

# Why Don't You Accept Your Own English? An Investigation into Chinese College Students' Perception of China English

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## **Abstract:**

The global spread of English has witnessed the emergence of varieties of English in different places of the world. Hundreds of millions of English speakers in China have made English cross-linguistically influenced by Chinese, which makes China English different from native speaker English. However, it seems that China English is not well-accepted in China. As language attitude can affect the learning and teaching of English, this article attempts to investigate the Chinese college students' attitude toward China English with the data from previous studies in the literature. The study indicates that most Chinese university students still feel that China English is not equal to native speaker English and they regard English as the OTHER'S language. An analysis of the reasons behind the college students' perception of China English and the possible pedagogical implications can lend support to the adjustment of College English teaching in China to encourage the students to bravely accept their ownership of the English language so that they can communicate in English without self-stigmatizing their own English or struggling to aspire to the unattainable native speaker competency.

**Keywords:** *China English, Chinese College Students, Perception*

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## I INTRODUCTION

English has gained considerable popularity and importance over the last three decades in China. China now has the largest number of English learners in the world and it is estimated that there are more than 25 million English Learners in China [1]. Among them, College English learners are one of the largest English learning groups in China.

However, although the general English proficiency is improving, most Chinese people still treat English as OTHERS, not THEIRS [2]. The previous studies indicate that English teaching in China is based exclusively on standard American and British English. English learners and teachers in China are not willing to accept China English. Most students don't want to be recognized as a Chinese [3]. In several

extreme cases, some students even discriminate their own people because of China English [4]. Even though millions of Chinese people are speaking English, they don't identify their English equal to native English. They subconsciously position their English as inferior to native speaker English. In the depth of their heart, they don't think they own the language. This contradicts with the sociolinguistic view of the equality of languages, in which is "there is not only one English, but many Englishes. No one has exclusive rights to the language. Anyone who speaks it has the right to own it" [5].

As a huge number of Chinese college student are required to learn English, their values and attitudes toward English will influence not only their own English study but also probably the following generations. Thus, this paper aims to examine the college students' perceptions of China English, probe into the reasons behind it, and analyze the implications to English teaching so as to draw attention of the English educators, textbook compilers, curriculum designers and et al on the fact that as hundreds of millions of Chinese English speakers have been unavoidably creating a Chinese variety of English, English education should adapt itself to this unavoidable change.

## **II BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 World Englishes to Unequal Englishes**

English has been exported so successfully that the native speakers can no longer control it, thus a number of Englishes with distinctive features have been evolving in different parts of the world because of different geographical, socio-historical and political reasons. They are called World Englishes and are divided into the inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle Englishes. "Inner circle" is where English used as a first language, such as the UK, US, and New Zealand. "Outer circle" is represented by countries like India and Singapore, where English functions as an institutionalized additional language. "Expanding circle" is where English is used as a foreign language, for instance, China, Japan, and Korea. It is the truth that English speakers from the expanding and outer circles have far more outnumbered the inner circle English speakers [6-8].

By claiming the concept of World Englishes, Kachru and his followers endeavor to advocate the equality of the variations of English. For them, different variations need to be codified and equally treated. However, as much as the World Englishes scholars try to spread the idea of the equality of Englishes, the Englishes are still unequal, not linguistically but ideologically and politically. The fight for the equality of the English variations is still an on-going process. Thus, a group of scholars wants to expose the unequal Englishes in the post-colonial age and find ways to address the problem [5]. By doing so, they essentially hope that equality of language can be achieved, speakers in all the circles need to know that "there is not only one English, but many Englishes. No one has exclusive rights to the language. Anyone who speaks it has the right to own it" [5].

## 2.2 The definition and codification of China English

Under the umbrella of world Englishes and with increasing English learners in China, the Chinese variation of English has attracted significant research attention. Although it is claimed that the extent to which Chinese variety is legitimate is still under dispute [9], the present study firmly believes Chinese people have the right to own the language. Besides, with a huge number of English learners and as China moves to international stages with increasing self-assurance, China English will continue to develop. The English speakers in China will inevitably create a socially accepted Chinese variety of English [3].

