

# *A Systematic Review of Attitudes towards China English and Implications for L2 Teaching in China*

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**Abstract:** As China has an increasing contact with the outside world, China English, an English variety used by native Chinese speakers, is playing a more and more important role in many places. Although scholars have already started to become aware of the role of China English in English language teaching, some students and teachers, the real participants in classroom, still hold negative attitudes towards China English. A systematic review approach was adopted in this research to address the research question regarding the relationship between attitudes of students and teachers towards China English and the English language teaching in classroom.

## **1. Introduction**

English is used for various activities in different contexts as a lingua franca (Crystal, 2003) and this makes English a language that has contact with a number of other languages (Galloway and Rose, 2015). As an international language, one significant feature of this kind of English is that it seems to be ‘accommodating’ (Harmer, 2015:3). Influenced by their mother tongue and their own culture, non-native speakers are likely to speak or write English with their cultural characteristics. Inevitably, therefore, a number of local English varieties in different places has emerged. These varieties are unique to different countries, representing their own cultural characteristics and their identities. China English is one of these varieties. As China has an increasing contact with the outside world, China English is playing a more and more important role in many places. It has long been receiving a great deal of attention. China English is expected to have more speakers than both British English and American English do in the future, from which we can tell that China English may have significant influence on the development of English (He and Li, 2009). Like other countries, however, China is facing the difficulty of maintaining its own culture and identity while the world is becoming more globalized and English language functions as the dominant tool for communication (Clark, 2013). Therefore, some scholars have put forward the idea that China English should be brought into classroom and be taught as a variety for Chinese students (Hu, 2004; He and Li, 2009; Xu, 2010).

## **2. Literature Review**

English education in China has always been a subject that arouses scholars’ concern. The history of English teaching in Chinese educational context has been studied by various scholars (Galloway

and Rose, 2015; Clarks, 2013). According to Galloway and Rose (2015), interaction with English in China can be traced back to almost 400 years ago. Although the contact with foreigners was ceased no longer after that, English regained its status in China in 1978 due to the development of globalization. Since then, English has become a compulsory subject in Chinese school curriculum (Clark, 2013). Having contact with Chinese language, English is inevitably becoming localized in China. The localization of English has brought a new language variety – China English. The emergence and development of China English, as Lu and Zhang (2013 point out, has its necessities in the multi-cultural context for the reason that China English enables English language users in China to build and express their own cultural values. According to Wang and Gao (2015), China English, which is different from Chinese English, was firstly put forward to refer to English expressions that are unique to Chinese culture. Yuan (2014 defines China English as the English that is based on standard English and uses vocabulary and syntax with Chinese characteristics to express things that are special to Chinese culture and society. He and Li (2009 believe that China English is the most appropriate term to define the variety of English that is colored with phonetic, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic features of Chinese language. Chinese English or Chinglish, on the other hand, is considered by many as an unacceptable form of English that can impede communication and cultural exchange. Chinglish is viewed as ‘an unwelcome blend of Chinese and English’ and Chinese English is similarly regarded as ‘bad English’ that needs to be improved. (Clark, 2013:72). According to Li (1993), the critical distinction between Chinese English and China English is that the later does not have any L1 interference.

There are also a variety of studies that focus on identifying features of China English from linguistic perspective. Yuan (2014 identifies specific features of China English in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, sentence and context. Similarly, He and Li (2009 illustrate in details how China English is unique and different as an English variety with regard to phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse-pragmatics, and they also provide typical examples respectively. These studies on identifying the linguistic features of China English are to some extent helpful in recognizing this variety of English and distinguishing it from Chinglish. Also, these studies have contributed to scholars’ attention in the role of China English in language education practices (Wang and Gao, 2015).

As English has been increasingly used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers, scholars have started to challenge the current situation where British English and American English are accepted as the standard English and are applied as the only models in English teaching (He and Li, 2009). According to Wang and Gao (2015), there are also proposals that have been put forward to promote English varieties in English language teaching. In Chinese context, for example, Hu (2004 suggests that China English should be used as a standard in China for the reason that Chinese culture can be better understood through the use of English with unique Chinese characteristics. Moreover, China English may be more useful for other countries in Asia both culturally and economically. Lu and Zhang (2013 also believe that China English can help propagate Chinese culture to the world and at the same time enhance the identity of the nation.

