenship refers to the admission of reality of complex and multiple identities in the globalised world. Guo's relaxing tone of giving me chance to choose the language indicates his proudness in being 'a citizen of the world' able to operate in different languages.

One third of participants reported that they shifted between languages based on different contexts, which indicates that they were adapting their subject positions to contextual needs. Fan (male, Master's student) talked about his daily life experience of language shifting.

I usually speak Mandarin with my Chinese friends, but if foreign classmates are around, I switch to English so everyone can join in. I don't want to make others feel left out. It's about respecting everyone and making sure we all understand each other. In diverse groups, it's more important to connect than to stick to your own language.

(Original in English)

Fan's shift from Mandarin to English is a strategic use of code-switching, defined as "alternating use of two or more codes within one conversational episode" (Auer 2013, 1). This switch demonstrates a high level of intercultural communicative competence as he recognises the dynamics of mixed-language environments and adapts accordingly. Meanwhile, Fan embodies a cosmopolitan mindset by prioritising inclusivity and mutual understanding over linguistic or cultural boundaries (Rose and Galloway 2019). His willingness to adjust behaviour in multilingual settings reflects a global orientation and an ethical commitment to pluralism and coexistence. Rather than privileging his native language, Fan actively negotiates identity and belonging in a diverse context, valuing communication and empathy over cultural insularity. By switching between languages, intercultural speakers can navigate both cultures, developing multiple identities as cultural mediators (Fang and Ren, 2018). For international students, hybrid identities are shaped by their national identity, the receiving identity and various cosmopolitan influences. Thus, the awareness of English's global nature and the ability to use it bilingually or multilingually positively impact students' intercultural adaptation, community integration, and the development of a cosmopolitan cultural identity (Fisher et al., 2024).

Zhe reported that she often adapted English grammar to Chinese' or 'mixing Chinese and English in daily expressions' from time to time.

My boyfriend and I sometimes speak in English because I suddenly can't remember the Chinese works, or I think the English is more accurate. He graduated in Canada, so he can understand this mixture and why I do that.

(Female, undergraduate student, original in Mandarin)

Zhe's extract shows that she used translanguaging skills through dynamic interchange between languages during meaning-making activities. Cortazzi, Pilcher and Jin (2011) report that students may draw on the foreign language for some specific vocabulary that has no equivalent in their first language, regardless of how proficient they are. Translanguaging extends beyond language competence to encompass an integrated linguistic repertoire, showcasing speakers' multilingual proficiency (Rose and Galloway, 2019). This competence not only enhances sensitivity and adaptability in language use but also deepens cultural awareness (Byram, 2008). It enables users to navigate intercultural interactions and achieve a richer cosmopolitan immersion (Rose and Galloway,

2019). Zhe had stayed in the UK for four years and English-speaking habits had impacted her daily speech in the long-term. The grammatical and pragmatical feature of Chinglish¹ reflected her unconscious mixing of two languages to achieve ease and simplicity of expression (Yun and Jia, 2003).

Awareness of Global Englishes

The exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity, and access to English as a global language could arguably promote global citizenship, and further, foster students' cosmopolitan view towards their teachers and peers' accents (Jackson, 2011). For example, Feng (male, Master's student) shared his perspectives on the regional accents he encountered while studying abroad.

I know accents in London, other English cities, and Scotland are different—they're all still English. When I visited Scotland, I heard Scottish English everywhere—on the street, in restaurants, even at train stations. It was really interesting to hear the same words pronounced differently, especially with the real Scottish accent. I liked it!

(Original in Mandarin)

I watched Harry Potter when I was a child. I thought learning English meant imitating them [the actors]. The London accent does sound very upper-class, but when I visited London, I realised accents are everywhere, not as 'good' as I think. So, high-end and very down-to-earth...

(Jinyi, Master's student, original in Mandarin)

Sierra (female, Master's student) noted that getting used to different accents helped her appreciate the diversity of English and built her confidence in speaking English with greater flexibility.