During the past 30 years, several terms have been used to describe this variation, including “Chinglish” “Chinese English” and “China English”. “Chinglish” is the English influenced by the Chinese language but commonly regarded as nonsensical or ungrammatical English and thus has negative connotations. The term “Chinese English” is also regarded as bad English [10]. Among the different terms, “China English” is more recognized because “Chinese English” and “Chinglish” have strong negative implications in China [11]. Thus, the paper inclines to use “China English” for the Chinese variation of English.

According to Wang (2015), the term China English was initially used by a Chinese translator Ge Chuangui to refer to English expressions unique to Chinese culture. China English advocators have been trying to define China English. According to He and Li (2009), China English can be defined as “a performance variety of English which has the standard Englishes as its core but colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics, and which is particularly suited for expressing content ideas specific to Chinese culture through such means and transliteration and loan translation”.

To legitimate China English, scholars have been making efforts to identify and codify the salient and distinctive linguistic features of China English. A large number of phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features have been identified and documented by some scholars in China and abroad.

On the phonological level, China English can be obviously noticed because of the general lack of voiced fricatives and certain types of diphthong simplification, avoidance of weak forms and functional words, and et al [10]. Besides, China English has focused on segmental instead of suprasegmental features, which include weakening and liaison, stress, juncture, and pitch [2]. As it is a large country, the accents also vary from place to place. Another study made an attempt to document the most salient features of the pronunciation of English by speakers from different areas of China [12].

On the lexical level, China English carries many words uniquely in Chinese culture. Researchers found that there are many loan translation on the lexical level, such as “paper tiger” [10]. When expressing these notions in English, equivalent expressions cannot be found in native speaker English for the words like “Fengshui”, “Taichi”, “one country and two systems”, “open door policy” and et al. Thus, a lot of new words and phrases have been created by loan translation [3].

On the syntactical level, the distinctive features of China English are four morphosyllable idioms, parallel structures, and null subject parameters [10]. Four morphosyllable idioms in Chinese like “effort halved, result doubled” were loaded with specific culture meaning; Parallel structures are sentences like “a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit” were used to concisely translate Chinese in English; Null subject sentences like “Very glad to meet you” are considered as not acceptable in native speaker English or carries the intimate implication [3]. The sentences with distinct syntactical features are influenced by the Chinese proverbs and Chinese sentence structures, some of them have been accepted by native speakers.

On the discourse and pragmatic level, the concepts of face, politeness, and filial piety are quite different from western counterparts. Chinese people are inclined to lower the self-positioning and respect the other people, be very humble when accepting compliments, and be very polite when addressing the elders and the superiors [13].

With the above mentioned distinctive features, China English is inevitably developing with Chineseness so that it has been quite different from native speaker English. Although codifying and documenting China English is still an on-going process, this study strongly believes that China English should be respected by their own speakers and English learners in China have the right to own their English.

### 2.3 The distorted perceptions of China English

However, China English is far from being accepted. There is always stigma attached to China English. There are vivid qualitative narratives of English learners in China suffering from not willing to accept their own English in the literature. Nuske (2018) portrayed a Chinese English learner Linlin’s journey of accepting China English. At the beginning of her study in the United States, she repudiated China English even to the extent of DISCRIMINATING her own people. It took her a long time to accept her own English and identity.

Linlin is just one of the hundreds of millions of learners who hold distorted perceptions toward their English. Another study about a Chinese EFL teacher’s identity formation reported that the teacher had been tortured by his “deaf-and-dumb” English and dared not to open his mouth because of his pronunciation when he was a college student in Guangzhou province (Tsui, 2007).

In another study, when a group of college students was asked whether they could use some expressions with Chinese pragmatic knowledge, such as “The big room has three rooms”, a student responded that if they speak English like this, they could only get DESPISED [11].