Although scholars have already started to become aware of the role of China English in English language teaching, some students and teachers, the real participants in classroom, still hold negative attitudes towards China English (Wang and Gao, 2015; Wang, 2015; Sui, 2016). As what Wang and Gao (2015 state, attitudes of students and teachers are fundamental to the application of English varieties in classrooms. Therefore, there are some studies that have investigated students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards China English. However important their attitudes are, the relationship between their attitudes and English language teaching in classrooms has remained uncertain. As a result, this research is framed by the following question: Do students’ and teachers’ attitudes towards China English affect the English teaching in China? In this research, university students’

and teachers' attitudes are emphasized for that they play an important role in the spreading of Chinese culture to the rest of the world.

### 3. Methodology

A systematic review approach was adopted in this research to address the research question regarding the relationship between attitudes of students and teachers towards China English and the English language teaching in classroom. Two major electronic databases were used to search relevant articles, including Discover, the university's platform that has access to a variety of electronic databases, and CNKI, a well-known and authoritative database in China that includes both Chinese and English articles. To detect studies that are relevant and useful for the review, the search terms were defined as "attitudes towards China English", "acceptance of China English", "China English" and their Chinese equivalents. More studies were found through cross-referencing. That is, some studies were found by searching the reference lists in relevant articles. As the research question is related to Chinese context, both Chinese articles and English articles were included as long as they were found useful. In addition, the search period was not limited. Theory articles and studies without statistical analysis were not included in the review. Also, some articles were excluded due to accessibility and some studies whose participants were not university students or teachers were also excluded.

Finally, there were in total 10 studies that were used in the review. Most of the studies were published in journals. Information including author, year of publication, research questions, methodology, participants, and result was extracted from these articles to analyze. After important information was captured, the studies were coded in terms of the following three criteria: awareness of China English, understandability and acceptability.

### 4. Results

Of altogether 10 studies selected, there are 6 studies that merely focus on university students' attitudes towards China English and only 1 study that puts the emphasis on university teachers' attitudes, while another 3 of the studies look at both teachers' and students' attitudes. Among these 3 studies, 2 of them share the same data. The reason why these two articles were both selected is that one of the articles further illustrates teachers' and students' opinions. Although these studies have different emphases and not every one of them is conducted to address the same research questions, all of the studies have provided valuable data to know more about classroom participants' attitudes towards China English as a variety of English.

#### 4.1 Awareness of China English

According to 5 of the studies that present student's awareness of China English and one that presents teachers' awareness, most students and teachers are not aware of the existence of China English (He and Li, 2009; Yang and Zhang, 2015; Hu, 2003; Xue, 2015; Sui and Kaplan, 2016; Edwards, 2017). However, a considerable proportion of participants in every one of these 6 studies have heard of Chinese English. In the study that focuses on teachers' attitudes, none of the teachers mentioned China English when analyzing sentences with features of China English (Yang and Zhang, 2015). Instead, they used Chinese English and Chinglish to refer to all these features, no matter they rejected or accepted each feature. As for students, these studies show a positive finding about their awareness of English varieties. However, they do not recognize English with Chinese characteristics as one of these varieties. The study that is conducted by He and Li (2009) is the only study in which more than half of the participants are found to have heard of China English. In other

studies, contrarily, the majority of the participants is unfamiliar with the concept of China English. Three different studies show different result regarding students' attitudes towards China English and Chinese English. The earliest study shows that only 20% of the student participants believe that China English is different from Chinese English, while around 60% and 40% of the student participants are shown to have the same opinion in other two studies respectively. Although students are not very familiar with China English, we can tell from these studies that they are getting more and more aware of it.

## 4.2 Understandability

Similarly, there are six studies that ask participants to finish the questionnaires which include English expressions or sentences with features of China English (Wang and Gao, 2015; Wang, 2015; Xue, 2015; Yang and Zhang, 2015; Ren and Lin, 2016; Shao, Li, Yang, Zhang and Chen, 2017). Participants need to identify or rate the acceptability of English with Chinese characteristics. Both teachers and students are shown to have no difficulty understanding these expressions and sentences that occurred in the questionnaires. In one study where participants are required to rate the understandability of different language items of different linguistic features, 96% of them say that all the items are understandable (Wang and Gao, 2015). Another study also shows that most students consider English with unique Chinese characteristic to be highly intelligible (Yang and Zhang, 2015).