In undergrad, I had a teacher with an Indian accent, and I found it hard to understand at first, so I shared notes with classmates to avoid misunderstandings. Back then, I thought English just meant British or American accents—but going abroad showed me it comes in many forms. That helped me become more flexible and less focused on 'standard' English.

(Original in English)

These quotes illustrate a shift in their understanding of English from a narrow, accent-centric view to a broader, more inclusive perspective aligned with cosmopolitan values and the concept of global English. Initially, Feng and Sierra associate English with British or American norms, reflecting a standard language ideology that privileges certain accents as more legitimate or "correct". This mindset often marginalises speakers of other varieties of English, such as Indian English, despite its widespread and historically rooted usage. However, the experience of studying abroad acts as a transformative moment. Exposure to diverse Englishes encourages the speaker to become more flexible and to adjust their linguistic expectations, embodying a cosmopolitan openness to linguistic diversity (Rose and Galloway, 2019).

It has been found that people with cosmopolitan mindset tend to be more positive towards linguistic diversity and the complex sociolinguistic landscape, given the cosmopolitan individuals appear to be more open to other cultures and willing to build connections with other communities (Yuwita and Ambarwati, 2023). Cosmopolitanism, in this context, involves recognising and valuing different ways of being and communicating in the world, rather than adhering to fixed national or cultural standards. By acknowledging that "English comes in many forms", Feng, Jinyi, and Sierra align with the view that English is a global lingua franca, shaped by local cultures and speakers worldwide. This recognition challenges linguistic hierarchies and supports a more democratic,

¹ Chinglish: a combination of Chinese and English, especially a style of English employed by Chinese speakers that includes certain Chinese vocabulary or constructions.

pluralistic view of language use which is an essential understanding of both cosmopolitanism and the Global Englishes paradigm (Rose and Galloway, 2019).

Expression of Global Selves

In addition to language, findings show that a small percentage of students' cosmopolitan identity associating with intercultural quotidian experiences. However, cosmopolitan identity develops through the long-term negotiation of various factors, including students' familial histories and experiences after studying abroad (Jackson, 2011). These participants expressed a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan self through critical reflection and intercultural communication in localised global spaces, shaped by multiple intercultural negotiations during their experiential learning (ibid.). To illustrate this point, I compare Xuan's and Chang's comments as examples to discuss the flexibility of language expression.

Xuan (female, Master's student) who migrated the UK as a child with her family and recently moved back to China, seems to adopt a cosmopolitan identity. However, she also reflected on not her difficulty in engaging with local Chinese people who had never been abroad even though she speaks fluent Mandarin.

I'm really glad I kept up my Mandarin after moving to the UK—it helped when I came back. It's hard to find close local friends who haven't lived abroad, but I stay connected with Chinese friends who have, and still keep in touch with my British friends. Maybe I'll make more local friends over time, but I'm not too bothered.

(Original in English)

Xuan expressed appreciation for maintaining Mandarin proficiency while abroad demonstrates language as both a practical tool and a symbolic resource. This aligns with Huang's (2020) concept of '*instrumental citizenship*', whereby transnational individuals maintain linguistic and cultural competencies that allow for fluid navigation across borders. She voluntarily engaging in intercultural contact with local Chinese friends highlights her hybrid identities through reciprocal exchange and negotiation (Kramsch and Uryu, 2012). Xuan's quote exemplifies cosmopolitan competence. Yet, her quote - "I'm not too bothered" about not having many local friends, initially seems in contrast Hannerz's (1996) idea of cosmopolitanism as deep engagement with otherness. However, seen through Calhoun's (2003) relational cosmopolitanism, Xuan's attitude reflects a more grounded, situated openness. Rather than rejecting local ties, she pragmatically balances with British friends, embodies a lived cosmopolitanism grounded in experience and reciprocity, not merely idealised openness.

The following quotes demonstrate high cosmopolitan identity although they do not explicitly mention the language abilities.

