

English Teachers' Attitudes Toward China English

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Abstract

China English has garnered much attention lately as a growing trend of English variation. The study aimed to explore the language attitudes of Chinese English teachers towards the variety of English in China and further probe into the cause of their attitudinal evaluations. A mixed research method (Questionnaire survey and focused interview) was employed. A total of 23 English teachers participated in the current study. The study revealed that nowadays, many teachers still view standard English, either British or American, as the pedagogical teaching model in China. Since only Chinese English users can use and understand China English, there are better fits for a teaching paradigm than China English. However, most participants claim that some idioms are most effectively expressed in Chinese, and there should be a variety of English in China. The current study's findings may be necessary for English instruction in situations where English varieties are emerging in the globalized world.

Keywords: China English, language attitude, English teacher, world Englishes

1. Introduction

1.1 Background information

With globalization, English is being promoted as a global language in more and more countries. However, the standard varieties of British and American English have long been accepted and promoted as the only internationally acceptable pedagogical models for learning and teaching English. With many English learners appearing in every corner of the world, a range of local English varieties have emerged around the world (Bolton, 2012). Out of all the nations, China has the largest population of English language learners (Yajun, 2002; Bolton, 2006). Therefore, the increasing number of Chinese English learners has inevitably resulted in a unique variety of English in China, known as China English (Ge, 1980). China English has generated heated discussion in recent years as a developing English variety. Yun and Jia (2003) stated that English in China has experienced three stages. It started from Chinese Pidgin English to Chinglish, and finally to China English. Since the late 1970s, China English has been widely discussed and investigated by many Chinese scholars (e.g. Li, 1993; Du & Jiang, 2003; Wang, 1991; Xie, 1995).

2. Material Studied

2.1 Definitions of China English

The definition of China English varies significantly among different scholars. The term China English was introduced by Professor Ge (1980). However, it was first clearly defined by Wang (1991) as a form of Standard English that has Chinese characteristics and is used by Chinese people in China, and the definition of "China English" was then refined by Li (1993) as a variety with "normative English" at its core, but characterized by Chinese features at the lexical, syntactic and discourse levels; however, different scholars named it differently, Jia and Xiang (1997) define "China English" as a variety of English which is used by the Chinese native-speakers with 'normative English' at its core but also displaying or transmitting Chinese characteristics. Eaves (2011) defines China English as "The developing world's variety of English." It contains unique features such as phonology, lexical syntax, and discourse patterns". The current study adopted the definition of HE and LI (2009), which "China English" as a performance variation of the language that is based on standard English but is accented with distinctive Chinese phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse pragmatics features. It is especially well-suited for using transliteration and loan translation to express content ideas unique to Chinese culture.

2.2 Previous Research on China English

Kachru's (1985) Three Circles classification model of English equates native English (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with the status of English in a given country. The Three Circles model has been under fire recently; this criticism stems primarily from the fact that the model is based on colonial heritage and does not reflect the globalization process that Englishes have undergone in recent years (Mair, 2013). For example, China stands in the expanded circle, where English is learned as an important foreign language in formal instructional settings (Rautonaho et al., 2018). However, according to an empirical study done by Wang (2015), in the globalized world, even in the expanded circle, people are starting to establish norms that are distinctive to their own. Studies related to the China English attitude have been conducted thoroughly, and most of them are empirical studies; in the early stages,

Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) conducted a study to look at a few Modern Standard Chinese discourses and rhetorical rules and then compare them with a similar set of discourse and rhetorical norms from standard English. They argue that L1 discourses and rhetorical norms are more likely to be used by East Asian Chinese speakers than Inner Circle speakers. In their study, 28% of the students truly believed there would be a variety of English in China one day, and only 17.5% seemed content to be recognized as Chinese when they spoke English. HE and LI (2009) conducted a study to determine the attitudes of Chinese students on incorporating China English as a pedagogic model along with a native-based variety of English. According to their research, the most acceptable approach for teaching college English in Chinese classrooms on the mainland remains to be standard English (American or British English). Wang (2015) conducted a large-scale study to examine how Chinese university students and instructors felt about China English; a questionnaire survey was used to gauge the acceptability and understandability of certain possible elements of China English, and the results revealed that both the teacher and student participants were hesitant to embrace China English as a teaching model. The ubiquitous native-speaker English ideology and the stigma associated with Chinglish accounted for respondents' unfavorable opinions of China English.

