



Chinese Undergraduate Students' Attitudes Towards English Accents in an English-Medium Instruction Context

Jiayue Xiang^(✉)

Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College,
Zhuhai 519087, Guangdong, China
p930025099@mail.uic.edu.cn

Abstract. In response to the criticisms of the standardization of English caused by globalization, notions of World English and English as a lingua franca have been developed, emphasizing the co-existence of different English varieties. This has caused changes in non-native speakers' attitudes towards English accents, especially in the English-medium instruction (EMI) context where the two notions are widely introduced. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate Chinese EMI learners' attitudes towards English accents. Questionnaires and interviews were utilized to examine 50 Chinese EMI undergraduates' preferences of different English accents and their attitudes towards their own accents. The results showed that when intelligibility was considered, most students perceived native English accents more positively and showed relatively negative attitudes towards non-native ones, which were more likely to hinder intelligibility. Although nearly half of the participants were satisfied with their accents, more than half still aspired to native-like accents. However, some students reported an attitude change caused by EMI and believed that attaining a native-like accent was unnecessary as long as the accent was intelligible. Accordingly, some implications can be provided for English as a second language (ESL) teaching, such as promoting EMI application and emphasizing intelligibility when teaching speaking.

Keywords: Accent · Attitude · China · English-medium instruction · World English

1 Introduction

As a result of the ongoing globalization, the great importance of English can be reflected in the vast, rapid spread of English in different fields worldwide [1]. Unsurprisingly, the number of English as a second language (ESL) speakers has also increased at an unprecedented speed. However, the convention which regards native English as the benchmark in ESL teaching causes discrimination against non-native speakers (NNSs) as well as the English varieties they use [2]. This has built ingrained negative attitudes in NNSs' minds towards their own English varieties, and they are convinced the native ones are superior and standard. These issues were not addressed until the notions of World

English (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) were raised, which attempted to diminish the prejudice between native English and non-native English [3]. Changes can be mainly reflected in the transition of people's attitudes towards English accents, which has been investigated by many researchers worldwide.

There are several similar studies in China, but few studies have been conducted in an English-medium instruction (EMI) context. The current study aims to fill in the gap by using questionnaires and interviews to explore students' English accent attitudes in a Chinese EMI university. More specifically, the English accent(s) the Chinese EMI undergraduates prefer and their attitudes towards their own English accents are investigated in this paper. The research results can provide several pedagogical implications for ESL teaching in both EMI and non-EMI contexts.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language Attitude Measurement

In order to measure language attitudes, various methods have been adopted which can be classified into three general categories: 1. Societal treatment approach. 2. Direct approach. 3. Indirect approach [1]. The societal treatment approach is the least popular compared to the other two approaches. It is carried out by observing participants' behavior and making reference to their attitudes [1]. For the direct approach, participants express their attitudes explicitly by answering questions overtly designed for language attitude measurement [4]. Questionnaires and interviews, as employed in the current study, are the two commonly used instruments for the direct approach [1].

The indirect approach, also known as a synonym of the matched guise technique (MGT) in language attitude measurement, utilizes more subtle techniques to reveal respondents' attitudes unconsciously [4]. However, since MGT requires a single speaker to read a text with different accents, it is criticized for its accent authenticity problem. To address the criticism, Verbal Guise Technique (VGT), one of the modified versions of MGT, was developed. The most distinctive difference between VGT and MGT is that VGT uses different speakers instead of one bilingual or multilingual speaker to produce the recordings [1]. Because VGT allows speakers to use their first language, thus the unnaturalness issue can be overcome [5].

