Is English a Brand: The Impact of English Language Learning on Product Evaluation

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Abstract

In Asia, there is a growing assumption of that English capability is a requirement to enter the global economy. Students studying English in Asia now outnumbers students in America. This paper explores the potential synergy of these two trends by examining an increased favorable attitude toward products from English speaking nations on the part of consumers who have majored in English. A wide area Web-based survey, administered in Taiwan, resulted in 582 respondents in a conjoint-based design. Analysis of variance found that respondents who were language majors exhibited higher levels of consumer ethnocentricity than those who had not majored in language. This finding raises questions about assumptions surrounding the international nature of English. English students in this survey do not go on to be more accepting of imported products. Conjoint analysis found no favorable halo effect for products that were related to English speaking countries of origin. These findings raise a flag of caution when considering English in the global market and emphasize the importance of localization in product marketing, including marketing communication as well as English language instruction.

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In Asia, there is a long-standing assumption that English capability is a prerequisite for entry to the global economy. English is a required course of study in most Asian nations, now starting from elementary school in both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. The population of students studying English in China alone outnumbers students in North America. The official Japanese government goal for English education is a typical example of how governments in the region link English ability and economic success (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2002):

> With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.

These government policies indicate the success of English in the role of the so-called international language. Simultaneously, the success of market economies has made the marketing message itself an international language of sorts. Consumers encounter product information daily from numerous sources. One central channel in this marketing communication is language, including the language in packaging, advertising, and product information. This paper explores the potential synergy of these two trends by examining the impact of English language learning on preference for products from English speaking countries.

Marketing Communication in the Global Market

The globalization of markets, observed by Levitt in 1983, included a merging of consumer preferences and a standardization of products on a world-wide scale. Over a decade later, Usunier

(1996) pointed out that much of the observed cultural globalization is based on the assumption that a modern lifestyle is represented by the American way of life, where the world tunes into CNN for news and learns English in schools (Pennycook, 1994). Although unclear what globalization means visa via a global culture, it is clear that cross national communication in the twenty-first century cannot be opted out of.

Firms face the challenge of constantly communicating internationally but with little certainty of what the communication medium entails or what it means to the receivers at a local level. This exploratory study examines the possibility that English has a beneficial role to play in the marketspace, and that such an advantage is increased by the local emphasis on studying English. In the case of non-differentiated products that are easy for respondents to understand and do not require any special instructions in a native language, a predisposition towards the English language could have a halo effect for products from English speaking nations in general, much like a country of origin effect.

Pre-existing bias toward a product has been widely studied in consumer behavior research domains. One of the strongest biases is based on where a product is made, known as country of origin (COO). Attitude toward the COO is generally considered to have two main dimensions: cognitive (Haubl, 1996) and affective (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Affective can include triggering associations and even emotions (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000; Fournier, 1998) being part of the symbolic aspect of COO (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) and potentially interacting with foreign language (English) studies. These characteristics are potentially open to influence by the trend of English education as students are exposed to textbooks depicting lifestyles in English speaking countries in a positive light along with the normative aspect of studying English as an educational and social norm. COO research has traditionally centered on extrinsic cues

(Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Steenkamp, 1990) such as price and brand name, however, other aspects have been considered, such as cultural and national historical ties.

Higher levels of education and income have been related to increased acceptance of foreign produced goods (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972; Schooler, 1971; Dornoff, Tankersley, & White, 1974), with younger people often found to be more positive toward imports (Wall, Heslop, & Hofstra, 1988; Schooler, 1971). Stereotypes held about other countries influence evaluations of products (Bilkey & Nes, 1982), for example, French speaking consumers, in Canada, rated French products higher than English speakers (Wall & Heslop, 1986). A shared culture appears to influence members to view made-in labels from other cultures with a somewhat homogeneous perspective, with culturally close or socially accepted countries receiving a benefit (Forney, Pelton, Caton, & Rabolt, 1999; Knight & Calantone, 2000; Wall & Heslop, 1986; Yavas & Alpay, 1986). Within Taiwan, Lin and Sternquist (1994) found that Taiwan department stores often promote products as *imported*, while Warden, Lai, and Wu (2002) observed English in Taiwan often used as a visual cue to represent a Western standard of living, thus simultaneously taking advantage of preconceived stereotypes and reinforcing them.