Studies examining China's attitudes toward English have shown a similar tendency in recent years. For example, Pan (2019) used a qualitative method to investigate the opinions Chinese university students have about China English. This article concludes that the majority of participants had conflicting opinions on China English. They offered positive opinions on China English's cultural characteristics, lexical influences, and practical role in achieving communicative goals. However, they considered their usage of China English to be humiliating and of worse grammatical quality. Similar results were also achieved by Pan et al. (2021); their study showed that the majority of the students did not wish to be easily recognized as Chinese when using English, demonstrating self-contradictory attitudes towards China English. The results demonstrated both the students' desire to develop a Chinese cultural identity and the communication value of English. Zhijia (2023) conducted the same investigation regarding how Chinese overseas students feel about China English. The study's finding echoed what has been proved so far; this further demonstrated that although more Chinese students studying abroad were reluctant to demonstrate Chinese English characteristics in their regular English usage, most would embrace Chinese English characteristics since they include some unique aspects of Chinese culture.

2.3 Features of China English

(1) Features of Phonology

Chinese is a tonal language that belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. Meaning is expressed in four tones: level, rise, fall-rise, and fall. However, as a member of the Indo-European family, English is an intonation language. The meaning of a word can not be conveyed through different tones but through its intonation, which can be divided into pitch, stress, sound length, and others in the sentence. English has four basic types of intonation: falling, rising, fall-rise, and rise-fall.

(2) Features of Lexicon

Features are discussed in lexical borrowing, hybrid or mixed form, and semantic shift. Lexical borrowing is commonly divided into two parts: transliteration and translation loans. Transliteration means changing Chinese lexical items into Chinese syllables, for example, jiaozi(饺子) and gongfu(功夫). Translation loans, translating English words and phrases, Chinese terms and expressions directly into English, for example, Chinese painting (中国画), four Books (四书), five Classics (五经), spring rolls (春卷). Hybrid or mixed form means that words are made up of two parts; one part is Chinese, and the other part is English, which is a combination of two languages, for instance, Xuanwumen Gate (玄武门), Hengshan Mountain (恒山). Semantic shift requires words and phrases that have taken on a new meaning in English after being influenced by Chinese, for example, educated youth(知青), the four modernizations (四个现代化).

(3) Features of syntax

According to YUN and JIA (2003), China English syntax included a detailed discussion of six features. However, the current study aims to discuss only some salient features: (1) Initial positioning of adjuncts and adjunct clause modifiers such as adverbials or adverbial clauses are generally placed in front of the main verb of a sentence. For example, this morning, I bought a cup of coffee. (2) the null subject parameter. It is a reference to a linguistic characteristic that is set differently in Chinese and English. For example, in English, a sentence must include a subject, while in Chinese, it is optional (He & Li, 2009). It is prevalent for Chinese students to write "wish you all the best" and "very glad to hear from you" (3). China English rarely uses the passive voice. For example, some people told me you had won the game." (4) China English prefers simple structure rather than compound and complex sentence structures. For example, I bought a T-shirt yesterday and gave it to my sister."

2.4 Research Questions

In summary, there was inadequate empirical research on Chinese English teachers' attitudes toward China English, especially in Chinese mainland settings (Zhichang Xu et al., 2017). Therefore, the current study aims to discuss the salient features of China English in the following dimensions (phonology, lexis, and syntax) and then explore how English teachers perceive China English. **This study seeks to better understand the significance of incorporating China English into the English teaching model. The following research questions were the focus of the investigation:**

- (1). What are Chinese teachers' language attitudes toward China English?
- (2). What are the reasons underlying their attitudinal responses toward China English?