It can be noticed in the above cases that some college students have been self-stigmatizing their own English and even discriminating or despising their own people because of China English. Why don’t the college students accept China English? Why do they think the Chinese way of expressing themselves

would get despised? Why don't they dare to speak their English? These examples listed above may represent some extreme distorted thoughts, but they definitely indicate that Chinese college students don't think they have the ownership of English, which triggered the author's interest of investigating the Chinese college English students' perception of China English. Three research questions are to be answered for pedagogical purposes: First, how do Chinese College English learners perceive China English? Second, why do they have this perception towards China English? Third, what are the pedagogical implications?

### III METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of investigating the college students' perception of China English, this article reports the findings of 5 quantitative empirical studies published in the recent years, which included 4085 college students in a wide range of disciplines and grades from different areas in China (see Table 1). The 5 empirical studies mainly used questionnaires and interviews to collect data and then analyzed the data from different perspectives. Piecing together the data from the studies can show us the Chinese college students' attitude towards China English in a more comprehensive way.

### IV RESULTS

As pronunciation has always been the focal point of the studies on the acceptance of China English, this paper then divided the findings into two categories: the perception of pronunciation of China English, the perception of the other distinctive features of China English, which include the lexical, syntactical, discourse, and pragmatic features.

In terms of the acceptance of pronunciation and accent, although the results of the previous study seem to vary from each other, quite a number of students can't accept their accent and pronunciation of China English. In Kirkpatrick and Xu's (2002) study, about 60% of the students don't want to be recognized as a Chinese when they speak English. In He and Zhang's (2010) [16] study, 41.6% of the student participants wanted to sound like a native speaker, while 58.2% of them didn't mind speaking English with the accent of the mother tongue, as long as listeners can understand them. Wang's (2015) study reported that although 97.8 % of the participants can understand China English pronunciation, the acceptability of the accent of China English is 34.7%. In Wei's (2016) study [14], 40.9% of the participants agreed that the pronunciation should be as close as the native speakers' pronunciation. Native speaker pronunciation is the norm. Only 11% of the participants agree with the legitimacy of China English pronunciation. In the latest study, Fang (2016) [15] still found that 79.3% of the participants wanted to sound like a native speaker. Based on the above data, although the acceptability of China English pronunciation varies from each other, it is reasonable to claim that many students in China are struggling with their China English accents because they want to sound like native speakers.

In terms of other features of China English, He and Zhang (2010) found that 46% of the students prefer native English grammar, arguing that native English can guarantee effective communication and avoid misunderstanding and EMBARRASSMENT. Wang (2015) reported the acceptability level of lexical,

syntactic and discourse features of China English is even lower than acceptability of China English accents, they are respectively 30.2%, 32.3%, and 25.9%. Some students even indicated that if they don't follow the standard norms, they would get DESPISED.

**TABLE I: The researches on Chinese college students' perceptions of China English**

Research Conductor & Year	Place	College students Participants (Numbers & main characteristics)	Main focal linguistic aspect	Main Related findings
Kirkpatrick & Xu (2002)	A key university in Beijing	N=171 Main characteristics: 1. 88 English majors, 58 females and 30 males 2. 83 engineering majors, 77 males and 6 females	General but more focus on pronunciation	1. 60.8% of the participants felt that they did not want to sound like a Chinese when they speak English. 2. Most participants felt that it was impossible that China English would be a variety of English. 3. 64.3% agreed that most Chinese learn English because they need to communicate with the native English speakers. 4. There were differences in attitudes between English majors and non-English majors. 5. Female English majors were fascinated with standard English.
He & Zhang (2010)	4 universities Notes: 1 key university, 3 second-tier universities located in different areas of China	N=820 Main characteristics: 1. From a variety of disciplines but excluding English majors 2. 795 valid questionnaires 3. 411 males, 384 females Note: 1. another 210 teachers participated in the survey 2. Matched guise experiment	Pronunciation; Grammar	1. Most of the participants showed preference to native speaker norms. 2. 41.6% of the students preferred to sound just like a native speaker. 3. Male participants have more tolerance on China English 4. 61.4% agreed that China English can possibly be included if it were codified and implemented systematically.
Wang (2015)	12 universities Notes The universities are from 6 provinces, 2 for each.	N=1589 Main characteristics: 1. From a wide range of disciplines 2. The length of their English study is from 6 to 15 years	Phonology; Lexis; Syntax; Discourse pragmatics	1. More than 96% of the participants had no problem in understanding expressions with Chinese English features. But only 30.8% chose to accept China English. 2. China English had not been pervasively accepted. 3. Accents enjoyed higher acceptability (34.7%) than other features at the lexical (30.2%), syntactic (32.3%), and discourse pragmatic levels (25.9%). 4. High percentages of participants rejected most syntactical and discourse pragmatic features of China English.
Wei (2016)	4 key universities in Beijing	N=1196 Main characteristics: 1. 690 females and 506 males 2. spread over a variety of disciplines 3. 1154 valid data	Pronunciation; The manner of expression	1. Most of the participants felt that native-speaker English is the criteria of good English. When using English, good speakers are those who is able to understand and be understood by the native speakers, pronounce as close as native speakers and think in a native-like way. 2. Most students felt that English with Chinese features should be corrected in accordance with the native standards. 3. 216 among the participants felt that China English should be respected.
Fang (2016)	1 university	N=309 Main characteristics:	Pronunciation	1. 11% of the participants were not satisfied with their own pronunciation at all and more than 60% were not