I see myself as a global citizen. Being born and living in China doesn't mean I have to fit others' expectations of how a Chinese person should behave. I'm here because I'm happy with my life now, but I might move abroad again to try a new lifestyle. (Chang, female, Master's student, original in English)

Ah ... I think I have changed a lot and have many characteristics of different countries. Not only Chinese. I think I have an American schedule, British manners, Russian temper, Japanese hobby, and Chinese taste, never changed...It's just hard to change a lifelong habit. No matter where I went, I could try local restaurants, but by the end it was Chinese food. It is the home taste. (Chengua, male, Master's student, original in English)

In these quotes, participants demonstrate a strong sense of cosmopolitan identity, describing themselves as global citizens unconstrained by national boundaries or cultural expectations. Although the quote does not mention language explicitly, it reflects an underlying ideology where language operates as both a resource and a symbol of mobility. By positioning themselves as someone who may live and work across countries, Chang and Chengua implicitly assume access to the linguistic capital required to do so, likely including English and possibly other languages. This

orientation toward mobility and self-determined identity aligns with the idea that language practices are not just about communication, but about constructing and performing a transnational identity (Pennycook, 2016). The ability to navigate different linguistic and cultural contexts becomes central to the cosmopolitan ethos the participant expresses.

Discussion

By centering on a non-Western context, this study contributes to broader discussions of identity, language, and globalisation, offering new insights into the ways Chinese students navigate cultural hybridity and linguistic plurality in transnational settings. The findings indicate present students' identity formation with language practices from four aspects: functions of English, language proficiency, awareness of global English, and expressions of global selves.

From the sociolinguistic perspective, findings reveal that students with higher English proficiency are more likely to develop a cosmopolitan identity by navigating cultural and linguistic boundaries, supporting Gee's (2008) view that language shapes identities and ideologies. Students like Guo, Fan and Xuan who can flexibly change their languages according to the communicative needs through code-switching or translanguaging demonstrated that they understood language and are able to use English as a tool for intercultural communication that transcends national boundaries. Jin's (2014) study similarly found that British learners of Chinese developed a 'Chinese' identity through language learning. The findings in this study emphasise the importance of recognising English's global and local diversity and focusing on dynamic meaning-making for intercultural speakers to foster a cosmopolitan identity. The flexibility to use English fosters a sense of ownership over the language and contributes to the construction of a cosmopolitan identity. This broadens individuals' sense of belonging to the global community, rather than confining it to a specific culture (Waldron, 2000). As people move across borders, their language use and identities become more flexible and intertwined (Calhoun, 2002). This dynamic interplay between translanguaging, multilingualism and cosmopolitan identity foster the development of inclusive communities where diverse languages and cultures are appreciated and respected.

In addition to English proficiency, findings of this study indicate that awareness of English as a global language, such as its diverse accents and expressions, can foster a more cosmopolitan outlook among L2 learners. Such an understanding promotes a practical and pragmatic approach to English use, where learners recognise that effective communication can take many forms and styles, depending on cultural and contextual factors. Importantly, this broadened perspective often leads to a renewed appreciation for their first language, which is no longer perceived as a hindrance but rather as an asset that enriches their linguistic repertoire and intercultural competence (Pichler, 2011). The openness to linguistic diversity contributes to learners' ability to "reflect linguistic history of a nation in order to understand the processes that helped shape the English spoken there" (Galloway and Rose 2015, 10), deepening their sensitivity to cultural nuances embedded in language use. By engaging with English as a pluricentric and evolving language, students develop critical insights into how language is intertwined with history, identity, and power relations (Lankiewicz, 2021; Phillipson, 2013). This reflective stance aligns closely with the development of a cosmopolitan identity, which requires recognising and valuing difference as a foundation for intercultural sensibility and ethical engagement with the world (Jackson, 2011; Jacobsen, 2015).