(3). What types of factors might influence their attitudes toward China English?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 23 participants completed the questionnaire survey and then took part in the interview. Finally, 21 valid questionnaires were collected. Participants of the current study have an average teaching experience of 6 years. They aged from 30-55. Among them, 15 were females, and the remaining 6 were males. When it comes to majors, 16 of them were English majors, and five were not. Regarding their educational backgrounds, 23.8%(5) of them have master's degrees and, 66.7 %(14) of them were undergraduates, only 9.5%(2) of them graduated from junior college. The school classification included four primary school teachers, four junior high school teachers, and 13 senior high school teachers.

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

The current study applied a mixed method; a questionnaire was used to gather data and understand the perceptions and attitudes of teachers. The focused interview is used to collect reasons released by the participants. The questionnaire was distributed by Wenjuanxing, a professional online platform providing users with powerful online questionnaire design tools. The questionnaire items focus on participants' perceptions of the unique variety of English in China. It consisted of three parts: demographic information(gender, teaching experience, educational background, etc.), five yes-or-no questions related to their essential awareness of China English, Chinese English, and Chinglish, and a total of 17 items(five-point Likert scale) were included. Inside the questionnaire statements, items 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 were adapted from Deyuan and David(2009). The front section of the questionnaire(composed of items 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12) aimed to find out how Chinese English teachers evaluate their identity when they speak English and to explore the attitude they hold toward China English. The latter part comes to the perceptions and expectations teachers hold toward their students regarding English usage.

3.3 Focused Interview

Among all the participants, nearly half of the English teachers(n=9) were invited to the interview session to explain further the reasons behind their attitudinal choices. The respondents were selected based on their answers to some relevant questionnaire questions. The interview session was conducted online through WeChat, a popular socializing app in China. The session was conducted in Mandarin to guarantee that all participants spoke their minds freely. The interview data was recorded and then transcribed into Chinese. Before translating it into English, the author checked and proofread the transcriptions twice. During the process, stylistic inconsistencies were reduced, and discrepancies were carefully settled (He & Miller, 2011).

3.4 Data Collection & Analysis

When collecting the data, the snowball sampling method is used. The link to the questionnaire was distributed to the researchers' acquaintances who are English teachers at school and then passed on to other potential participants. SPSS 28.0 deals with the quantitative data collected. Descriptive statistics was used to investigate teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards China English by calculating the means and standard deviations. The Spearman Correlation test is used to investigate whether there is a reliable relationship between the demographic variables and participants' awareness of China English.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire Survey

From Table 1, Most of the correlation coefficient values are less than 0, and all p-values are more significant than 0.05. Participants' awareness of China English is not affected by demographic information. Moreover, it is clear that among all the factors, gender is the least important factor. However, a positive relationship exists between "educational background" and teachers' perceptions of China English. In statements "I have heard of China English" and "I have heard of Chinese English", their coefficient values are 0.468 and 0.466, indicating that the higher level of education they received, the more teachers are aware of the variety of English in China. Furthermore, there is a contrasting relationship between the P value(0.072) and coefficient(0.400) in the statement "I have heard of Chinglish" and majors, exhibiting that more English major teachers have heard of "Chinglish" than their counterparts.

Table 1. Correlations test results

Correlation test						
Items		Gender	English major	Educational background	Teaching department	Teaching experience(years)
I have heard of world Englishes.	coefficient	0.258	-0.228	-0.122	0.091	-0.160
	P value	0.258	0.320	0.599	0.696	0.488
I have heard of "Chinglish".	coefficient	0.141	0.400*	0.355	-0.362	0.142
	P value	0.541	0.072	0.114	0.107	0.540
I have heard of "China English".	coefficient	0.122	-0.032	0.468*	-0.110	0.174
	P value	0.599	0.890	0.032	0.635	0.450
I have heard of "Chinese English".	coefficient	0.106	-0.050	0.466*	-0.469	0.182
	P value	0.647	0.830	0.033	0.032	0.430

"Chinese English" is the same as "China English".	coefficient	0.230	-0.014	0.337	-0.081	0.165
	P value	0.316	0.953	0.135	0.727	0.476

The mean has been rounded off to 2 digits after the decimal point.

