



Chinese University Students' Perceptions of the Impact of a “Standard” English Accent on Classroom Participation in TESOL Classrooms

Shidi Zhang

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 90007, America

shidizha@usc.edu

Abstract. This study uses a questionnaire-based methodology to investigate the effects of Chinese university students' view of a “standard” English accent on their classroom involvement and future professional growth. The research finds that learners' perceptions of Standard British English (SBE) and General American English (GenAm) are still influenced by the idea of standard language, and it examines the interaction between this ideology and emerging respects such as intelligibility and belonging in English. The results show that accent-related concerns may hinder classroom participation, as 72.73% of the participants reported that they sometimes, often, or always hesitate to speak in class because of their accent. This article further argues that TESOL teaching classrooms should move away from the mother-tongue-centered teaching model and place comprehensibility, identity, and diversity in pronunciation teaching at the core.

Keywords: TESOL; Standard English accent; Intelligibility; Classroom participation, Motivation

1 Introduction

In contemporary Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) classrooms in China, the concept of English pronunciation is still deeply influenced by the ideology of “standard” pronunciation, especially Standard British English (SBE) and General American English (GenAm). This ideology has consistently been reflected within the Chinese education system over a long period of time. Textbooks, listening materials, and assessment standards are often primarily based on norms based on native speakers [1]. As a result, many students generally prefer SBE and GenAm, perceiving them as more standard and pleasant, while evaluating non-native accents (e.g., Chinese, Indian) less positively [2]. These deeply-rooted notions of accent norms significantly influence learners' self-perception, language confidence, and willingness to communicate in teaching scenarios. To better understand broader issues like participation and justice in cross-cultural English teaching (TESOL) situations, it is crucial to investigate how Chinese college students perceive the “standard” accent.

According to recent studies, Chinese learners have complicated opinions about English accents, which frequently show themselves as a conflict between the idea of standard language and the acceptance of accent diversity. Numerous students still view their own accents negatively and prefer to use standard English accents. According to Fang's research, for example, college students typically link SBE and GenAm to increased employment competitiveness, social standing, and linguistic standardization [3]. In a similar vein, Wang discovered that students were highly motivated to master standard accents and saw identical native-like pronunciation as an indication of great ability [4]. More recent research, however, suggests a continuous change [4]. Qiao, Song, and Xu found that more students view comprehensibility as a more useful criterion for communication, even though standard English native accents are still preferred [5]. Overall, these studies show that Chinese learners' assessments of accents are both consistent and evolving.

This study focuses on how college students view the effect of "standard" English accents on their engagement in class and expectations for career advancement in TESOL classrooms. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study combines a questionnaire survey with a critical literature to explore students' accent preferences and their attitude toward their own Chinese-accented in English. It aims to figure out the impact of accents on their desire to participate in class discussions across three main aspects. This research design reveals the spread and difficulties of the idea of standard accents in modern TESOL teaching situations, connecting the theoretical study of accent ideology with the real classroom experiences of students.

This research serve as a resource for educational decisions on teaching pronunciation, linguistic identity, and inclusiveness in the classroom. This study has useful implications for TESOL teachers, encouraging instructional courses that emphasize comprehensibility to support learner participation and develop successful communicative competence for a variety of English-speaking environments. This study provides guidance for the ongoing efforts to re-establish the pronunciation norms in TESOL classrooms.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Key Concepts

The so-called "standard" English accent typically refers to the variant with higher social status, such as Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American English (GenAm). These variants have often been regarded as authoritative norms in English textbooks and Chinese educational policies, and people adjust their own accents according to these pronunciations, which also indicates the status of the "standard" English accent [1]. In contrast, "Chinese-accented English" refers to a localized variant of English influenced by Chinese phonetics, vocabulary and pragmatic features, yet comprehensible to international speakers [5]. People's attitudes towards accents are also influenced by the ideology of accents - this belief system links specific accents to notions of correctness, prestige, and social status, often marginalizing regional accents as inferior or flawed [3]. As many students now understand that being understood is more important

than obtaining native-like speech, comprehensibility has become a more importance criterion in international communication [5]. These ideas provide the foundation for comprehending how students assess accents in academic and professional settings.

