Adhering to Norms or Embracing Variation? A Study of Chinese Business English Learners' Linguistic Preferences

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Abstract

English has become a global language and is now widely used in countries like China, where English is not the native language. This rise in popularity has led to questions about how English is taught and used in classrooms. This study looks at how 50 Chinese Business English students feel about different types of English, including China English. Using both surveys and interviews, the research collected information through a mixed-methods approach. The analysis showed that students have mixed feelings about China English. On one hand, they are starting to accept different forms of English, but on the other hand, they still believe that "native-speaker" English, like British or American English, is more prestigious. Even though many students now accept the idea that English can be used in many different ways, they still worry about being understood and being professional. These results help us better understand how English is used in Chinese classrooms. They also show that more research is needed to develop teaching methods that include local English forms while helping students communicate well in global settings.

Introduction

Recent studies show that there are over 7,000 languages spoken around the world (Maurer et al., 2025). Each language has its own history, culture, and use. Among them, English holds a unique position as a global language. In the past, English was mainly spoken in countries like the UK and the US. But today, it is used worldwide and belongs to people from many different countries. Researchers now agree that English is no longer only for native speakers. Instead, it is a shared tool used by many people around the world (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Because of this change, new ideas and frameworks have emerged, such as:

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) – Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011

English as an International Language (EIL) – Crystal, 2008; Jenkins, 2011

World Englishes (WE) – Jenkins, 2015

Global Englishes (GE) – Galloway & Rose, 2015

Although Kachru's (1985) Three Circles Model is important, it has been criticized for being too fixed. It doesn't fully reflect how English works in real life, especially in places like China where English use is flexible and changing. Newer ideas offer more useful ways to think about English use today. For example:

Pennycook (2007) talks about English as a Local Language, focusing on how people adapt it to their own needs.

Canagarajah (2013) introduces the idea of Spatial Repertoires, showing how English is shaped by social use.

Wei (2018) explains Translanguaging, which shows how multilingual speakers mix languages in useful ways.

These ideas help us see China English as a living, changing form of English, not just a poor copy of British or American English. For example, "Indian English" and "Singaporean English" are now recognized as real and useful forms of English. But in many countries like China, teachers and schools still follow "native-speaker" models, often ignoring or undervaluing local versions of English (He, 2017; Yang & Zhang, 2015).

In China, English is mostly taught using British or American standards. This creates problems for local forms of English like China English, which are often seen as incorrect or low quality. International tests like IELTS and TOEFL also focus on native-speaker norms. As a result, many Chinese students see China English as weak or wrong. This problem also exists in other countries where English is not a native language (Canagarajah, 2013).

Even though China English is used more and more in daily life, it is not well studied or supported in the classroom (Pan, 2015). According to the World Englishes (WE) model, China English has its own grammar, sounds, and vocabulary (Xu, 2010). Under the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) model, English in China is seen as flexible and influenced by local languages. Still, many teachers and students hesitate to accept China English because of the strong focus on British and American English (Fang, 2017; Wang, 2015; Yang & Zhang, 2015).

This raises important questions about whether China English is seen as a legitimate form of English in the classroom. As English spreads worldwide, we must rethink the idea that only native-speaker English is good. While some studies have looked at how university students feel about different types of English (Miao, 2023; Pan et al., 2021), there is little research about students in technical and vocational schools, especially those studying Business English.

These students are important because they are preparing for real-world international business, where flexible and clear communication is key. Unlike university students, they may care more about being understood and less about speaking "perfect" English. That's why this study focuses on:

How Business English students in vocational schools understand different types of English, including China English; What shapes their opinions about these different types of English; Which types of English they prefer in their classes.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the attitudes of Chinese Business English learners toward traditional language norms and emerging linguistic variations in global business communication

2. To identify the factors influencing learners' preferences for either standardized English usage or diverse, context-specific language practices in business settings

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to clearly explain the participants' opinions about different types of English and the reasons behind their views. The research took place at a vocational and technical college in northern China. This college has a long history of over 60 years and offers a wide range of programs. It was a good place to study how students understand different types of English in today's globalized world. The participants were all 50 second-year students majoring in Business English during the first semester of the 2025 academic year. These students were part of the Foreign Language Department. The researchers chose these students on purpose to make sure the study focused on those most relevant to the research questions. First-year students were not included because they had not yet learned enough about the topic. Third-year students were also not included because they were doing internships at the time of data collection. The 50 students in this study were all adults aged 18 or older. They were able to think for themselves and give honest opinions. Their answers did not affect their grades or studies, which helped them share their thoughts openly. However, the results of this study cannot be applied to students from other schools or levels because of the small sample size.