	in Southeast China	From 5 different disciplines		<p>very satisfied while only 1.3% of them felt satisfied with their own pronunciation.</p> <p>2. 79.3% of the students wanted to sound like a native speaker.</p>
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Generally speaking, although China English can be understood, the pervasive negative attitude has been attached to it. There are still a large number of Chinese college students cannot willingly accept it. Even though some students can accept the pronunciation of China English, most of them prefer native-like pronunciation. Besides, although other features of China English have received less research attention, it can be noticed from the previous studies that most of the students agree that lexical and grammatical features of China English will influence comprehension and can lead to embarrassment, thus preference is still on native standards. In the eyes of some Chinese college students, China English is not equal to but inferior to native speaker English.

## V DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Reasons behind results

The linguistic inequality between China English and native speaker English can be interpreted as, from the World English scholars' perspective, "both structural and subjective, political and personal" (Joseph, 2005).

In the case of China English, on the higher political level, English fluency is associated with globalization, educational reproduction, social class division, and et al. English thus enjoys an established prestige and is a highly valued symbolic capital in China. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital is tangible or abstract commodities that enable individuals to have socially recognized forms of prestige. People in the society try their effort to get the symbolic capital to increase their total amount of capital [17].

To be specific, communication between people take place within a "linguistic market", such as the education system and the labor market. English proficiency has been a passport and benchmark of the job market and further education. It is a practical tool, a superiority, a distinction from others, a pivotal to move upward [18]. So, power is attached to English, thus it is valued on the different social levels.

As English has a symbolic power, English education system caters to the social need in an extreme way. To begin with, the instruction model at schools is mostly based upon the Native speaker English, especially the American English [19]. In 2007, the Higher Education Department of MoE published College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR), which all the universities in China need to follow [20]. The teaching materials are centered around CECR and are mainly based on standard British or American English. There seem to be no other alternatives for the teachers but to stick to the native speaker English.

Besides, the high-stakes exams such as College English Test (CET) are based on British and American English. CET is organized by the National College English Testing Committee (NCETC) under the supervision of the Higher Education Department of the MoE in China [21]. All the college students in China except for English majors are required to take CET4. It is estimated that about 18 million college students take part in the test annually [22]. However, the whole test, especially the listening subtest, is based on standard American or British English. It unavoidably influences language learning and teaching in the nation-wide universities, which will further entangle the native speaker model into an impasse.

On the individual level, the seemingly self-controlled choices then become essentially socially constructed. The students are molded by the society to prefer native speaker English. As the upper levels value English highly, anxiety, frustration, and uneasiness are felt by the students when they learn English. They then follow anxiously what the society, the school, and the teachers instruct them to do.