2.2 Existing Research on Accent Attitudes in China

Research on Chinese language learner' opinions toward English accents reveals the intricate relationship between status, identity, and communication priority. Numerous studies have shown that learners consistently favor native speakers' accents. According to Fang's research, pupils typically connect British and American accents with higher language proficiency and linguistic norms. The deeply ingrained standard language paradigm in the Chinese educational system is reinforced by this perception [3]. In a similar vein, Wang noted that students typically believe that pronouncing words like native speakers is advantageous for both academic success and future job prospects [4]. Recent research, however, indicates that students' perceptions are gradually changing. On the one hand, with the increasing awareness of English as an international language, more and more learners recognize the priority of comprehensibility over native accent for effective communication [5]. On the other hand, some students still prefer the original accent, which may be related to the cultural capital and social prestige it carries [5]. Overall, the findings of the existing literature show that Chinese language learners are in a transitional exploration stage between conventional norms and the new notion of linguistic diversity.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Chinese students' perceptions of standard accents can be interpreted using three theoretical frameworks: World English, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and the identity/ownership perspective. The World Englishes paradigm challenges the dominance of inner-circle norms, such as British and American English, by positioning English as a multi-centered language with several acceptable variants [1]. According to this viewpoint, Chinese and English are useful variations anchored in cultural settings rather than faulty outliers. This perspective is supported by English as a Foreign Language (ELF) research that prioritizes mutual intelligibility and adaptation over achieving the same degree of accuracy as native speakers. Easy communication is more crucial, and languages should be treated equally [1]. Additionally, the identity recognition-based approach emphasizes the relationship between accent and learners' sense of self and cultural belonging. Students who strongly identify with their Chinese linguistic origin are more likely to accept their own accent and see English as a shared international resource [5]. Together, these theoretical stances refute the native speaker prejudice and offer different ways to think about the validity of accents in the context of teaching TESOL.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study employed an online questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions. 21 Participants were all enrolled in English-related courses at a Chinese comprehensive university. All of the participants, who were between the ages of 18 and 23, had completed at least one TESOL or English course. Because these students frequently utilize English in teaching and communication contexts and are immediately impacted by the pronunciation standards in the TESOL classroom, this sample is thought to be in line with the research aims.

3.2 Instrumentation

Two applied linguistics experts independently reviewed the questionnaire draft. They assessed the questionnaire's relevance to the research objectives, the unambiguity of the question items, and its cultural appropriateness within the context of Chinese students, confirming its feasibility. The questionnaire was used to gather information about students' perceptions of English accents and their self-reported involvement in class. In line with the constructs commonly studied in accent attitude research, the questionnaire was divided into four sections:

- The general perceptions of standard accents.

- The perceptions of Chinese-accented English.

- The perceptions of communicative efficacy and intelligibility.

- The impact of accent on readiness to speak in class.

For data analysis, items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Responses on the five-point Likert scale were set into three categories for more intuitive interpretation: ratings of 1 and 2 were combined as

"Disagree," 4 and 5 as "Agree," and 3 remained as "Neutral." The frequency and percentage of responses in each category were calculated for key items. Descriptive statistics.

3.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

The study made it clear that the purpose of the poll was to examine how people generally perceived English accents rather than to evaluate each participant's level of English ability. Descriptive statistical techniques were used for data analysis, with an emphasis on response distributions, average scores, and frequency across the four categories. Thematic coding was employed to identify recurrent themes pertaining to identity, anxiety, and classroom engagement in open-ended responses. These techniques made it possible for the study to find a strong link between students' reported behaviors in the TESOL classroom and how they perceived accents.

4 Results

4.1 Attitudes Toward “Standard” English Accents

Table 1 presents students’ responses regarding perceptions of “standard” English accents. The findings indicate that items pertaining to professional settings had the highest agreement percentages. Specifically with 50.00% of participants agreeing that native-like pronunciation is essential for career success and 54.55% stating that employers favor native-like accents. Concerning the definition of a standard and its link to proficiency, garnered the highest proportions of neutral responses (54.55% for both), with agreement rates below 32%. A large number of students continue to link “standard” English accents, primarily American and British accents, to social prestige, language accuracy, and greater language competency. It reflects the enduring influence of standard accent ideology as reported in other studies [4].

Table 1. A summary of students’ perceptions of ‘standard’ English accents.

Item	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
British and American accents represent “standard English.”	31.82%	54.55%	13.64%
Accent reflects one’s English proficiency.	27.27%	54.55%	18.19%
Native-like pronunciation is necessary for professional success.	50.00%	40.91%	9.09%
Employers prefer native-like accents.	54.55%	45.45%	0%

4.2 Attitudes Toward Chinese-Accented English and Intelligibility

Table 2. Attitudes toward Chinese-accented English and intelligibility.

