



# Teaching English as an international language in China: Investigating university teachers' and students' attitudes towards China English



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes of Chinese university students and teachers towards China English (CE), an emerging variety in China and the ideological underpinnings beneath their attitudinal responses. In the study, 1589 university students and 193 English teachers were asked to evaluate the understandability and acceptability of some potential features of CE with a questionnaire survey. Among them, 31 students and 33 teachers were also invited to provide reasons for their survey answers. The study revealed that both the student and teacher participants were reluctant to accept CE as a pedagogical model but their attitudes diverge as specific CE features were involved. The in-depth exploration of their justifications identified that the widespread native speaker English ideology and Chinglish stigma were more important reasons leading to their negative evaluations of CE than concerns for the communicativeness of CE to the outside world. Findings of the study may have important implications for English education in contexts where local varieties of English are emerging.

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## 1. Introduction

The global spread of English has been reshaping the sociolinguistic realities of the language. It has led to the emergence of a number of local English varieties in different places of the world (Bolton, 2012; Kachru, 1985). The rise of English for international communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds has also challenged the dominance of native speaker English in English language education (Jenkins, 2006; Ke & Cahyani, 2014). Proposals have been made to include more localised English varieties in the teaching and learning English enterprises alongside the conventionally adopted standards of British and American English (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Sharifian, 2009). Nevertheless, attitude research has persistently noted language learners' preference for native speaker English instead of other choices (Timmis, 2002; Young & Walsh, 2010). Language learners were even found to be reluctant to accept the variety emerged in their own contexts (Chan, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to find out what specific about these varieties impairs peoples' willingness to accept them as alternative pedagogical models. To this end, China English (CE) was taken as a case in this mixed-method study to explore university English learners' and teachers' perceptions of it in the context of China. Given that the number of English learners

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and/or users has well exceeded 400 million in mainland China (hereafter China, [Wei & Su, 2012](#)), the investigation may have important implications for the localisation of English education in China and similar contexts.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Problematising native speakerism in English language education

Native speaker English, typically British and/or American English, and their speakers have often been endorsed as target models in English teaching and learning practices in many contexts ([Cook, 2007](#); [Yoo, 2014](#)). The indiscriminate privilege of native speakers and their English contributes to the creation of a pervasive culture of native speakerism in such contexts ([Kumaravadivelu, 2003](#); [Waters, 2007](#)). As [Holliday \(2005\)](#) argued, the over-representation of the native-speaker point of view at the expense of non-native-speaker ones (*native speakerism*) had “a massive influence and exists to a greater or lesser degree in the thinking of all ESOL [English to Speakers of Other Languages] educators” (p. 7). It produced “realities of exclusion, discrimination and rationalizations for intervention and ‘cultural correction’” ([Kabel, 2009](#), p. 17). With the development of English in global contexts, the dominance of native English in education has been critically contested in recent years. It has been argued that the adoption of native English as pedagogical models privileges native speakers as sanctioned English owners and norm providers, whereas non-native speakers as underachieving learners and emulators ([Kirkpatrick, 2006](#)). Power imbalance of such may create considerable inequities between those who *haves* and those who *have-nots* ([Nunan, 2003](#)). What's more, to teach English as a native language also goes against the reality that many indigenous English varieties have already developed to express meanings in locally relevant ways and as identity markers for their own speakers ([Alsagoff, 2010](#)). A native English model fails to attend the diversified realities of English in the global context. Besides, for most learners who are living outside of Anglo-American countries, it is also impossible for them to achieve native-like proficiency by learning English mainly through *macroacquisition* ([Brutt-Griffler, 2002](#)). A native speaker model actually sets up an unattainable goal for them ([McKay, 2010](#)). More critically, a native speaker model does not necessarily guarantee successful communication in the international arena with the increased participation of speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds ([Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011](#)).

To address the dominance of native speaker English in language education, a variety of pedagogical proposals have been made. Some suggest enhancing learners' linguistic flexibility by exposing them to various English varieties ([Morrison & White, 2005](#); [Suzuki, 2011](#)). Others recommend the teaching of international communication strategies to English learners ([Seidlhofer, 2011](#); [Sifakis, 2009](#)). Among them, one frequently discussed proposal is to integrate the variety generated in learners' own local context into education. It is argued that a localised model is culturally, politically and linguistically more relevant to teachers and learners in that context than a native speaker model ([Kirkpatrick, 2006, 2007](#)). It has the potential to increase learners' ownership of English for it is closer to their own life and can enable them to communicate the culture and values of their own country to international audience ([McKay, 2010](#)). In spite of such enthusiasm in promoting local English varieties, there are still concerns about the appropriateness of having local varieties as pedagogical models in contexts where English has restricted presence and has not yet developed into a legitimate variety ([Bruthiaux, 2010](#)). However, in countries such as Japan, scholars have started calling for “the teaching of [Japanese] English as a de-Anglo-Americanised international language” ([Hino, 2009](#), p. 107). They argue that although standardised local varieties are not yet formed in many contexts, “nativization indeed takes place [...] in a way that both reflects and allows users to express their indigenous values” ([Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012](#), p. 20). Attitudinal studies, though have continually documented frontline teachers' and learners' preference to native English, have also begun to notice participants' emerging appreciation and attachment to English developing in their own context ([McKenzie, 2008](#); [Sasayama, 2013](#)). More studies are needed to probe into the subtleties and nuances involved in these attitudinal responses to local English varieties in different contexts.

### 2.2. China English and English language education in China

In China, English proficiency has long been promoted as indispensable for the nation's modernisation and internationalisation though English is seldom used for daily communication ([Gao, 2012](#)). English language education has been a compulsory course in mainstream education from secondary schools to universities ever since 1978 and further expanded to primary schools in the new millennium ([Lam, 2005](#)). At present, English has enjoyed the largest population of learners in comparison with other foreign languages taught in China ([Xu, 2010](#)). Nevertheless, it is mainly native speaker English, particularly American or British English, that has been advocated under the name of ‘standard English’ in the educational system ([Gil & Adamson, 2011](#)).

In recent years, *China English* has been promoted as a developing English variety emerging in the context of China and a possible pedagogical choice for Chinese English learners to challenge the dominance of native speaker English in China ([Deterding, 2006](#); [Gao, Liao, & Li, 2014](#); [Hu, 2004](#); [Kirkpatrick, 2007](#); [Xu, 2010](#)). The term *China English* (CE) was initially put forward by [Ge \(1980\)](#) in translation to refer to English expressions unique to the Chinese culture. However, it had not aroused much attention at that time because with the dominance of native speaker English in education, English usages with Chinese characteristics but deviating from native speaker norms had been pervasively taken as *Chinese English* or *Chinglish*—an *interlanguage* that was produced by language learners in their learning process and was somewhere in-between their mother tongue and the target language ([Hu, 2004](#); [Wei & Fei, 2003](#)). For reasons of such, the two terms, *Chinese English* and *Chinglish*,

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