Table I: 50 second-year Chinese students

50 second-year Chinese students	Gender	Age	Educational subjects
	Female 45 (90%)	18+years (78%)	Liberal arts 32 (64%)
	Male 5 (10%)	20+years (22%)	Science 18 (36%)

All 50 second-year students were carefully chosen from a group of 200 Business English students at the vocational college. Most of them were female (about 90%), which matches the actual student population in the Business English program, where more females are enrolled than males. This helps support the accuracy of our sample.

The researcher used purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018), meaning we chose students who had experiences related to the research topic so we could collect detailed and

meaningful data. To join the study, students needed to have completed at least one semester of professional courses like International Trade Theory and Practice, Overview of Britain and the United States, and Cross-border E-commerce English. This requirement made sure they had a basic understanding of different types of English.

These students also had experience using English both locally (through daily interactions) and internationally (through travel), especially with China English and other varieties. This made them good candidates to give useful insights for our research.

From these 50 students, we selected 9 for in-depth interviews. These 9 were chosen based on their answers to a questionnaire. They had more experience with different types of English and were willing to join the interview. We selected students with different levels of understanding and opinions about China English so we could hear a wide range of views on this complex topic.

Findings Results

The questionnaire results show that students are becoming more aware of English as a global language and are more open to different ways of speaking it. They do not believe that English belongs only to native speakers and accept different types of English as valid. While being understood is more important to them than following traditional native-speaker rules, many still think native-like English sounds more prestigious, especially in school or work settings. Chinese English (CE) is seen as a useful form for communication within China, but some students worry it might not be accepted internationally. These results help set the stage for the next part of the study, which looks more closely at why students think this way and what challenges they face.

Table II: Students' Awareness of English Varieties

No.	Sentements	Mean	S.D.
The concept of Kachru's three concentric circle			
1.	Correct English are only American or British English.	1.28	0.536
2.	ESL English (e.g.: Hong Kong or Singaporean English) are incoorect.	1.28	0.536
3.	EFL Englishes (e.g.: China or Malaysia English) are incorrect.	1.24	0.431
The concept of standard English			
4.	Correct English must have a single standard.	1.20	0.539
5.	Standard English must have the same grammar rule.	2.36	0.827
6.	Standard English may have a different accent and pronunciation.	2.80	0.495
The concept of English ownership			
7.	Only British or Americans are the legal owners of English.	1.18	0.438
8.	English currently does not belong to the native speakers anymore, but to anybody who uses it.	2.80	0.495

No.	Sentements	Mean	S.D.
	China English		
9.	Unlike Singaporean and Philippine English, China English has its own individual idiosyncrasy.	2.80	0.495
10.	Speaking English with Chinese accent is embrarrassing.	1.34	0.626
11.	Any Chinese speaking with Chinese accent is embarassing.	1.98	0.769
12.	I am happy with my English pronunciation as long as others can understand me.	2.70	0.580
13.	I would like to speak English with Chinese accent.	2.44	0.760
14.	Chinese accent is easier to undersatnd then a native speaker's accent in a Chinese classroom.	2.82	0.482
English varieties			
15.	English has different varieties.	2.84	0.422
16.	Different varieties of English can be found in social network sites.	2.92	0.274
17.	Every Englishh variety should be accepted and recognized.	2.86	0.452
18.	It is important to understand varieties of English, e.g. Indian English, Singagprean English, China English, etc.	2.90	0.303
19.	I don't think we need to understand non-standard varieties of English because they are not native varieties of English.	1.36	0.663
20.	Since English is a global language, it is important to understand fidderent accents of English.	2.82	0.482
21.	It is very interesting to learn different forms of English prounciation.	2.80	0.535
22.	I do not think it is important to speak like native speaker of English.	2.42	0.825
23.	Sometimes I find it difficult to understand those learners who speak English with a stroung non-English accent.	2.58	0.702
Other aspect of World English			
24.	The English taught in school must be British English or American English.	2.72	0.640
25.	English messages with scattered grammatical errors are fine as long as they are understandble.	2.80	0.535
26.	If I can choose, I will speak British or American English.	2.40	0.639
27.	I do not mind that others can't understand my English because English is not my first language.	1.42	0.731
28.	I like to focus more on intelligibility rather than how I can speak like a native speaker.	2.82	0.482
29.	It is important to speak English like a native speaker.	1.38	0.697

No.	Sentements	Mean	S.D.
30.	You should not say anything in English until you can speak English correctly.	1.10	0.364

The results from the study show that students are becoming more open to different types of English, especially when it comes to being understood (intelligibility), who owns the language (ownership), and what is considered the correct form (standardization). Students care more about speaking clearly than sounding like native speakers. They are happy with their pronunciation as long as it is understandable (M = 2.70, SD = 0.580), and many disagree with the idea that they must speak like native English speakers (M = 2.42, SD = 0.825). This shows a practical view of learning English, where being understood is more important than following strict language rules.

