Region - Educational Research and Reviews, 2022 , Volume4, Issue1
DOI: 10.32629/rerr.v4i1.625
ISSN Online: 2661-4634
ISSN Print: 2661-4626

The Sound of Identity: An Investigation of Attitudes towards English Accents of Chinese Students Who Study in U.S. Colleges

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Abstract: How Chinese students perceive their English accents and what kind of English accents they want have been topics of academic interest, particularly as English language has gained popularity in China and many Chinese students study abroad. The English accent that a speaker has can reflect the speaker's sense of personal and social identity. Despite the prior research on the attitudes towards English accents of Chinese students studying in Chinese universities, as more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad for colleges, little is known about the attitudes towards English accents of Chinese students studying in U.S. colleges. Using a questionnaire, this study investigates the extent to which Chinese undergraduate students in U.S. colleges are satisfied with their English accents and what kind of English accents they aspire to have. These findings are then compared to findings from a previous case study conducted among Chinese students in a Chinese college. This study also examines whether the experience in K-12 education and the English-use setting correlate with the attitudes of Chinese undergraduates in U.S. colleges towards English accents. Drawing upon the findings and the World Englishes (WE) framework, this study proposes that standardizing Chinese accents of English on the basis of intelligibility may make communications more comprehensible and at the same time retain the Chinese identity.

Key words: accent; attitude; identity; World Englishes; English as a Lingua Franca

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that among all languages, English is the most widespread one. On the one hand, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is used for international political and business communications. On the other hand, due to British colonialism, millions of people across continents have adopted English as a daily-used language, if not the mother tongue. With the total number of English speakers being 1.3 billion (Lyons), English is no longer solely the English people's English, nor is it the Americans' English. Instead, it has become the world's English. Across the world, it is commonplace for people whose first language (L1) is not English to have an accent when speaking due to the impact of their L1's phonology. As Jörg Dollmann et al. have pointed out, after the critical period up to age 10, obtaining oral language skills without a foreign accent becomes increasingly less likely. Therefore, how these English as a second language (L2) learners should be taught to deal with their accents has been contestable. According to Julie Scales and her co-authors who studied second language acquisition (SLA), two contradictory principles have traditionally informed pronunciation teaching: the nativeness principle, whereby learners model a standard dialect from the United Kingdom or North America, and the intelligibility

principle, whereby learners seek to be understood, no matter it is similar to the mother tongue (or whether the foreign language accent is strong or not). For L2 learners, whichever principle they stick to ends up revealing their attitudes towards accents and leading to identity conflicts. Generally speaking, the nativeness principle promotes L2 learners to assimilate into the US or UK cultures to a greater extent. In comparison, the intelligibility principle helps L2 learners retain their national identities.

2. Accent and Identity

Language is a crucial component of one's identity, with one's accent being an outward expression of one's identity. However, given the ELF status of English, the extent to which non-native speakers' (NNS) English accents could express their identities becomes unclear and complicated. Under the WE framework, all English speakers can be placed into three circles: the inner circle, where English is used as L1; the outer circle, where English is used as an official L2 in multilingual settings; and the expanding circle, where English is used as a foreign language for international communication (Tajeddin and Pakzadian). NNS, including Chinese speakers, are, by definition, concentrated in the expanding circle.

Employing the trichotomy of "circles" to analyze English accents, Jennifer Jenkins, a scholar of global languages, discovered that in contrast to speakers in the outer circle who are "careful to speak in a way that will make his or her identity clear", those in the expanding circle believe that the ideal goal is to imitate the native speaker of the standard language as closely as possible. She went on to say that "It would, therefore, be far from a compliment to tell a Spanish person that their variety is Spanish English. It would imply that their acquisition of the language left something to be desired." Jenkins's reasoning revealed that it was normal for L2 learners in the expanding circle (e.g., people in China, Japan, Brazil, etc.) to prefer the nativeness principle over the intelligibility principle. The reason behind it is that there are rewards, such as greater integration into the English community, for speakers who lose their L1 accent and sound more like the dominant NS majority, while negative consequences persist for speakers who speak the L2 with a non-native accent. Examples of such negative consequences include stereotyping, harassment, ridicule from coworkers and landlords, and even job loss (Crowther et al.). Despite the end of British colonialism, through the dominance in English accents, the UK and U.S still maintain their cultural hegemony, which perpetuates the public's attitude towards how the ideal English accent should be and eventually shapes non-native English speakers' identities.