2.2 Attitudes Towards English Accents

Since the terminologies World English (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) were put forward, various studies have examined the shift of NNSs' attitudes towards English accents. Many researches reported that although the hierarchy in English accents still existed, some changes could be observed. Franssisca reported that the Indonesian students aspired to be taught the English accents of inner-circle countries, but they were proud of their local accents [6]. Kim did an investigation in Japanese universities, and the results suggested that despite the fact that most participants expected to acquire native-like English accents, they did not perceive people with non-native English accents negatively [7]. Ambele and Boonsuk reported that most Thai university students showed

positive attitudes towards their accents since they believed their intelligibility was not influenced. In contrast, others wished to attain native-like English accents because they thought the Thai English accent could not be clearly understood [8].

Similar studies have also been designed to determine how Chinese learners perceive English accents. Some studies indicated that Chinese learners' attitudes were still strongly affected by standard English ideology, and negative attitudes were held towards their own accents [3]. Others, however, suggested that when intelligibility was considered, students attached greater legitimacy to their accents [9]. Likewise, some learners emphasized the practicality of communication and even queried the prestigious status of native English accents [10].

2.3 English-Medium Instruction

The term English-medium instruction refers to the way in which English is used as a medium to teach academic courses in places where English is not the native language [11]. In recent years, EMI has gained growing popularity in the educational context, especially in higher education (HE). This results from the status of English as a global lingua franca and its potential to improve the quality of HE, enhance the competitiveness of the nation and its graduates, and attract international talents [12]. To keep pace with the trend, the Chinese government also implemented policies to promote EMI application in its HE in the past two decades [13].

Since students have more opportunities to be exposed to different English accents in an EMI context where the teachers come from all over the world, the attitude they hold towards English accents probably differs from the one their counterparts hold in a non-EMI context. Nevertheless, few studies investigating students' perception of English accents set the research site in an EMI environment in China. Hence, the current study was conducted to fill the gap.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

Fifty undergraduates from a EMI university which was jointly founded by a Chinese mainland university and a Hong Kong university participated in this research. The participants were 41 females (82%) and 9 males (8%) from different majors and divisions, ranging from 19–23 years old.

3.2 Research Design

TO answer the aforementioned research questions, this study employed a mixed methodology, combining a questionnaire survey with interviews. The questionnaire survey was integrated with the listening session of VGT to minimize the effect of stereotypes. Participants listened to recordings produced by native speakers with different accents and graded each statement to express their attitudes. The interview was designed to elicit participants' in-depth answers as a supplement to the questionnaire survey.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Questionnaire Survey

An online bilingual questionnaire was administered via Wenjuanxing, an online form creator. Before the questionnaire was distributed, a pilot test was done by five students with similar backgrounds as the target participants to identify possible problems and ensure reliability. Participants were selected through snowball sampling. The initial participants were asked to spread the questionnaire by reposting the QR code on WeChat. The questionnaire was constructed of three sections: Section A, which collected participants' demographic information, Section B, which investigated participants' attitudes towards six English accents (Standard British English (SBE), General American (GA), Australian English (AE), Indian English (IE), Hong Kong English (HKE), and Chinese English (CE)), and Section C, which surveyed participants' attitudes towards their own English accent. The six accents were chosen because they are the most commonly used by teachers in the participants' university. Section B was adapted from Wang in which participants listened to a 2-min sound clip for each accent and rated four types of statements (English accent learning preference, teacher's English accent preference, pleasantness of English accent, and standard English accent) on a 5-point Likert scale [14]. The same text was recorded as speech samples by six native speakers who were male teachers from the same EMI university with similar ages and comparable voice quality. Section C was adapted from Fang and contained two parts: 1. Evaluation of own English accent. 2. Desired English accent. Participants rated the degree of satisfaction of their own English accent and answered a multiple-choice question about the accent they wanted to achieve [15].

3.3.2 One-on-One Semi-structured Interview

Based upon the questionnaire responses, 3 male and 3 female students from different majors were selected to attend the interview through the Tencent meeting. Questions adapted from Wang were used to explore the rationale of participants' attitudes towards different English accents and their own English accent as well as seeking their personal experiences as supporting evidence [3]. The interview questions were piloted to identify potential issues, which assisted in adjusting the interview protocol to maintain consistency.

