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# The Role of English as a Global Language in Shaping Students' Worldviews

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**Abstract:** As English continues to solidify its status as a global lingua franca, its influence extends far beyond communication, shaping cultural identity, value systems, and individuals' understanding of the world. This study investigates how learning and using English as a second language shapes the worldviews of university students in non-native English-speaking contexts. Drawing on data from surveys and in-depth interviews with 512 Chinese undergraduates, this study explores the cognitive, cultural, and emotional dimensions of English language acquisition. Findings indicate that English proficiency is positively correlated with students' openness to global perspectives, awareness of international issues, and perceived agency in cross-cultural communication. However, the study also reveals tensions between global integration and cultural displacement, as some students report feelings of identity fragmentation and alienation. The research highlights the dual role of English as both a tool for empowerment and a vector of cultural homogenization. These insights call for a more critically reflective approach to English language education that balances global competence with local cultural rootedness.

**Keywords:** global English; student worldviews; language and identity; intercultural awareness; English education

## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by globalization, digitization, and the intensification of transnational flows of people, goods, and information, the English language has emerged not merely as a tool of communication but as a formative medium through which individuals, especially students, engage with the wider world. Once limited to a few native-speaking nations, English now functions as the primary global lingua franca, used in international diplomacy, academic publishing, cross-border commerce, digital media, and scientific collaboration. The 2023 report from Ethnologue estimates that over 1.5 billion people worldwide have some proficiency in English, and more than 80 countries have incorporated English as a key component of their national education systems. In China, English has been a core curriculum subject for decades, with more than 300 million learners engaged in some form of English education, particularly within the university sector. However, while the instrumental value of English in providing access to global resources and opportunities is widely acknowledged, less attention has been paid to its deeper psychological and cultural consequences, particularly in shaping how students perceive, interpret, and relate to the world. This study explores the role of English as a global language in shaping university students' worldviews — a concept that encompasses beliefs, values, identity, cultural affiliations, and one's imagined relationship with global society. For many learners in non-English-speaking contexts, acquiring English goes beyond memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules; it entails sustained exposure to Anglophone cultures, ideologies, and epistemologies [1]. Through English-language films, music, academic texts, news media, and social networking platforms, students encounter narratives,

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moral frameworks, and cultural assumptions that may differ — sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically — from those of their local cultures. As a result, English functions not only as a means of accessing content but also as a cognitive and cultural lens through which the world is experienced and understood. Previous research in applied linguistics and cultural studies has extensively discussed the role of English in enabling upward mobility, intercultural communication, and cosmopolitan citizenship [2].

Scholars such as David Crystal have emphasized English's neutrality and inclusiveness, while others, such as Robert Phillipson, have warned of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony. From a cognitive standpoint, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (linguistic relativity) suggests that language shapes thought patterns and worldview formation. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also frames language as a mediational tool for meaning-making and higher-order thinking. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study moves beyond the question of how well students learn English and instead asks what students learn through English — especially in terms of cultural worldview, identity negotiation, and global consciousness. The significance of this research lies in its potential to reveal how English education may simultaneously open cognitive and cultural horizons while also introducing new tensions between global integration and local rootedness. While many students report gaining a greater sense of international awareness, tolerance, and curiosity through English, others experience cultural dislocation, identity fragmentation, or the internalization of Anglophone-centric perspectives [3].