Adopting the well-established research thread of COO, we now test for the existence of a preference for products based on the language spoken at the products source. Such an effect, language of origin (LOO), for English should exist within environments where English studies are emphasized. Based on the preceding review, the following propositions were explored in this study:

P1. Blocking for COO effect, non differentiated products from English speaking nations will obtain higher ratings than the same products from non-English speaking nations.

P2. Chinese university students majoring in English will display lower levels of consumer ethnocentricity over their four years of study.

P3. Chinese university students majoring in English will display increasing favoritism toward products from English speaking nations over their four years of study.

P4. Within Chinese culture, consumers who have previously pursued English studies will have lower consumer ethnocentricity than those who did not.

P5. Within Chinese culture, consumers who have pursued English studies will rate products from English speaking nations higher than products from non-English speaking nations.

Study 1: Language of Origin English Majors

In order to test for the potential existence of an LOO effect, the most likely population to exhibit such an effect was surveyed. Study 1 surveyed only university students in Taiwan majoring in English. The strength of country image has the potential to confound results when looking for any influence from language. For example, in Malaysia, consumers' evaluations were dominated by the developed countries of U.S.A., Japan, France, and Italy (Mohamad, Ahmed, Honeycutt, Tyebkhan,2000). Product type also plays a role in COO (Gaedeke, 1973; Kaynak & Cavusgil, 1983). Considering these factors, it was important to find product/country combinations that lacked pre-existing preferences on the topics questioned. Additionally, COO effect is only present when all other product attributes are considered equal among alternatives (Lumpkin, Crawford, & Kim, 1985), thus we may assume that any LOO effect would only be present when country image is considered equal among the products being examined. In order to avoid the common phenomenon of preference for one's own country, Taiwan and China were not included as product sources.

Method

A pre-study survey was designed with questions based on the Warden, et al, (2002) study. Dependent variables were responses on a one (negative) to seven (positive) scale, rating product

financial risk, quality, and technology level (two questions for each dimension). Independent

variables included six countries (USA, UK, Australia, Germany, France, and Italy) and six products

(iron, blow-dryer, coffee machine barbells, cooking hot plate, bug light). These countries and products

were familiar to students in Taiwan (drawn out from in-class questioning). Respondents rated each of

the products, on the three dimensions, repeated six times (each time from a different country). The

order of the countries and the products were randomized. A 3 X 6 X 6 design employed MANOVA

analysis, with a total of 145 respondents answering the paper-based survey, at two universities in

central Taiwan. All respondents were first determined to be non-English majors in order to establish a

baseline of products and origins for the sample frame in general. Results showed a significant

difference among countries on all three dependent measures (Risk: $F = 26.25$ $P < 0.000$, Quality: $F =$

30.28 $P < 0.000$, Technology: $F = 60.41$ $P < 0.000$, $df = 5$), a significant difference among products

(Risk: $F = 8.01$ $P < 0.000$, Quality: $F = 7.87$ $P < 0.000$, Technology: $F = 16.31$ $P < 0.000$, $df = 5$) and

no significant interaction between country and product. Post hoc Tukey comparisons were employed

to find subsets of products and countries that showed no significant differences on the three dependent

measures. The resulting countries (Australia, France, and Italy), and the products (iron, blow-dryer,

and coffee machine) did not display any pre-existing COO effect or product preferences for

respondents and were thus adopted for use in the following English major sample.

University English Majors

The English major survey followed the pre-study survey approach with only the three resulting

countries and products that showed no COO effect. Again, the paper survey was printed with

randomized order for both countries and products. The consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma,

1987) reduced subscale of ten questions (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Mobley, 1993, p. 32-33) was

translated to Chinese and included. Only English majors were sought to participate in this survey, with

surveys being distributed to ten English departments at national universities in all regions of

Taiwan. A total of 500 survey forms were sent with 273 valid forms returned.

<center>Results & Discussion</center>

Participants

Average age of respondents was 22, with 74 percent female. The six COO questions related to

risk, quality, and workmanship exhibited a reliability Alpha of .96 and a Guttman Split-half reliability

of .93 while the consumer ethnocentricity questions exhibited a reliability Alpha of .91 and a Guttman

Split-half reliability of .86, both acceptable levels. The full factorial design, (3X3X6 three products by

three countries by six questions), resulted in 54 responses for each participant.