Table 2. Frequencies for general items

	Frequency		Mean
	Yes	No	
I have heard of world Englishes.	85.71%	14.29%	0.86
I have heard of "Chinglish".	95.24%	4.76%	0.95
I have heard of "China English".	57.14%	42.86%	0.57
I have heard of "Chinese English".	76.19%	23.81%	0.76
"Chinese English" and "China English" are the same.	19.05%	80.95%	0.19

Table 3 shows that the majority of teachers(95.24%) are aware of the term "Chinglish," while nearly half of the participants(42.86%) show zero familiarity with the term "China English." With regard to "Chinese English," 85.71% of English teachers recognize it. Among all the participants, 80.95% of teachers disagree that "Chinese English and Chinese English are the same."

Table 3. Frequencies of questionnaire items

	1 (Strongly disagree)	2 (Disagree)	3 (Neutral)	4 (Agree)	5 (Strongly agree)	Mean	SD (Standard deviation)
1. When I speak English, I want to sound like a native speaker. (当我说英语时我希望我听起来像一个母语者)	4.76%	9.52%	0.00%	57.14%	28.57%	3.95	1.15
2. Sounding like a native speaker could help me gain confidence. (听起来像一个母语者可以帮助我获得信心)	4.76%	9.52%	4.76%	42.86%	38.10%	4.00	1.30
3. When I speak English, I want to be identified clearly as Chinese. (当我说英语时我希望能被清楚地识别为中国人)	9.52%	47.62%	9.52%	33.33%	0.00%	2.67	1.13
12. The non-native speakers can also speak Standard English (非母语人士也能说标准英语)	4.76%	4.76%	0.00%	66.67%	23.81%	4.00	0.90
9. Like "Malaysian English" or "Singlish", China should have its own variety of English. (像 "马来西亚英语" 或 "新加坡英语" 一样, 中国应该有自己的英语变体)。	4.76%	14.29%	28.57%	38.10%	14.29%	3.43	1.16
8. There will be a variety of "China English" one day. (总有一天在中国会出现一种英语变体)。	9.52%	0.00%	14.29%	61.90%	14.29%	3.71	1.11
10. Only "China English" can express the content ideas specific to Chinese culture adequately (只有中国英语变体能够充分表达中国文化特有的内容思想)。	4.76%	38.10%	19.05%	28.57%	9.52%	3.00	1.30
11. "China English" should have its own linguistic features at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse-pragmatics. (中国的英语品种在语音、词法、句法和话语语用学等层面都应该有自己的语言特点)。	4.76%	28.57%	9.52%	42.86%	14.29%	3.33	1.43
3. I'd love to use English listening materials recorded with different accents. (我愿意使用由不同英语口语音的人录制的英语听力材料)	4.76%	14.29%	9.52%	52.38%	19.05%	3.67	1.23

4. I do not require my students to speak English like native speakers. (我不会要求我的学生把英语说得像母语一样)	9.52%	33.33%	9.52%	38.10%	9.52%	3.05	1.55
5.I think students should set native speakers as role models to speak and behave linguistically. (我认为学生应该把以英语为母语的人作为说话和行为的榜样。)	14.29%	28.57%	4.76%	33.33%	19.05%	3.14	2.03
7. It is important to correct students' accents to comply with native speakers' accents. (纠正学生的口音以符合母语者的口音是很重要的。)	4.76%	9.52%	4.76%	57.14%	23.81%	3.86	1.13
13.English teaching materials should include more characters of non-native speakers of English (英语教材应包括更多非英语母语者的特征)。	9.52%	4.76%	28.57%	47.62%	9.52%	3.43	1.16
14. The focus of the English curriculum should be on teaching students to use English for communication in real life. (英语课程的重点应该是教学生在现实生活中使用英语进行交流)。	9.52%	0.00%	4.76%	52.38%	33.33%	4.00	1.30
15. only British English or American English can be taught in school.(在学校只能教授英式英语或美式英语)。	9.52%	23.81%	23.81%	42.86%	0.00%	3.00	1.10
16.It is important for students to showcase their cultural identity when speaking English. (学生在说英语时展示自己的文化身份是很重要的。)	9.52%	0.00%	9.52%	61.90%	19.05%	3.81	1.16
17.It is important that students are encouraged to use Chinese cultural characteristics to express their identity in writing. (鼓励学生在写作中利用中国文化特点表达自己的身份是很重要的。)	9.52%	9.52%	9.52%	57.14%	14.29%	3.57	1.36