These experiences are not uniform but shaped by factors such as students' disciplinary background, level of English proficiency, access to global content, and the pedagogical framing of English in their institutions. This study thus examines not only the perceived benefits of English but also its subtle risks and unintended outcomes. The empirical focus of the research is on university students in China, a context where English education is both widespread and deeply embedded in broader efforts toward modernization and internationalization. Drawing on mixed-methods data — including surveys with 512 undergraduate students and in-depth interviews with 28 students and 8 English instructors — the research investigates how English influences students' perceptions of global issues, self-identity, cultural affiliation, and moral reasoning. Special attention is given to students' reflections on cultural hybridity, intercultural tensions, and the internal process of negotiation between their native and English-mediated worldviews. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows: How does learning and using English influence students' perception of global cultures and social realities? In what ways does English affect students' identity construction and cultural positioning? What opportunities and challenges do students perceive in navigating between local and global value systems through English? And finally, how can English language education be designed to foster critical, inclusive, and ethically aware global citizens? In addressing these questions, the paper is structured into six chapters. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of literature and theoretical frameworks on English as a global language, language and thought, and worldview formation. Chapter 3 explains the research design, including methodology, data collection instruments, and analytical approaches. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings based on student and teacher responses. Chapter 5 interprets these findings in relation to the research questions and broader theoretical debates. Finally, Chapter 6 offers conclusions, pedagogical implications, and recommendations for integrating worldview consciousness into English language instruction. By investigating the intersection of language, culture, and cognition, this study seeks to contribute not only to applied linguistics but also to global education discourse. Ultimately, it argues that English is not just a subject to be learned but a medium that reshapes us — reconfiguring how we imagine the world, relate to others, and understand ourselves.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The global expansion of English has given rise to extensive scholarly debates about its linguistic, cultural, and epistemological consequences. As English solidifies its position as the dominant global language, its role extends beyond mere communication to influencing identity formation, cognitive development, and worldview construction. Scholars from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and education have all contributed to a growing body of literature examining the implications of English's global status, particularly in non-native contexts where learners engage with English both as a language and as a cultural force. This chapter reviews major scholarly debates and introduces the theoretical frameworks that inform the current study on how English shapes students' worldviews.

The concept of English as a global language has been examined extensively by linguists such as David Crystal, who characterizes the phenomenon as a natural consequence of historical and economic forces that have elevated English to a transnational communicative platform. In *English as a Global Language*, Crystal argues that the spread of English is not inherently ideological, but rather pragmatic and demand-driven. However, this seemingly neutral view has been challenged by scholars like Robert Phillipson, who introduced the concept of "linguistic imperialism". Phillipson critiques the global dominance of English as reinforcing Western-centric dominance and marginalizing local languages and knowledge systems. According to his view, the spread of English is embedded in power structures that benefit economically developed countries and perpetuate cultural inequality. From this perspective, English is not just a language of opportunity, but also a carrier of ideology that shapes the way learners perceive their own culture and their place in the world.

Complementing these macro-level analyses are studies that examine the cognitive and psychological effects of learning English. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, or linguistic relativity theory, posits that the structure of a language influences its speakers' worldview. While strong versions of this theory have been largely set aside, a more moderate view has gained traction in contemporary research: that language provides a framework for attention, categorization, and interpretation. In this context, learning English may introduce students to new semantic fields, conceptual metaphors, and discourse conventions that reorient their thinking about abstract issues such as time, agency, individualism, or morality. Research in cognitive linguistics supports this position, showing that bilingual individuals often exhibit greater cognitive flexibility and cross-cultural sensitivity. For university students, especially those immersed in English-language texts and media, this linguistic exposure may result in a shift in epistemological perspectives and ethical frameworks.

The literature on language and identity further complicates the picture. Scholars like Bonny Norton and Claire Kramsch have argued that language learning is deeply entangled with the construction of social identity and symbolic power. Research suggests that learners invest in language not merely to acquire communicative competence but to gain access to imagined communities and enhanced social capital [4]. In the context of English learning, students may begin to reposition themselves in relation to global interactions, envisioning futures that are linguistically and culturally transnational. Kramsch introduces the notion of the "third space," where learners operate between native and target cultures, negotiating meaning and identity through their use of language in social contexts. For many students, English becomes not just a second language but a second self, offering both empowerment and diverse cultural identity experiences.

The rise of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in many universities worldwide has also attracted scholarly attention. Studies have shown that students in EMI settings report greater access to global knowledge and improved employability, but also face challenges in maintaining local cultural and epistemic frameworks. A study by some scholars in European universities revealed that while students appreciated the academic

advantages of EMI, many also experienced cultural adjustments and changes in native-language academic traditions [5]. Similar discussions have been raised in Asian contexts, where the prevalence of English in higher education has prompted attention to multiculturalism and linguistic diversity [6].