3. English in China

Among all L2 learners in the WE framework, those in China have drawn special attention for scholarly discussions. English has gained significant status in Chinese society as of today. Not only do students take mandatory English classes from elementary school through college, but they also have to take English tests in order to graduate. In such a context, L2 learners in China feel the overwhelming need to master English. Notably, when it comes to oral English, the social expectation of "mastery" appears to be associated with the ability to pronounce in a perfect General American (GA) accent.

Though, as mentioned in the previous section, attachment to native-like English accents is a global phenomenon among L2 learners. The attachment is so strong in China that it almost becomes a distorted obsession. L2 learners in China appear to disdain the Chinese accent compared to the GA. And there are no better examples verifying this distorted obsession of emulating American accent than the 1990s' case in which an English teacher, Li Yang, invented a pedagogy "Crazy English", through which learners improved their oral English by shouting out the vocabulary with him in public plazas; likewise, during the 2000s, in young parents' social circles, there was a cult that American teachers teach English the best regardless of their other characteristics. In the 2010s, the English teachers (Chinese nationals) hired for my middle school had accents so "American" that they even sounded unnatural and robotic.

Not only is the distorted obsession with GA an intuitive perception, but it is also supported by empirical evidence. The research by Fan Fang, a professor from Shantou University, investigated the attitudes of Chinese university students towards their own English accents and the extent to which such attitudes were influenced by standard language ideology. Sampling from undergraduate students in Shantou University, Fang discovered that more than 70 percent of the participants were not satisfied with their English accents, described by themselves as "Chinese-style". When asked about what accents they aspired to have, about 80 percent indicated that they wanted their accents to sound like a native speaker of English (NSE). On the contrary, less than 10 percent of the participants focused on intelligibility, thinking that it was normal to have a Chinese accent in English as long as it didn't not impede communication. Moreover, with regard to the reason they speak with a Chinese accent, some participants of the study believed it was not by choice since they were unable to change it. One interviewee even attempted to draw a line between Chinese accents in English and other foreign English accents, saying that she hoped the people who talked to her knew that she was a non-native speaker but not a non-native speaker from China (Fang). This case, in particular, attracts my attention and makes me wonder if L2 learners in China are obsessed with GA, not only because it is a desirable trait in itself, but also because they find Chinese English the least favorable. Finally, when asked about how the interviewees would feel if the interlocutor (mis)recognized them as NSEs, their responses were ambivalent; some considered it as a compliment, while others were less excited about losing their native identities (Fang). The ambivalence showed that the participants were aware of the concept of identity when speaking a language in a certain accent, although they may still deem GA as the model. Hence, the mentality behind this ambivalence requires further investigation.

4. Complexities

Overall, Fang's research has provided a structural understanding of Chinese college students' attitudes towards English accents alongside other similar case studies conducted in Chinese universities. However, a study about this topic has yet to be conducted abroad with participants who are Chinese undergraduate students in U.S. colleges. This may lead to a knowledge gap caused by the social setting, functionality of English, and Chinese student group in U.S. colleges significantly differing from those in Chinese universities. In terms of the social setting, GA is heard at a much higher frequency in U.S. colleges. In terms of functionality, English is not only used for academic and general communication purposes but also for socializing. Additionally, Chinese nationals who study in U.S. colleges mainly come from families with higher income and socio-economic status and may entertain different personalities and ideologies which are opposed to those of Chinese nationals who study in Chinese universities. In this research, I replicate Fan Fang's study with participants being undergraduate students in U.S. colleges who have Chinese nationalities. I compare the results I have obtained with Fang's results, for the purpose of understanding how Chinese citizens who study in the U.S. perceive English accents, what implications their perceptions have on the concept of identity, and How to adjust English pronunciation teaching in China in the future.

5. Methodology

The research utilizes a questionnaire to gather data via two channels: the WashU (Washington University in St. Louis) College Writing Program website and WeChat, a ubiquitous social media platform among Chinese people. In the questionnaire's instructions, it is mentioned that only Chinese citizens enrolled in undergraduate programs in the U.S. are eligible to take the survey for research purposes.

The survey was sent out on Nov 19, 2021, and closed on Dec 9, 2021. 78 effective responses were received, with 39 out of 78 (50%) respondents coming from Washington University in St. Louis, and the rest from other U.S. colleges. The range of respondents' age varied from 18 to 24. The total number of male and female respondents amounted to 37; three

were identified as non-binary/third gender; one preferred not to say.