Exploratory factor analysis showed two factors clearly divided along country lines. The first

factor included all questions when the indicated origin was France or Italy (eigenvalue = 22.32), while

the second factor contained all questions when the origin was Australia (eignvalue = 3.17). These two

factors accounted for 47.2 percent of total variance. Factor analysis of the ethnocentricity questions

also exhibited two factors (see Table 1) that were purified by removing question eight, which did not

load clearly (*I prefer to support products made in Taiwan although it costs more*). The resulting two

factors accounted for 73.18 percent variance. Ethnocentric views in factor B (eigenvalue = 1.2)

appeared related to purchasing products that were not produced domestically, while factor A views

were mostly related larger social issues (eigenvalue = 5.4), such as unemployment and national loyalty.

Table 1. Ethnocentric purified factor results using Varimax rotation

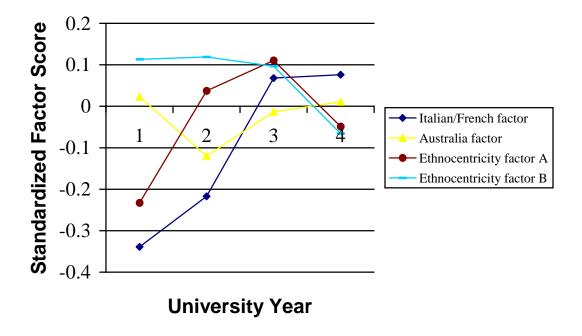|	Factor A	Factor B
Q4 It's wrong to purchase foreign products.	.915	.082
Q3 Taiwanese do not really buy imported good.	.903	.113
Q5 An authentic Taiwanese should buy products made in Taiwan only.	.899	.173
Q6 We should buy domestic products only to prevent other countries becoming rich.	.795	.317
Q10 Taiwanese buy imported goods should be responsible for those who lose jobs.	.74	.330
Q7 Taiwanese who buy foreign products will cause damage to enterprise and unemployment.	.722	.372
Q2 Taiwan products are the best.	.597	.317
Q9 In foreign countries, we should buy the products that can not be obtained in the domestic.	.274	.843
Q1 We should import the products which are unobtainable in Taiwan only.	.134	.874

Standardized factor means over the four university years are shown in Figure 1. Between the first two years and the last two years, there is a statistically significant increase in the scores given to the Italian/French based products (t = 2.22, df = 250, P < .027), while the remaining three scores show no statistically significant change. Thus, there is a lack of strong LOO effect (rejecting Proposition 1). However, results from the stratified sample of university students allows a temporal element to be inferred (based on year of study), which under examination does exhibit a LOO effect that declines over the four years as the non-English speaking countries of Italy and France receive increasingly higher scores.

Consumer ethnocentricity, which should play a central role in LOO, also appears to be undergoing change during these learning years, (rejecting Proposition 2). Ratings given to the Australian products are higher in first and second years, but not in third and fourth years, thus giving an unclear picture to any favoritism toward the English speaking country (rejecting Proposition 3). The fact that the sample frame was university English majors begs the question of what exactly is the motivation of studying the foreign language of English, as it appears that ethnocentricity increases. This sample did not, however, show if such a trend is specific just to university students in English

departments, or similar among all college students. In order to directly compare those who

had studied English as a university major with all others a wider area sample was employed in Study 2.

Figure 1. Factor mean results (all scores standardized)

Study 2: Language of Origin Non-English Majors

Study 2 follows up with an expanded survey over a wide area and large sample size including

non-student respondents in order to directly compare between those who had and had not previously

studied English.

Method

Study 1's survey was modified for online use. The online design included a graphic of the

product with the COO indicated in large Chinese characters. The six questions were placed next to the

product graphic with seven point scales clickable on the screen (see Appendix). Each package included

one of the three products and one of the three countries, with a single package displayed until the

respondent completed rating the six dependent variables. When finished with one package, another package would be displayed until all nine packages (3 countries X 3 products) were completed, with products and countries randomized for each respondent. This implementation followed a full factorial conjoint design.