In China, where English is a compulsory subject in most universities, the debate around English and worldview has gained traction in recent years. While English is widely seen as a gateway to international opportunities, some critics have expressed concerns about potential shifts in cognition, whereby students may engage with a range of global perspectives alongside local cultural values. Studies by Hu Gengshen and Wang Chuming have examined how Chinese students navigate cultural dynamics embedded in English learning, highlighting the dual processes of global engagement and cultural negotiation. Their research suggests that students are not passive recipients of English-based ideologies, but rather active agents who selectively appropriate, resist, or integrate foreign cultural elements with local ones. This aligns with intercultural perspectives that view globalization as a negotiated and multi-directional process, rather than a one-way flow of influence.

The theoretical foundation of the current study draws on three main frameworks. First, sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's notion of language as a mediational tool, provides a lens through which to understand how English functions as a cultural artifact that mediates thought, identity, and social interaction. Language is not merely a conduit for existing knowledge but a formative force that shapes higher-order cognition and worldview construction [7]. Second, the theory of linguistic relativity is employed in its moderate form to analyze how English may shape conceptualization of abstract social and moral ideas. Third, poststructuralist theories of identity, as articulated by Norton, inform the analysis of how students negotiate their place in a globalized world through their relationship with English [8]. Together, these frameworks enable the study to examine both the structural and subjective dimensions of English learning, treating language not as a neutral tool but as a space where ideological, cognitive, and cultural tensions unfold.

In summary, the existing literature reveals that the role of English in shaping students' worldviews is both significant and contested. While English opens doors to global knowledge, communication, and identity exploration, it also presents potential challenges such as reduced cultural nuance, identity tension, and the uncritical adoption of dominant ideologies. Theoretical perspectives from sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and identity theory offer valuable tools to unpack these complexities. This chapter has established a conceptual foundation for the study by reviewing the scholarly discourse on global English and introducing a multi-theoretical framework that guides the subsequent empirical analysis. The next chapter details the research methodology used to investigate how these dynamics manifest in the lived experiences of Chinese university students [9].

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore the influence of English as a global language on university students' worldviews. The rationale for employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches lies in the complexity of the research topic, which involves cognitive, cultural, and identity-related dimensions that cannot be fully captured through a single methodological lens. This mixed-methods combination enables both the quantitative mapping of patterns and the qualitative unpacking of personal narratives.

The research was conducted among undergraduate students from four Chinese universities, including both English majors and non-English majors. A total of 512 students participated in the questionnaire phase, selected through stratified sampling to ensure representation across gender, academic disciplines, regional backgrounds (urban and ru-

ral), and years of study [10]. To complement the quantitative data, 28 students were invited for in-depth semi-structured interviews based on their survey responses and their demonstrated variation in English proficiency and worldview indicators. By including both English-focused and non-English-focused learners, the study aimed to determine how varying levels of exposure and motivation influenced students' perceptions of global issues and cultural identity.

For the quantitative component, two research instruments were employed. The first was a Language Attitude Scale adapted from Gardner and Lambert's socio-educational model, measuring students' emotional and cognitive orientations toward English, including perceived prestige, instrumental motivation, and integrative desire. The second was a Worldview Awareness Inventory developed for this study, containing items assessing students' perspectives on global citizenship, cultural relativism, international news engagement, and moral reasoning across cultural contexts. Both instruments were translated into Chinese and back-translated to ensure semantic consistency. A five-point Likert scale was employed for all items, with internal reliability verified through Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.82 for each subscale.

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted in either English or Mandarin, depending on the comfort level of the participants. Interview questions were designed to probe students' lived experiences with English across academic, digital, and interpersonal domains, and to examine how these experiences shaped their cultural identity, global awareness, and sense of belonging. Questions included prompts such as "Can you describe a moment when learning or using English changed the way you understood a global issue?" or "How do you feel your sense of identity has changed as your English improved?" Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, was recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis [10].