6. Findings

6.1 Findings: what are the differences between China and the U.S.

As shown in Table 1, when asked straightforwardly "how do you feel about your English accent?" On a 5-point scale, the majority (65.39%) of respondents indicated that they were "satisfied". On the contrary, 12.82% felt "not very satisfied" and only 1 out of 78 (1.28%) respondents answered "not satisfied at all" in regard to their English accents. However, it is notable that only 6.41% said they were "very satisfied", suggesting that most of the respondents were not 100 percent confident about their English accents.

Table 1. Respondents' self-perception of English accents in my survey

Answer	Count (%)
Not satisfied at all	1 (1.28%)
Not very satisfied	10 (12.82%)
Uncertain	11 (14.10%)
Satisfied	51 (65.39%)
Very satisfied	5 (6.41%)
Total	78 (100%)

Interestingly enough, these results are almost opposite to what was found in Fang's research, in which the majority (60.2%) of respondents were "not very satisfied", 15.9% "satisfied", 11% "not satisfied at all", and only 1.3% "very satisfied" with their English accents (see Table 2). One reason behind this contrast may be that Chinese undergraduate students who study in U.S. colleges are, on average, more proficient in English than Chinese undergraduate students in Chinese college-most of the respondents scored 110 or higher in the Test of English as a Foreign Language(TOEFL), a score that those who study in Chinese colleges normally cannot attain without extra training. A good score in TOEFL serves as an objective indicator of English proficiency, which incentivizes respondents to feel satisfied with their English and English accents overall. In the results of my study, the most frequently observed adjective given when respondents were asked to describe their English accents is "American/native", while in Fang's study, it is "Chinese-style". Given the hypothesis, "In both Chinese and U.S. colleges, Chinese undergraduate students take native speakers' English accent as the model, the difference in the most frequently observed adjective between these two studies can explain why more Chinese students in U.S. colleges are satisfied with their English accents than those in Chinese colleges.

Table 2. Respondents' self-perception of English accents in Fang's survey

Answer	Response Count (%)
Not Satisfied at all	34 (11.0%)
Not Very Satisfied	186 (60.2%)
Uncertain	36 (11.6%)
Satisfied	49 (15.9%)
Very Satisfied	4 (1.3%)

In fact, the hypothesis above is supported by data shown in Table 3 and Table 4. When asked about the aspired accents, 79.3% in Fang's study and 65.39% in my study wanted to sound like a native English speaker, which revealed that a majority of students in both groups valued native-like accents of English over the Chinese accent. Another surprising contrast I found is that 23.08% of respondents in my study do not care about their English pronunciation, while in Fang's study, the number is 0.9%. One theory that may explain the contrast is the fact that U.S. colleges are more accustomed to having global community. For example, citizens from more than 100 and 120 countries are represented at WashU and Cornell, respectively. Therefore, Chinese students in U.S. colleges are exposed to a linguistically diverse environment

where they receive frequent opportunities to converse with not only native English speakers but also with those who speak English with other accents. Similarly, in U.S. colleges, a considerable amount of faculty members' country of origin falls into the "outer circle" and the "expanding circle" under the WE framework, which implies that they may use accented English during lectures. Students attending these lectures may begin to ponder: why should I care about the English accent if the lecturers can help me understand the material even with their non-native accents? This mentality is evidenced by one of the respondents' comments in the questionnaire, stating "The other day I attended a BME seminar. The speaker spoke eloquently with an Indian accent. He explained his research (insect's sensory system) clearly and so passionately that it got me genuinely interested in this area. Even native English speakers in previous weeks could not express their ideas with so much clarity. After his presentation, I didn't care about my accent as much. I aspire to be like him." Therefore, it can be concluded that exposure to the environment in which interlocutors with various accents are present likely lowers the extent to which non-native English speakers believe the GA accent is an important factor in communication.

Table 3. Respondents' aspired accents in Fang's survey

Accents to Aspire to	Count (%)
Sound like a native speaker of English (NSE)	245 (79.3%)
Keep my own English accent	33 (10.7%)
I do not care about my English pronunciation	3 (0.9%)
Others, please specify	28 (9.1%)

Table 4. Respondents' aspired accents in my survey

Accents to Aspire to	Count (%)
Sound like a native speaker of English.	51 (65.39%)
Sound like a Chinese speaker.	1 (1.28%)
Whatever accent that makes me unique.	6 (7.69%)
I do not care about my English pronunciation.	18 (23.08%)
Other (please specify)	2 (2.56%)