Conjoint analysis has been widely applied in behavioral research (Cattin & Wittink, 1982; Green & Rao, 1971; Green & Srinivasan, 1990), and is one of the most widely used methodologies for measuring consumer preferences (Carroll & Green, 1995). Conjoint analysis is employed for its emphasis on understanding tradeoffs consumers make when evaluating competing options (Green, Krieger, & Wind, 2001). Manipulated variables (attributes), in conjoint experiments, represent clear different states (levels) to the subjects who rate combinations (bundles) of product features, in this case, the differences were product and COO . Respondents were drawn from around Taiwan though advertisements placed on two widely used Web portals.

Participants

A total of 612 respondents entered the survey Website, with 582 complete and usable data sets. Females outnumbered males (57% compared to 41%, with 2% unreported), with a mean age of 25.4 (SD 0.7). The sample reflected the high education of Internet users, with 67.2% having or completing an undergraduate degree, and 7.7% a master degree. In order to investigate any influence from area of study in college/university, previous or current school majors were reported.

Results

The six COO questions of risk, quality, and workmanship exhibited a reliability Alpha of .95 and a Guttman Split-half reliability of .91. Consumer ethnocentricity questions exhibited a reliability Alpha of .92 and a Guttman Split-half reliability of .89. The first result confirms Study 1's finding that

English majors exhibited increasing levels of ethnocentricity (see Table 2), with respondents

who majored currently or previous in English showing higher levels of ethnocentricity 2.14 (SD 1.28)

than those who did not major in English 1.82 (SD 1.2). Overall, the level of ethnocentricity is low, but

the difference is statistically significant (t=1.94, df=529, p=.053), with a Cohen value of 0.26,

reinforcing Study 1's finding of increasing ethnocentricity among students of English (rejecting

Proposition 4). The very existence of such a difference is unexpected and counterintuitive.

Further analysis of the data examined the importance of the two main independent variables,

product and COO. Since a full factorial design was employed, conjoint analysis could be used to

uncover utility values (part worth values) that explain the amount each respondent valued the

combinations of these two main factors. For the total sample, the two factors of country and product

were nearly equally important to respondents when considering the conjoint packages, confirming the

blocking of any confounding influences. When comparing language and non-language majors, there

was still no difference, meaning that LOO did not influence respondents who were more familiar with

English (rejecting Proposition 5). Dividing the sample along demographic factors, such as age, income,

gender, etc., also found no significant differences among the utility scores.

Table 2. Results between previous English and non-English majors

		Part-Worth Utility Values					
		Risk	t-test	Quality	t-test	Technology	t-test
Australia	English Major	.112 (.728)	t=2.06 df=490	-.086 (.671)	t=.253 df=499	-.207 (.906)	t=.799 df=499
	Non-English Major	-.069 (.59)		-.105 (.511)		-.285 (.65)	
France	English Major	.118 (.714)	t=.55 df=490	.074 (.458)	t=.227 df=499	.196 (.714)	t=.525 df=499
	Non-English Major	.07 (.59)		.091 (.532)		.249 (.706)	
Italy	English Major	-.231 (.627)	2.94 df=490	.012 (.566)	t=.033 df=499	.011 (.667)	t=.273 df=499*
	Non-English Major	-.002 (.528)		.014 (.454)		.036 (.634)	
Ethnocentricity Means							
	English Major	4.86 (1.28)	1.94* df=529				
	Non-English Major	5.18 (1.2)					

Note: Values in parentheses represent standard deviation; significance level represents difference between the two levels of the utility values tested with a paired *t*-test, Df=490.
* p < .05

Discussion

Ironically, it would appear that among those with more English education, no LOO effect is observed. This echoes Heslop, Papadopoulos, and Bourk's (1998) finding that although French Canadians shared the French language with France, products from France did not obtain higher product ratings. In the current study, those people with the highest level of exposure to English appear to have no assumptions about products from an English speaking country. Most striking are the results from both Study 1 and Study 2 that English majors experience higher levels of consumer ethnocentricity as they complete their university studies. This level is also higher than non-English majors. In Japan, Hinenoya and Gatbonton (2000) found a similar result that may help to explain this phenomenon. Although not examining specifically consumer ethnocentricity, that study found successful university language students displayed higher levels of ethnocentrism, leading Hinenoya and Gatbonton to conclude that . . . *the pressure to do well in examination English may outweigh any effects of ethnocentrism, traits, values and beliefs* (p. 236).