Students are also more accepting of different grammar (M = 2.80, SD = 0.535), showing they care more about how language works in real life than about avoiding errors. Their views on ownership also show change. Most students disagreed with the idea that English only belongs to people from Britain or America (M = 1.18, SD = 0.438), and they support the idea that English is a shared global language (M = 2.80, SD = 0.495). They see English as a tool for global communication, not something owned by just a few countries.

However, even though students recognize the value of many kinds of English (M = 2.84, SD = 0.422) and their use in global communication (M = 2.86, SD = 0.452), some still prefer British and American English (M = 2.40, SD = 0.639). This shows a conflict: while students accept different forms of English in theory, they still view native English (especially British and American) as more prestigious, especially for jobs or academic purposes.

When it comes to China English, students show both acceptance and hesitation. Many see it as a useful and understandable form of English (M = 2.80, SD = 0.495), and they prefer Chinese-accented English in class for better understanding (M = 2.82, SD = 0.482). But opinions are mixed about whether they want to speak with a Chinese accent (M = 2.44, SD = 0.760), and many still admire native-like pronunciation (M = 1.98, SD = 0.769). This shows that China English is still not seen as equal in status to native varieties. This may be due to the way English is taught in schools, exams that favor native accents, and the global influence of English-speaking countries.

Overall, the findings show that students are trying to balance their local identity with global expectations. They are becoming more confident in their own way of speaking English, and they understand that English is used by people around the world in different ways. Students care most about being understood, not about copying native speakers exactly. This supports the idea that English is changing based on how it is used around the world, and that learners now focus more on clear communication than on perfect grammar or pronunciation.

At the same time, students still struggle with understanding accents that are very different from what they're used to. This shows that while they accept variety, being

understood is still the top priority. These results support the view that mutual understanding should be more important than sounding native-like in global English communication.

In conclusion, students are moving toward a more practical and flexible way of learning English. They are more open to different forms of English and see local versions like China English as valid. However, native varieties still carry a sense of status and influence how students think about English, especially in formal settings. These findings show the need for teaching methods that support local language identity while helping students communicate effectively in global contexts.

Interview Results

The interviews with Business English students showed that they are aware of different kinds of English around the world. Most students understand that English is a global language used for business, travel, and communication. They know about different English varieties, such as British, American, and China English (CE), and they recognize that English changes depending on where it is spoken.

1. Awareness of English Varieties

Students agreed that English is spoken differently in many countries. They said English helps people from different backgrounds communicate. However, even though they know about English varieties like CE, many still believe that British or American English is more suitable for professional or academic situations. Some students felt proud of CE, but others felt unsure about using it in serious settings.

2. Feelings About China English (CE)

Students had mixed feelings about CE. Many said it is useful and comfortable when talking with other Chinese people. It reflects their identity and helps reduce anxiety when learning English. However, they worried that using CE in job interviews or international meetings might make them seem less professional. Some students said being labeled as a CE speaker felt like criticism.

3. What Affects Their Opinions

Three main things influenced how students see English and CE:

Media: Most English content they see (like movies and news) uses British or American English, which affects their idea of what "good" English is.

Education: From a young age, students are taught to follow native English models, so they tend to see these as more correct.

Career Goals: Many believe speaking like a native speaker can help them get better jobs, which makes them focus more on standard English.

4. Opinions on English Teaching

Some students said CE should be part of English lessons because it helps them understand better. But others thought schools should still focus on British or American English.

Many preferred a balanced approach: learning both CE and standard English. This would help them use English well in different situations.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Students are beginning to accept English diversity, but native-speaker standards still influence them, especially in professional settings. To improve English teaching:

Teachers should include different types of English in the classroom.

Learning materials should show various English accents and styles.

Classes should focus more on clear communication than sounding like a native speaker.

Activities like role-plays and group discussions can help students use English confidently.

Tests should check how well students express ideas, not just grammar or pronunciation.

Future research should look at students in other fields and see how global communication changes their views. It would also help to learn what employers think about CE and other English varieties. These steps can help English education in China become more inclusive and practical for the modern world.

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