## 5.2 Pedagogical Implications

As language attitude can significantly influence the students' language acquisition, College English teaching in China should take into consideration the general unacceptance of China English and preference to American and British English. However, if sticking to unattainable native English models, English learners would suffer from more anxiety, discouragement, and thus possibly fail in their English learning. Then, the impasse will never be solved. Thus, researchers have been arguing about what kind of English model can be applied to China.

Kirkpatric (2006) examined three potential models of English teaching in East Asia and Australia [23]. They are respectively native speaker model, nativized model, lingua franca model. He suggested that the lingua franca model can be used in the context where English is used mainly by non-native speakers. However, as China has a strong attachment and enchantment to the standards and correctness, nativized model and lingua franca model cannot be accepted by the students. Besides, as China English has not been fully developed and codified, it cannot be adopted as the sole source of English teaching. Thus, can English teaching continue to rely solely on native speaker model? The answer is definitely "No". If we only count on native speaker model, there would be an impasse. Enchantment of native speaker model will never be broken up. Many college students in China will continue to be tortured by not being able to sound like a native speaker and deny their own identities.

An eclectic approach could be a possible solution. Li (2006) proposed a Standard English plus model, in which English teaching should include not only the native speaker English and but also English with Chineseness. It systematically includes China English in English teaching. Standard English can be still used as a core, but more attention should be paid to China English, especially those codified features, which can promote the students to accept their own English and identity.

Yet we need to realize it's easier said than done. As the enchantment of native speaker English in China is deeply rooted, the general acceptance and implementation of learning China English require more from

society at large. Along with adjusting teaching model in College English class, awareness should be raised from different perspectives not only to the students, but also to English educators, textbook compilers, curriculum designers, parents, teachers, and et al.

Firstly, they need to be aware of the fact that English is most likely used by Chinese speakers to communicate with non-native speakers. It is estimated that 80% of English communication takes place between non-native speakers [24]. The purpose of English learning should be reconsidered. Second, they should be noticed that native-speaker proficiency is unattainable (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Because English is learned as a foreign language in China, it is almost unlikely for the students to acquire native-like proficiency as they are mostly taught by non-native teachers who don't have native-like proficiency and without learning environment to communicate in English after class, let alone to communicate with native speakers. Last but not the least, they should be informed that even though they cannot achieve native-like fluency, they can still have the ownership of English, because anyone who speaks English has the right to own it [5]. Despising or self-stigmatizing themselves is neither the goal nor the end of their English learning. The whole society should realize the above-mentioned truths and work together to make the proper adjustments to every aspect of English teaching, such as curriculum, textbooks, testing and assessment, and et al.

## **VI LIMITATIONS**

The data of this article is mainly based on the previous findings, which applied different indexes and parameters to investigate the students' perception. Although piecing together the previous findings can provide the readers with a more comprehensive general picture, the precision and accuracy have been impaired. If provided enough resources, the author aims to further this research to add her own voice in helping the Chinese learners accept their ownership of English.

## **VII CONCLUSION**

With the rapidly increasing number of English learners in China, the general proficiency of English has been improving and the Chinese variation of English has become more and more distinct. However, China English is not well-accepted among the college students and they don't perceive China English equal to native speaker English. Many college students ambitiously aim to acquire the unattainable native-speaker English. However, as almost none of them are able to acquire the native-like competence, some students become discouraged in learning English, which reinforces their belief that they don't have the ownership of the language and they begin to despise and self-stigmatize their own China English.

English teaching should not make the students despise or self-stigmatize their own English. It is thus advocated that efforts should be made to gradually change the students' perception of China English. Since the students still have a strong attachment to native speaker English and China English is not well-codified enough, if we suddenly replace native English model with a total nativized model, they won't accept it. However, if we continue to rely on the native speaker model, there would be an impasse,

in which the students would continue to perceive China English in a negative way. Consequently, there is an urgent need to promote linguistic diversity and adjust the pedagogical models in language teaching in China. Codified features of China English should be included in English teaching. General awareness should be raised to the unattainable nature of native speaker proficiency and the inalienable ownership of their own English.

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