Findings also indicate that the length of time spent abroad can influence the development of a cosmopolitan identity. Participants across different levels of tertiary education, particularly PhD and undergraduate students, are more likely to identify as cosmopolitan citizens compared to Master's students, who typically experience shorter periods of study abroad. This aligns with the findings of Goldstein (2022) and Coker, Heiser, and Taylor (2018), who argue that the intercultural competence and global citizenship developed during short-term immersion programs often fall short of those cultivated through longer stays. While brief programs may still foster valuable outcomes, such as broader general education, enhanced critical thinking, and improved collaboration skills, longer durations abroad offer more sustained engagement with diverse cultures. The extended exposure

helps break down cultural barriers and nurtures cosmopolitan awareness, ultimately supporting the development of intercultural citizenship grounded in diversity, reflection, and personal growth.

Last but not least, this study reveals that studying abroad and engaging in English-speaking practices may reinforce students' national identity, while the development of a cosmopolitan identity remains limited. This is evident in some students' attitudes, where English is viewed strictly as a foreign language that should not be used among fellow Chinese nationals. Such perspectives suggest that students perceive language primarily as a national symbol to be shared within a cultural community, rather than merely as a communicative tool. This echoes Maeder-Qian's (2017) study of Chinese students in Germany, which demonstrates that, no matter what their interculturality levels are, many participants foregrounded their Chinese identity against other intercultural identities. Three reasons might explain this situation: (1) students who arrive in a foreign culture later in life can find it more difficult to negotiate new cultural identities than younger ones do; (2) with the increasing impact of China globally, students are more confident in their home culture and strength; and (3) as Chinese students constitute the largest international student group, it is easier for them to socialise with other co-nationals (*ibid.*). Participants in this study basically meet the above characteristics, so it can be argued that their self-identity is closely connected with their national identity and their first language.

Implications and Conclusion

This study has implications for UK HEIs and English language educators in China. Firstly, to raise international students' awareness of linguistic diversity, HEIs could organise language exchange programmes to allow students with different language backgrounds to share their experiences of learning English and how English is localised in their countries. HEIs could offer interdisciplinary language courses that not only involve academic language skills, but also explore topics related to language diversity, inclusive language and intercultural communication. These courses could provide students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills for engaging with diverse perspectives. HEIs might enhance support for international students by diversifying their staff, valuing their cultural backgrounds and leveraging their insights to better serve the international student community. Encouraging teaching staff to participate in student-led cultural events can foster closer connections between lecturers and students, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of students' cultural perspectives and needs. These events aim to promote intercultural awareness, foster mutual understanding, break down cultural stereotypes and encourage a more fluid perspective on cultural differences.

Secondly, the English language educators in China should increase students' awareness of the relationships between language, culture, and identity, potentially fostering a global sense of English ownership and cosmopolitan identity (Jackbson 2015). Instead of teaching textbook-based English, it is suggested that incorporating authentic materials like newspaper articles, advertisements and social media posts into teaching practices is essential, and schools could establish a systematic evaluation process for this approach, collecting feedback and reflections from students regarding its effectiveness in learning. These resources would expose students to genuine cultural contexts and language usage, fostering the development of both cultural sensitivity and linguistic competence (Hussein and Elttayef, 2018). As Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) suggest, meaning-making through communication is dynamic, arising from diverse practices and discourses. Enhancing students' linguistic and intercultural awareness of their local, national, and global communities is essential to cultivating a cosmopolitan worldview in international students, who are cultural travellers.

This study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample consisted exclusively of Chinese students, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. The implications of the study may not be applicable to a broader or more diverse population of international students. Future research could benefit from including participants from a wider range of cultural and national backgrounds to enhance the external validity of the results. Besides, the data was collected at a single point, either during or shortly after the participants' study abroad experience. However, identity

development and transformation are inherently long-term and dynamic processes that evolve over time. To gain deeper insights into how students' identities evolve throughout their international education journey, future research could adopt a longitudinal design that captures changes across different stages.

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