The percentage has been rounded off to 2 digits after the decimal point.

Approximately 85.71 % of the participants wanted to be recognized as native speakers when speaking English because nearly 80.95% of them argued that sounding like a native speaker could help them gain confidence. Moreover, only 33.33% of the teachers intended to be identified as Chinese when speaking English. Of all the questionnaire respondents, about 90.47% of them consider that "non-native speakers can also speak standard English." Consequently, most of the participants(57.14%) believed that the English teaching materials should include more characteristics of non-native speakers. Nearly 76.19% of the participants believed that "China should have its own variety of English." Furthermore, more than half of them(57.14%) agreed that "China English should have its own linguistic features at the level of phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics." About 80.95% of English teachers insisted that it is essential for students to showcase their cultural identity when speaking English. Furthermore, more than half of them(71.43%) encouraged their students to use Chinese cultural characteristics to express their identity in writing. All this suggests that Chinese English teachers prefer standard English(British or American English). However, most respondents believed that "China should have its variety of English" and China English should incorporate linguistic features such as phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics. Moreover, they strongly encouraged students to showcase their unique cultural identity when using English.

4.2 Interview

The results gained from interview sessions are similar to those obtained by the questionnaire survey. Nearly two-thirds of the teachers(n=9), in the interview, favored setting standard English as a pedagogical model for teaching college English. They considered standard English as the international language, and it applies anywhere, not just in China but in every corner of the world. Their responses also addressed the benefits of teaching in standard English, as learning English serves the communication function of understanding different cultures. Suppose China English becomes the pedagogical teaching model; in that case, it means that only a small number of learners in China can understand the content, which will go against the original meaning of learning a language.

By looking at pedagogical principles, correctness is the most critical factor in teachers' assessments of China English. Teachers' strong

convictions that standard English is the correct English and, therefore, should be observed and followed. This thus explains why teachers expect their students to set native speakers as role model to speak. By encouraging students to imitate native speakers' accents or copy their expressions, students can establish the correct structure of using that language. Nevertheless, when it comes to behaving like native speakers linguistically, the reasons vary greatly.

T1: Some of the expressions are not grammatically correct, teaching requires correctness all the time; otherwise you will mislead students and you gonna be in huge trouble.

T2: I think I'm quite tolerant with my students, but why I don't think China English could be used in the classroom is that when we communicate with native speakers, you want to guarantee that they understand what you said, and that requires near-native pronunciation of words and expressions. If you make any mistakes at this stage, they need help understanding what you said. That's why in my class, I highly emphasize pronunciation; all the mistakes will embarrass you in the very end.

T9: I think it all comes down to the purpose of what are you looking for. And what are your expectations for your students? Like I just said, if you want to know more about their culture, then you can choose to set the behavior role model. But if you only need to communicate using the language, then behaving like a native speaker is not necessary.

Conversely, one-third of the teachers showed green pass to China English. They regard it as a form of expression reflecting the characteristics of Chinese history, culture, and political reality. They believed there would be a prosperous future for China English, as it has already played an increasingly important role as a supplement to standard English.

T5: If it's in the early stages, I might say standard English, but China is currently the world's second-largest economic power country. I believe there is a great chance we can have our own style of English. From the student's perspective, if I speak Chinese English to my students, they will feel more familiar with me, and I think it will also be easier to teach them.