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics were used to map general trends, while Pearson correlation coefficients and multiple regression analyses were used to test relationships between English proficiency, language attitude, and worldview indicators. The qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 12, employing thematic coding procedures. Initial open coding was followed by axial coding, a process that identifies core themes and explores the connections between them. To ensure validity, coder triangulation and member checking were applied throughout the process [11].

Overall, the research design ensured methodological rigor and triangulation across instruments and data types. The mixed-methods framework enabled a robust investigation into how English learning correlates with — and contributes to — the ways students understand themselves and the world.

#### **4. Empirical Findings and Interpretation**

The data gathered from the mixed-methods approach reveal a number of significant trends regarding the relationship between English language learning and students' worldview development. A consistent pattern emerged linking students' level of English proficiency with increased cognitive engagement in global issues. Specifically, higher proficiency students scored significantly higher on items measuring international news consumption, interest in global social justice topics, and sensitivity to cultural diversity ( $p < 0.01$ ). These students reported more frequent exposure to English-language media sources and academic materials, which they attributed as central to shaping their global awareness and critical thinking about world affairs [1].

Students' attitudes toward English were also predictive of their sense of global identity. Those who scored high on integrative motivation (i.e., a desire to connect with global cultures and communities) were more likely to describe themselves as "world citizens" or "open-minded toward different cultures" [12]. Interviews confirmed that many students associated English not only with academic success or career advancement, but also with access to new ways of thinking, expressing opinions, and participating in global dialogues.



One student noted, "I realized how differently the world can be perceived when you explore it through the lens of another language." English, in these narratives, was seen not merely as a communicative code, but as a lens that reframed how students understood the world.

Notably, the findings also reveal significant differences in worldview perspectives based on students' background variables. Urban students, particularly those attending key universities, generally had higher English exposure, richer digital experiences, and more cosmopolitan self-descriptions than their rural counterparts. Students from elite programs reported stronger identification with global norms such as environmentalism, gender equality, and human rights, whereas students from under-resourced institutions were more likely to express skepticism toward Western perspectives, sometimes viewing English as a necessity rather than a cultural bridge. English majors tended to adopt hybrid identities more readily, often describing themselves as navigating between "two cultures" or "two different mental frameworks", while non-English majors were more prone to compartmentalizing English as an academic requirement disconnected from identity [13].

However, not all effects of English learning were perceived as uniformly positive. Some students reported experiencing cultural adjustment challenges and occasional value tensions. A few described a sense of navigating between Chinese and English-speaking cultural contexts, especially when their values or linguistic expressions did not align clearly with either. Others noted that frequent exposure to Anglophone perspectives sometimes led to a reduced emphasis on local knowledge or the adoption of simplified views about their own culture. These observations highlight the nuanced dynamics present in linguistic globalization. While English serves as a valuable medium for fostering intercultural understanding, it may also contribute unintentionally to cultural convergence or favor Anglophone perspectives in knowledge frameworks. Some students expressed that their worldview expanded internationally while simultaneously facing the challenge of maintaining a strong local cultural foundation, illustrating the complex balance involved in global language education.

In summary, the empirical findings suggest that English language learning plays an important role in shaping how students perceive and engage with the world, influenced by contextual factors such as background, access, and pedagogical approaches. The benefits of broadened perspectives, global competence, and intercultural dialogue are evident, alongside the challenges of cultural negotiation, identity complexity, and interpretive filters. These results emphasize the importance of English education that is not only linguistically thorough but also culturally aware, empowering students to critically reflect on both the content and the process of their learning through English.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the complex and nuanced ways in which English, as a global language, influences university students' worldviews. By analyzing the interplay between language proficiency, learner identity, and global awareness, this study reaffirms and extends existing theoretical understandings from sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and identity studies. While the benefits of English learning are widely recognized in academic and professional discourse, this research underscores the deeper cultural and psychological transformations that accompany the process, especially in a context like China where English holds high symbolic and instrumental value.