Such results may be seen in terms of Chinese or Japanese cultural distance from English speaking cultures. Starting from elementary school grades, students in both China and Japan are indoctrinated in their respective cultures. Although English is introduced early, and generally emphasized as an important tool to success, its accompanying cultural baggage may be left at the doorstep. The emphasis placed on examinations for entering high school and university, force students to conform more to the core values of their own culture, rather than less. Entrance to foreign language departments, in Taiwan universities, over the previous two decades, has been based on relatively high scores on the unified university entrance exam (in the top 10 % of all examinees). This does not, however, infer that those testing into the language departments have been outstanding language students, but rather, outstanding students in the educational system, which is exam oriented. These young people have succeed to gain entrance to the foreign language departments through their early adoption of core Chinese social values, including studying in order to score high on exams.

These results point out the very shallow nature of English learning in Asia. Rather than bringing learners into the complexity and richness of the cultures associated with the language, English is being adopted as simply a part of the education system—nothing more. In fact, those learning more of the language, and its associated cultures, may be, paradoxically, increasingly less impressed with the cultures associated with English. Warden and Lin's (2000) study of motivations for studying English in Taiwan concluded that the main motivation was increased domestic monetary opportunities, and no motivation toward *integrating* with the foreign culture was found. Western firms should not assume any benefit will be accrued to consumer perceptions of products simply because the firm is located in an English speaking country and the number of English learners is high within a target market segment.

Language Teaching Implications

The most immediate implication for language teachers is that English as a foreign language (EFL) students are approaching their training for its local meaning rather than its international meaning. The English majors of this study were increasingly exposed to English language training and understood where English is spoken, with 98% correctly indicating English as the language used in Australia. Nevertheless, they showed no increase in interest for products from the English speaking source (Australia) while also exhibiting increasing levels of ethnocentricity. Preexisting stereotypes may explain this phenomena and give some direction to teachers.

Today, Americans and the accompanying English language are the default values representing foreignness in Taiwan, even though the majority of resident aliens are citizens of Canada, Australia, and South Africa. The label American (美國人) is widely used to represent all non-Asian persons on first encounter, especially among children. Such classification is related to usage of the ancient Chinese adjective yang (洋) that was used to designate some object or idea perceived to have arrived from overseas and was thus non-Chinese, regardless of region of origin. In this way, English is closely linked with the United States, but not with other English speaking countries. All English speakers, and all products labeled with English, are simply assumed to be from the United States. English instructors in Taiwan, and more widely Asia, must place their instruction with this existing bias. Newly arrived teachers are especially vulnerable to making the assumption that students of English are interested in and inclined toward international issues and topics, especially those related to English speaking countries. Assuming students in English language departments are anxious to join or even learn about the English speaking world may be risky, resulting in a disconnect between teachers and students.

Rather than make assumptions about what English represents, teachers can examine the local context and motivations. Such a focus may reveal reasons and goals for language study that have little

to do with internationalism. In Taiwan, English training is so closely tied up with

examinations (civil exams, entrance exams, and company hiring exams) that students often expect, and

teachers often supply, training oriented toward passing exams. Lastly, whatever the motivations and

orientations of students, English teachers may need to spend more effort in breaking down the bias that

English is equivalent to the United States. Increased coverage of English in all its international

incarnations can increase the understanding English in its numerous international uses.

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Appendix

Online Survey Screen

本調查問卷的目的在於瞭解各位的看法, 每個問題並無所謂對或錯的答案, 調查結果僅作為團體意見分析之依據, 您的選答絕對保密, 所以敬請放心地依自己的意見回答。請詳閱左邊之產品及其原產國, 之後, 讀閱右列問題並從中選擇符合您意見的那一答案並在 該 ○ 內點選。

請注意！ 國家及產品可能會改變

吹風機

此產品的原產國是:

澳 洲

	1 非常低	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 非常高
您認為此產品的效能風險(效能非如該產品本應備有之機率)是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
您認為此產品的價格風險(物非所值之機率)是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
您對此產品的品質評價是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
您認為此產品故障的可能性是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
您認為此產品的做工精巧(緻)度是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
您認為此產品的科技化程度是:	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

請繼續 (還有 8 組題目)