5. Discussion

Table 3. Comparison of adopted items in HE and LI (2009) and current study

Items	Disagree(%)		Neutral(%)		Agree(%)	
	D	P	D	P	D	P
1. When I speak English, I want to sound like a native speaker.	6.7	14.3	11.5	0	81.9	85.7
4. I do not require my students to speak English like native speakers.	53.2	57.1	21.4	9.5	25.3	33.3
8. There will be a variety of "China English" one day.	23.8	9.5	15.8	14.3	60.5	76.2
9. Like "Malaysian English" or "Singapore English", China should have its own variety of English.	26.5	19.1	17.0	28.6	56.5	52.4
10. Only "China English" can express the content ideas specific to Chinese culture adequately	23.5	42.9	19.7	19.1	56.7	38.1
11. "China English" should have its own linguistic features at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse-pragmatics	15.1	33.3	17.0	9.5	67.8	57.2
12. The non-native speakers can also speak Standard English	6.6	9.5	13.6	0	79.6	90.5

Note. The data for D is adopted from HE, D. and LI, D.C.S. (2009), Language attitudes and linguistic features in the 'China English' debate. *World Englishes*, 28: 70-89. Copyright 2009 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

D=Deyuan and David(2009) P=Present study

The percentage has been rounded off to 1 digit after the decimal point

HE and LI (2009) also conducted a questionnaire survey to find out the view of non-English majors and college English towards China English. All 984 people participated in the study; 795 were students, and 189 were teachers. Of all the items in their study, six of the items are found to be similar. They generally want to sound like a native speaker when speaking English(81.9 and 85.7% of the participants agree with this idea). Besides, most of them oppose the idea of being identified clearly as Chinese when speaking English(53.2% and 57.1% of them disagree, respectively), and the majority of the participants in both studies agree that "there will be a variety of Chinese English one day."

The most noticeable difference in these studies lies in the respondent's view towards the statement10, "Only Chinese English can express the content ideas specific to a Chinese culture adequately." according to HE and LI (2009), 56.7 % of their participants agree with it. Whereas only 38.1% of participants in the present study considered it possible. Through a closer reading of the background settings, one possible explanation may have been the different choice of words since they described item 10 as "Only the variety of English in China can express content ideas specific to Chinese culture adequately." However, the present study describes it as "only China English cannot express the content idea specific to Chinese culture adequately." In the present study, participants might come up with other varieties of English that can express the essential ideas related to Chinese culture. The description of "only China English" has limited the statement to an absolute statement, and people tend to believe in multiple possibilities. Besides, it could be that Chinese English teachers are not 100% sure about what "China English" is, which may render them to believe that not only "China English" can express the core idea of Chinese culture, but other varieties of English might express the content ideas related to Chinese culture as well.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the attitudes of Chinese English teachers towards China English and why they hold these opinions; then, the article presented some well-established features of China English. These features are well represented in all aspects, suggesting that Chinese English is on its way to becoming an established variety of English (Eaves, 2011). Current studies argue that when it comes to the pedagogical teaching model, many teachers still acknowledge standard English (British or American English) as the teaching model because language serves the function of communication in the world; understanding different cultures requires a common understanding of the international language. China English can only be used and understood by Chinese English users. Therefore, China English is not suitable for teaching models. However, most participants felt there should be a variety of English in China, because some expressions can only be expressed best in Chinese words. China English expressions can show local culture and speakers' identity. These all indicate that English teachers accept "China English" as a legal, local variety (He & Li, 2009). They realize the purpose of learning English should not only focus on standard rules but also on using English to communicate.

The current study has some limitations. First, increasing the number of participants is better for a more objective result. Second, although it can be difficult for scholars to identify the most prominent linguistic features of China English, it is better to incorporate some well-documented and salient features in the questionnaire to test participants' perceptions of China English. The current study also suggests that for students to defend their own culture and identity and improve their ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue, it is crucial to level up their comprehension of Chinese English and better include it in English education.

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The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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