6.2 Findings: "They are the same thing."

When asked about the reason why they feel in the certain way about their own English accents, a respondent who chose "very satisfied" stated: "I just don't care. There are European accents as well. They're the same thing as Chinese accents." This note serves as a great reminder for those who have a distorted obsession with GA accent in China; thousands of public figures working at intergovernmental organizations in Geneva and Brussels speak accented English, but it does no disservice to their ability to communicate clearly in televised speeches and media conferences. If such important European public figures can overtly speak English with European accents in front of the masses, why must the people in China imitate the American accent even just for private conversations? One may argue that if a Chinese person speaks English with whatever Chinese accent they want, the pronunciation would be so irregular that native speakers can have difficulties understanding. Indeed, this is not groundless. In my survey, one respondent who felt "uncertain" about his accent commented that "There was one time the guy at DUC (Danforth University Center at WashU) couldn't understand my 'Half and Half' (a popular dish at WashU) because I was saying 'Haaf and haaf' instead of 'Haef and haef', and I felt pretty bad." The Chinese accents in English become a problem once it hinders intelligibility. Given this reality, it seems to make sense that teachers would encourage students to imitate native accents (usually GA). Nevertheless, the alternative could be to standardize Chinese accents of English on the basis of intelligibility (e.g., to compile a set of phonetic symbols showing how intelligible Chinese English should sound like). Since further research as to what type of Chinese accents is intelligible needs to be conducted, this might be a time-consuming process, but it is worthwhile as it helps Chinese people

build up their cultural confidence and retain their Chinese identity while speaking English.

6.3 Findings: Prior education and attitudes towards English accents

Table 5 sheds light on the big picture of how English is taught in China. About 64.10% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "In my education, I was taught that I should strive to speak English as native speakers of English do." Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed only took up 16.67%. This data seems to support that there exists a sort of "distorted obsession" with native-like accents in English education. In other words, at the macro-level, students in China are encouraged to stick to the nativeness principle. With regard to the statement "In my education, I was taught that I should not speak English with a Chinese accent," though the contrast is not as overwhelming as the one present in the above statement, it is evident that those who agreed with it outnumbers those who did not. This data reveals that students are, to some extent, encouraged to get rid of their Chinese accents when speaking English.

Table 5. How respondents were taught to deal with English accents

Answer	In my education, I was taught that I should strive to speak English as native speakers of English do.	In my education, I was taught that I should not speak English with a Chinese accent.
Strongly Disagree	4 (5.13%)	10 (12.82%)
Disagree	9 (11.54%)	16 (20.51%)
Neutral	15 (19.23%)	16 (20.51%)
Agree	37 (47.43%)	26 (33.34%)
Strongly Agree	13 (16.67%)	10 (12.82%)
Total	78(100%)	78(100%)

As discussed in a preceding section, all Chinese students begin to take mandatory English classes from Grade 1. In addition, Chinese students who prepare to study in U.S. colleges usually experience a significant increase in the use of English during high school. Considering these two factors, it is very likely that their attitudes towards English accents have been formed and even fixed before higher education. Thus, to understand whether there is a relationship between variations in prior education and attitudes towards English accents, I incorporated two questions asking where respondents attended high school and whether their English teachers were best characterized as speaking English with an American/British/Chinese accent or other accents. In my survey, 54 reported that they attended high school in China and 22 in the U.S. The most notable outcome, shown in Table 6, is that all of the 5 who were "very satisfied" with their English accents had attended U.S. high schools, while none of those who attended Chinese high schools reported having this feeling. Moreover, in my sample, those who had attended U.S. high schools were on average slightly more satisfied with their English accents than those who had attended Chinese high schools. In terms of the aspired English accent, there are no significant differences between the two groups--64.82% of those who had attended the U.S. high schools and 63.63% of those who had attended Chinese high schools aspired to sound like native speakers (see Table 7).

Table 6. Respondents' self-perception of English accents by where they attended high school

Answer	Count (%) (US High School)	Count (%) (CHN High School)
Not satisfied at all	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.85%)
Not very satisfied	2 (9.09%)	8 (14.81%)
Uncertain	3 (13.64%)	8 (14.81%)
Satisfied	12 (54.54%)	37 (68.53%)
Very satisfied	5 (22.73%)	0 (0.00%)
Total	22 (100%)	54 (100%)

Table 7. Respondents' aspired accents by where they attended high school

Answer	Count (%) (US High School)	Count (%) (CHN High School)
Sound like a native speaker of English.	14 (63.64%)	35 (64.82%)
Sound like a Chinese speaker.	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.85%)
Whatever accent that makes me unique.	2 (9.09%))	4 (7.41%)
I do not care about my English pronunciation.	5 (22.73%)	13 (24.07%)
Other (please specify)	1 (4.54%)	1 (1.85%)
Total	22 (100%)	54 (100%)