## 4.3 Acceptability

It is found in these studies that both teachers and students have different attitudes towards the acceptability of different features of China English. For phonological features, most participants are generally open to China English accent. More than half of the participants in two studies consider Chinese accent to be acceptable (Wang and Gao, 2015; Yang and Zhang, 2015). Even those who hold negative attitudes toward China English think that they can accept China English accent as long as it is understandable (Edwards, 2017). However, an overwhelming amount of student participants in another two studies express that they prefer native norms of speaking English (Hu, 2003; He and Li, 2009). As for lexical features, according to the studies, both teachers and students are comparatively more tolerant of them. They tend to accept China English expressions when the concept is unique to Chinese culture or when there is no equivalent in English. In terms of syntactic features of China English, they are found in three studies to be less acknowledged than lexical features by students and teachers (Xue, 2015; Yang and Zhang, 2015; Shao, Li, Yang, Zhang and Chen, 2017). Compared with students, teachers are more resistant to syntactic features of China English. They tend to relate these syntactic features to Chinglish, which is regarded as unacceptable English. When it comes to discourse pragmatic features, almost a half of the teacher and student respondents in each relevant study reject to accept them. Similar to the attitudes towards syntactic features, teachers are found to be less willing to accept discourse pragmatic features than students do.

## 5. Discussion

Generally speaking, university students' and teachers' attitudes towards China English are not so negative. Although there are negative views, the percentage of participants who think China English is unacceptable does not overwhelmingly outnumber that of participants who have positive attitudes. There are some students who hold the view that China should has its own variety of English for that only China English other than other varieties of English enables them to express the content in

Chinese culture (He and Li, 2009; Edwards, 2017). However, most teachers and students still prefer native norms of English and view British English or American English as standard. Through the analysis of these 10 studies, a better insight into attitudes of university students and teachers towards China English is presented. However, there is no answer to the question about whether their attitudes towards China English have influence on the L2 teaching in China. All of these studies put emphasis on how university students and teachers perceive China English, but no one has looked at the relationship between their attitudes and English language teaching in China yet. Jenkins (2006) states that there are no noticeable changes in English teaching despite the fact that many scholars' effort into promoting World Englishes. Pan and Block (2011) also investigate Chinese teachers' and students' language beliefs and conclude that their beliefs do not seem to have influenced how English is taught in China. However, what they focus on is teachers' and students' attitudes towards English rather than China English.

Nevertheless, implications for applying China English in English teaching can be drawn from these studies. Firstly, teachers should raise students' awareness of China English and English varieties. Yang (2017) notices that many Chinese students know a lot about English culture but little about their own culture due to the blind worship of the standard English. The introduction of China English in classroom, therefore, can help students protect their own identity and culture. Also, English is increasingly used as a lingua franca around the world. In this case, students are more likely to communicate with non-native speakers. According to Cook (2016), the horizons of students may be limited if teachers only teach one kind of English in classroom. Moreover, global English instruction is proved by Galloway (2011) to have influence on student's motivation for learning English and raise their confidence as English speakers.

Secondly, it is unwise for teachers to apply all China English features in teaching because both teachers and students have different attitudes towards different features. For example, teachers should not overemphasize the native norms of speaking English as many students are willing to accept China English accent (Wang, 2015). According to Sung (2016), teachers should encourage students to have their own beliefs about second language pronunciation and their accent choice rather than blindly pursuing native-like accent. In terms of lexical features, students tend to accept English expressions that are unique to Chinese culture and when there are no equivalents in English. Accordingly, teachers should try to meet students' need by teaching them how to use China English to express cultural content (Wang and Gao, 2015). Students find it difficult to accept syntactic features of China English because the ideology of Chinese English has been rooted in their mind. To improve this situation, it should be suitable to teach students what syntactic features can be regarded as China English while what can be seen as errors that violate grammar rules (Li, 2016). In addition, although both teachers and students are reluctant to accept discourse pragmatics features of China English, they still should be mentioned in classroom. The introduction of Chinese discourse pragmatics enables students to have a better understanding of the differences between Chinese culture and English culture, which is beneficial to successful communication.

## 6. Conclusion

The study on the relationship between university students' and teachers' attitudes towards China English and the L2 teaching in China shows that it remains uncertain whether their attitudes affect English teaching in China. However, an insightful look into attitudes of university students and teachers towards China English can provide significant implications for applying China English into classroom. Moreover, with its 390 million learners of English, China provides a significant context for the research on English varieties and the study of English as an international language (Wei and Su, 2012). As Sewell (2013) suggests, the norms and standards are still required when

teaching English. However, it is necessary for teachers to introduce the variety to students when they are ready. Standard English should serve as the basis of English teaching, for the sense that it would be difficult to understand other non-native speakers if we do not share some common rules of English (Cook, 2016). At the same time, arousing students' awareness of China English and applying it into English teaching is significant because in this way students can protect their own culture and identity and they will be more prepared in cross-cultural communication.

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