Item	Positive / Identity-affirming Responses (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Chinese-accented English sounds less professional.	40.91% (Disagree + Strongly Disagree)	27.27%	31.82%
Chinese accent is part of my identity.	54.55%	45.45%	0%
I would like to keep features of my Chinese accent.	27.28%	63.64%	9.09%
Intelligibility is more important than sounding native-like.	68.18%	31.82%	0%

As shown in Table 2, A majority of participants (54.55%) participants believes that Chinese accent is linked to their identity. 68.18% students consider comprehensibility more important than a native-like accent, confirming the perspective of English as a lingua franca. Opinions are more divided regarding the professional perception of a Chinese accent, with 40.91% disagreeing that it sounds less professional and 31.82% agreeing. 63.64% remain neutral on the desire to actively retain features of their Chinese accent.

4.3 Accent Anxiety and Classroom Participation

Table 3. Accent-Related Anxiety and Classroom Participation

Item	High Anxiety / High Influence (%)	Neutral (%)	Low Anxiety / Low Influence (%)
Hesitation to speak because of accent.	40.91% (Always + Often)	31.82%	27.27%
Feeling anxious when sounding "Chinese."	27.27%	40.91%	31.82%
Teachers' reactions affect willingness to speak.	36.37%	36.36%	27.27%
Participate more when accent diversity is encouraged.	68.18%	27.27%	4.55%

Regarding students' self-reported accent-related anxiety and its perceived impact on classroom participation are presented in Table 3. The results indicate that 40.91% of participants reported that they were reluctant to speak in class, especially 36.37% of them afraid that their teachers or peers would think poorly of their accents. A strong majority (68.18%) agree that they will participate more actively when they are in an environment that accent diversity encouraged. These events show that participation behavior is significantly shaped by the concept of accent, and they also point to a potential psychological barrier that could prevent equitable participation in TESOL classes.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The study's findings highlight the intricacy and underlying inconsistencies in Chinese college students' perceptions of English accents. British and American accents are still seen favorably by many participants. However, the Chinese educational system and teaching methods have strengthened the long-standing language standards, which are the primary cause of this preference. According to a number of students, learning to pronounce words similarly to their mother tongue can make them more competitive for jobs in the future, particularly in professions where oral communication is necessary on a regular basis [1]. While Chinese college students are becoming more conscious of the variety of English, they still have a strong internalization of native speakers' linguistic standards. The fact that students frequently characterize their native accent as being more "professional" or "correct" suggests that the standards of native speakers continue to have a symbolic impact on how language proficiency is perceived.

However, the survey results also show that people are embracing English with a Chinese accent [6], which is consistent with current scholarly research that highlights the validity of regional linguistic variants [5]. Learners who prioritize comprehensibility are more inclined to participate in class discussions than native speakers [7]. This suggests that positive accent identification can improve engagement and reduce

anxiety. The shift is mainly due to the lack of an immersive language environment, and it also reflects a trend towards a more "self-oriented" approach. These findings show that students are progressively adopting an ELF-oriented viewpoint, considering comprehensibility as the primary requirement for successful communication rather than native language competency. The transitory nature of modern Chinese learners' attitudes about accents is reflected in this dual orientation, which values the prestige of native language accents while accepting local accents.

All of these data suggest that Chinese learners are in a transitional stage where they must balance the evolving viewpoints based on global communication needs with the inherited accuracy rules.

5.2 Future Directions: Implications for Teaching and Learning

Reorienting Teaching Philosophy and Content. Shifting the Pedagogical Goal: This thesis explores the future development direction of TESOL teaching methods within the Chinese context. The teaching objective should shift from pursuing a native accent to prioritizing clarity. As students increasingly view clarity and comprehensibility as the core goals of communication, pronunciation teaching urgently needs to break away from the limitation of imitating the native language and instead focus on the clarity and comprehensibility of pronunciation [8].

Calculating Ownership and Broadening Exposure: Learners view the accented English as an integral part of their own cultural identity, which indicates that they are gradually regarding English as a global shared resource [6]. This emphasis on language ownership and identity recognition helps learners build greater confidence and autonomy in their use of English. Thirdly, exposure to a wider variety of English accents, including non-native variations, can help students accept the diversity of accents and break the privileged status of British and American accents.