As shown in Table 8, 20 respondents reported that their English teachers were best characterized as speaking English with a Chinese accent, and 58 reported that they were best characterized as speaking English with a native accent (American or British). Among the 20 who had English teachers with Chinese accents, 45% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I speak English with a Chinese accent," while among the 58 who had English teachers with native accents, the percentage agreeing with the statement amounts to only 18.96% (see Table 9). Based on this correlation, it is likely that in K-12 education, the teachers' English accents influence their students' accents. However, no causation can be asserted at this point because confounding variables such as "exposure to English songs, TV shows, and films" and "parents' attitudes towards English accents" were not controlled.

Table 8. How respondents characterize their English teachers' accents in their education

Answer	Count (%)
Speaking English with an American accent.	51 (65.39%)
Speaking English with a British accent.	7 (8.97%)
Speaking English with a Chinese accent.	20 (25.64%)
Speaking English with other accents.	0 (0.00%)
Total	78 (100%)

Table 9. How respondents define their English accents by how they characterize their English teachers' accents

Answer	I speak English with a Chinese accent. (Chinese-accented teacher)	I speak English with a Chinese accent. (Native-accented teacher)
Strongly Disagree	1 (10.00%)	7 (12.07%)
Disagree	3 (15.00%)	26 (44.83%%)
Neutral	6 (30.00%)	14 (24.14%)
Agree	8 (40.00%)	8 (13.79%)
Strongly Agree	1 (5.00%)	3 (5.17%)

Total	20(100%)	58(100%)

Another remarkable finding discovered is: among the 20 respondents having teachers with Chinese accented English, 45% were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their English accents; on the other hand, among the 58 respondents having teachers with native English accents, 81.04% felt this way (see Table 10). Together with the differences in agreement for the statement "I speak English with a Chinese accent," this data seemed to provide evidence for the inclination to the "nativeness principle" (i.e., students who speak Chinese accented English feel unsatisfied because they do not sound "native-like").

Table 10. Respondents' self-perception of English accents by how they characterize their English teachers' accents

Answer	Count (%) (Chinese-accented teacher)	Count (%) (Native-accented teacher)
Not satisfied at all	1 (5.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Not very satisfied	4 (20.00%)	6 (10.34%)
Uncertain	6 (30.00%)	5 (8.62%)
Satisfied	8 (40.00%)	43 (74.14%)
Very satisfied	1 (5.00%)	4 (6.90%)
Total	20 (100%)	58 (100%)

However, findings discussed in the next section will challenge this assertion, making the answer to the nativeness-or-intelligibility dilemma ambiguous.

7. Concluding Remarks and Limitations

The findings in this research have demonstrated that, unlike Chinese undergraduate students who study at Chinese colleges, the majority of those who study in U.S. colleges are satisfied with their English accents. Similar to those in Chinese colleges, the majority of Chinese students in U.S. colleges aspire to native-like accents, though most of them are aware that having Chinese accents when speaking English is a manifestation of their Chinese identities. However, a much higher percentage of those in U.S. colleges do not care about their English accents at all. The paper has offered plausible explanations for these observations. Findings in this research have also provided perception-based evidence for the presence of "distorted obsessions" with a native-like accent (General American accent) and rejection of the Chinese accent, confirming that the English education in China advocates the nativeness principle when it comes to pronunciation teaching. Moreover, it has been recognized that there are self-reported cases where an interlocutor's Chinese accent in English hinders the communication with native speakers of English. Regarding this finding, the paper has proposed a strategy to standardize Chinese accents of English on the basis of intelligibility, which may simultaneously make communications comprehensible and retain the speaker's Chinese identity. In addition, findings in this research have uncovered correlations between a) where students attended high schools and their attitudes towards their English accents and b) the type of accents students' English teachers had in their K-12 education and their attitudes towards their English accents. This research has the following limitations. Since the sample size is relatively small and mainly obtained from U.S. colleges that rank No.30 or higher according to the U.S. NEWS reports, the sample may be biased and not perfectly representative of the entire

Chinese undergraduate student population studying in the U.S colleges. Additionally, the reasons provided for the variations in attitudes towards English accents are mainly based on inference, so future research could focus on finding empirical evidence to account for such variations as well as control confounding variables and examine if prior education affects attitudes towards English accents beyond a simple correlation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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