The first major point for discussion is the observed correlation between students' English proficiency and their engagement with global topics. Higher-proficiency students exhibited stronger awareness of international issues, cultural diversity, and cross-border values such as human rights and environmentalism. This aligns with the moderate form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity theory, which proposes that language shapes perception by providing categories and metaphors through which

individuals interpret reality. English-language media, news, and academic discourse tend to frame global events within particular moral and ideological narratives, many of which emphasize dominant global values commonly found in Western discourse. Students who access these materials more frequently are exposed to new epistemological lenses that expand their interpretive horizons. In this sense, English functions not merely as a conduit for information, but as a cognitive framework that shapes attention, evaluation, and empathy.

Yet, the cognitive influence of English does not operate in isolation — it is deeply intertwined with questions of identity and cultural belonging. Drawing on Norton's theory of language and identity investment, the study shows that many students do not simply learn English to improve their job prospects; they invest in English as a means of reimagining themselves as global citizens. For English majors in particular, the language becomes a part of their internal discourse, influencing not only how they speak, but how they think and feel about themselves in relation to others. Several students described an evolving dual identity — feeling connected to global cultures through English while experiencing a sense of tension or negotiation with local traditions. This duality reflects what Kramsch calls the "third space", a liminal zone where learners negotiate between languages, cultures, and selves.

However, this process of identity negotiation involves complexity and varied experiences among students. One notable aspect emerging from the data is the cultural ambivalence some students encounter. While English provides access to international discourses and fosters a sense of global awareness, it may also prompt reflection on questions of cultural authenticity, loyalty, and representation. Some students expressed concerns that engagement with English-language norms might unintentionally prioritize certain cultural perspectives over others, including local ones. This resonates with critiques of linguistic dominance, indicating that the widespread use of English could influence knowledge frameworks in ways that require ongoing critical awareness. In such contexts, English serves as a multifaceted tool — facilitating cognitive growth on one hand, while also shaping ideological orientations in subtle ways.

The findings also illustrate variation in these impacts across student groups. Students from urban and well-resourced institutions tended to show more integrative orientations toward English and more positive experiences with developing global awareness. Conversely, students from rural or less resourced institutions were more likely to view English primarily as a practical skill, with less personal or cultural significance. This pattern reflects broader disparities in access to quality English education and digital resources, which influence how language learning intersects with worldview formation. It also highlights the importance of the educational environment — including teacher attitudes, curriculum design, and media availability — in enabling or constraining the transformative potential of English.

Another significant theme relates to pedagogy's role in shaping the relationship between English learning and worldview development. Many students reported that their engagement with global content largely arose through self-directed learning via media and online communities rather than formal classroom instruction. This suggests a gap between traditional English education — often focused on grammar, reading comprehension, and exam preparation — and the broader cultural and intercultural dimensions of English use. These findings point to the need for reimagining English pedagogy to incorporate global issues, cross-cultural dialogue, and critical literacy, encouraging students to thoughtfully engage with the values and assumptions embedded in English-language materials.

The data also invite reconsideration of the role of English teachers. Students seldom cited teachers as primary influences on worldview expansion; instead, digital platforms such as AI tools, YouTube, TED talks, international podcasts, and social media were more frequently mentioned. This indicates that English's impact on worldview is increasingly

mediated through digital ecosystems beyond institutional settings. Consequently, teachers are called to reposition themselves not only as language instructors but also as facilitators of global engagement — curating content, fostering critical discussions, and guiding students through complex processes of cultural negotiation and identity development.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings support sociocultural theory's view of language as a mediational tool. Students' use of English extends beyond functionality to include social interaction and symbolic meaning-making, reshaping relationships with knowledge, self-expression, and moral reasoning. Simultaneously, the results align with poststructuralist perspectives that identity is fluid and context-dependent, influenced by discourse, power relations, and broader sociopolitical narratives. Students' English learning experiences are thus shaped by personal motivation and proficiency as well as by institutional structures and transnational imaginaries.