5.3 Repositioning the Teachers' Role

Teachers play a crucial role in driving these changes: they are defined as the subjects of the transformation. To close the gap between policy and classroom practice, educators must actively exhibit an inclusive mindset, adapt the curriculum to local needs, foster a classroom climate that values a variety of accents, and take part in curriculum design and policy discussions. [9]. For example, because real resources are few, Chinese students' English pronunciation frequently lacks clarity. The comprehensibility is particularly impacted by inappropriate word emphasis. By recognizing word endings and vowel placements, teachers can use Waldo's stress prediction methods to anticipate the proper stress.

The findings demonstrate that this approach is both straightforward and easy to learn, and it outperforms the conventional approaches. It can assist Chinese learners in lowering their accents and enhancing their comprehension and self-assurance when communicating internationally [10]. TESOL instructors can assist students in overcoming accent anxiety and developing more enduring communication skills by improving understanding, bolstering identity identification, and encouraging linguistic diversity.

6 Conclusion

The study's findings show that Chinese college students view English accents in two ways: traditionally and more recently. On the one hand, a lot of students still consider American and British accents to be the "standard" and link them to improved linguistic accuracy, academic standing, and professional benefits. However, more students are starting to acknowledge the validity of speaking English with a Chinese accent and are emphasizing the language's comprehensibility and communication power. This reflects the evolving trend in the study of Chinese English and in the context of English as an international language in recent years. According to these research findings, learners are in a transitional stage where they are balancing a more inclusive and identity-based perspective of English usage with the intrinsic norms of their mother language.

Despite the substantial value of this work, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. The results' applicability to a larger student population is restricted by the comparatively small sample size. Additionally, participants' opinions of societal norms and their self-assessed English competence may have an impact on the utilization of self-reported data. Additionally, the questionnaire lacked contrastive audio stimuli and acoustic measures, which could have contributed to a better understanding of how students assess various accents in real time.

To effectively reflect the diversity in attitudes toward accents, future studies should increase the sample size to include students from different academic fields, geographical areas, and English proficiency levels. In order to better understand how students evaluate native and non-native accents, the study may also include experimental or perceptual tasks (e.g., matching pseudonyms or intelligibility tests). Additionally, more investigation is required to examine the function of educators. Learners' attitudes and involvement patterns are greatly influenced by teachers' personal views and classroom methods. Finally, future studies could investigate how curriculum design, multimedia input, or classroom interaction can improve exposure to a variety of English accents.

References

1. Li, G. (2016). Adjusting Students' Attitude toward English Accent in China's EFL Education from the Perspective of World Englishes. In 2016 International Conference on Education, E-learning and Management Technology (pp. 611-616). Atlantis Press.
2. Xiang, J. (2022). Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes towards English accents in an English-medium instruction context. In 2022 6th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2022) (pp. 3305-3313). Atlantis Press.
3. Fang, F. (2017). An Investigation of attitudes towards English accents—A case study of a university in China. In *Researching Chinese English: The state of the art* pp. 141-156. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
4. Wang, Z. (2020). A Study of English Accent: Attitudes of Chinese Undergraduate English-major Students in Southwest Forestry University in China. *Language in India*, 20(9).
5. Qiao, J., Song, H., & Xu, C. (2022). Investigating Attitudes Towards China English Accent among Undergraduate Students in Mainland China. In 2022 7th International Conference on Social Sciences and Economic Development (ICSSSED 2022) (pp. 466-473). Atlantis Press.

6. Pan, H., Liu, C., Fang, F., & Elyas, T. (2021). “How is my English?”: Chinese university students’ attitudes toward China English and their identity construction. *Sage Open*, 11(3), 21582440211038271.
7. Feng, S. (2025). A Review of Accents in L2 English—Taking Chinese Accent as an Example. *Frontiers in Educational Research*, 8(7).
8. Lu, T., & Gao, X. (2023). Elf learners’ attitude towards english accents. *Scholars International Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 6(8), 351-357.
9. Molina, S. C. (2016). English language teaching in China: Teacher agency in response to curricular innovations. In *Teacher agency and policy response in English language teaching* (pp. 7-25). Routledge.
10. Liu, L. (2023). A Potential Solution to Chinese Students’ Unintelligible English Accent: A Study of the Effectiveness of a Stress Placement Intervention to Improve Chinese English Speakers’ Lexical Pronunciation. *Chinese Studies*, 12(2), 140-156.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