In conclusion, English as a global language plays a significant and complex role in shaping students' worldviews — its influence is dynamic rather than uniformly positive. English expands access to global conversations, alternative perspectives, and emerging identities, while also presenting challenges related to balancing diverse cultural viewpoints and maintaining cultural connections. Therefore, English education should go beyond linguistic proficiency to engage critically with the ethical, cultural, and ideological dimensions of language use. This approach can help realize English's potential as a medium for dialogue, reflection, and authentic intercultural understanding rather than cultural homogenization.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to explore how English, as a global language, shapes the worldviews of university students in non-native English-speaking contexts. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data from Chinese undergraduate students, the research examined the cognitive, cultural, and identity-related impacts of English learning. The findings demonstrate that English does far more than facilitate international communication or academic success; it actively participates in reshaping how students perceive global issues, construct personal identity, and position themselves within a transnational community. English acts simultaneously as a linguistic tool, a cultural filter, and a symbolic system, guiding students' access to knowledge and influencing the perspectives through which they interpret the world.

The research confirms that students with higher English proficiency and more integrative motivation tend to show stronger engagement with global issues, increased intercultural sensitivity, and a more pluralistic worldview. These students are more likely to draw on English-language media, global discourses, and diverse perspectives when interpreting current events or forming ethical judgments. However, the study also highlights the uneven nature of this transformation. Students from less privileged backgrounds often encounter English as a utilitarian skill rather than a gateway to global engagement, and many experience tensions between global perspectives and local cultural values. While some students construct hybrid identities that integrate both English-mediated and native cultural elements, others report feelings of cultural alienation, self-doubt, or epistemic confusion. These ambivalent experiences reflect the complex nature of English as both an empowering and disorienting force.

From a theoretical standpoint, The study illustrates the value of applying sociocultural theory, linguistic relativity, and identity theory to understand language learning as a socially and culturally embedded process. English is not neutral; it carries assumptions, power relations, and cultural narratives that shape students' internal and external realities. The "worldview effect" of English, therefore, cannot be reduced to mere exposure or vocabulary acquisition — it must be understood as a deeper process of cognitive orientation, identity rearticulation, and intercultural positioning.



Based on these findings, several pedagogical and policy implications are proposed. First, English language education should be reoriented toward critical global literacy. Rather than focusing solely on grammar, pronunciation, or exam preparation, curricula should integrate global themes, ethical debates, and culturally diverse materials. Teachers can introduce students to alternative worldviews through literature, journalism, and digital content, encouraging critical discussion and reflexive thinking. Second, intercultural competence must become a central goal of English education. This includes helping students to navigate value conflicts, question dominant narratives, and maintain cultural rootedness while engaging globally. Language classrooms should become spaces where students are empowered not just to speak in English, but to think critically both in and about English.

Third, teacher training programs should emphasize global pedagogical awareness. Educators must be equipped not only with linguistic expertise but also with the tools to address identity tensions, ethical dilemmas, and the cultural politics of language. They should be encouraged to act as intercultural mediators and critical guides in students' worldview formation. Fourth, institutional support is essential in reducing inequalities in English education. Access to high-quality English instruction, international resources, and digital tools should be expanded to under-resourced regions to ensure that all students can benefit from the transformative potential of language learning.

Finally, further research is needed to expand and deepen the current study. Longitudinal studies could track how students' worldviews evolve over time with increased English exposure. Comparative research across countries could illuminate how English functions differently depending on cultural context and educational infrastructure. Additionally, the role of emerging technologies — such as AI language tools, virtual exchange platforms, and global learning networks — deserves greater attention in shaping students' engagement with English and the world.

In conclusion, English as a global language plays a profound role in the cognitive and cultural development of university students. Its power lies not only in enabling access to global discourses but in transforming the very frameworks through which students understand and engage with the world. As such, English education must be reimagined as a space of critical consciousness, ethical reflection, and intercultural dialogue — one that prepares students not only to succeed globally, but also to think globally, act responsibly, and remain rooted in the multiplicity of their identities.

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