3.4 Data Analysis

For the questionnaire survey, the data were analyzed through SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were run to gain the average score for each statement and the percentage of each option. For the interview session, Xunfeitingjian, an online transcription platform, was used to transcribe the recordings. The transcriptions were coded into three themes: the attitudes towards different English accents, the attitudes towards participants' own English accent, and the attitude change.

Table 1. Pleasantness of English Accent.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard British English accent	3.46	0.837
General American accent	3.37	0.936
Australian English accent	3.14	0.978
Indian English accent	1.87	1.048
Hong Kong English accent	2.94	1.022
Chinese English accent	2.98	1.073

Table 2. Standard English Accent.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard British English accent	3.79	1.091
General American accent	3.42	1.036
Australian English accent	2.48	1.057
Indian English accent	1.67	0.901
Hong Kong English accent	2.03	1.000
Chinese English accent	2.06	1.162

4 Results

4.1 Questionnaire

According to Table 1, participants rated the SBE accent as the most pleasant with a mean (M) of 3.46 and GA accent as the second most pleasant (M = 3.37). The AE accent is also regarded as pleasant but with a lower mean of 3.14. The means of CE, HKE, and IE (M = 2.98, M = 2.94, M = 1.87) are lower than 3, which means as non-native English accents, they are perceived not as pleasant as native English accents.

The results of standard English accents show a similar pattern as the results of pleasantness (Table 2). SBE and GA accents (M = 3.79, M = 3.42) are still evaluated as the most standard accents, although it seems like SBE accent is much more standard than GA accent. Nevertheless, AE, CE, HKE, and IE accents (M = 2.48, M = 2.06, M = 2.03, M = 1.67) which the participants have less exposure to, are regarded as less standard. Since most of the textbooks in China are designed in the framework of SBE which gives SBE a higher authority, this can probably explain why SBE accent is perceived as more standard than GA accent.

As seen in Table 3, regarding the English accents teachers use, the respondents prefer SBE, GA, and AE accents (M = 3.83, M = 3.81, M = 3.78), followed by CE, HKE, and IE accents (M = 2.78, M = 2.74, M = 1.83). Compared to the results of other statements, the mean score for AE accent is much closer to SBE and GA accents, and the boundary

Table 3. Teacher's English Accent Preference.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard British English accent	3.83	0.964
General American accent	3.81	0.908
Australian English accent	3.78	1.004
Indian English accent	1.83	1.061
Hong Kong English accent	2.74	1.179
Chinese English accent	2.78	1.321

Table 4. English Accent Learning Preference.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard British English accent	3.67	1.061
General American accent	3.40	0.995
Australian English accent	2.25	0.968
Indian English accent	1.69	1.001
Hong Kong English accent	2.15	1.055
Chinese English accent	2.17	1.199

between native and non-native English accents becomes more distinct. One possible reason is that sometimes non-native English accents degrade intelligibility, leading to students' negative attitudes towards the teachers' non-native English accents.

As for the preference for accent learning, shown in Table 4, the results are highly related to the three aspects above. Respondents are more preferred to learn SBE and GA accents with $M = 3.67$ and $M = 3.40$ respectively, whereas AE accent, which also belongs to native English accents, is less preferred, with $M = 2.25$, followed by CE accent ($M = 2.17$) and HKE accent ($M = 2.15$). The IE accent is least preferred, with $M = 1.69$.

When students evaluated their own accents, 6% of them chose "not satisfied at all" and 28% of them chose "not satisfied". As for reasons, "with Chinese English accent", "accent is not pleasant", "not fluent", "with intonation problems", and "can't be clearly understood" are some common answers. Nevertheless, up to 46% of the participants reported they were satisfied with their accents, and 3% were very satisfied with their accents. Reasons such as "pronunciation is good", "intelligible", "fluent", "clear", "no Chinese English accent", "closer to native accents" were given. The results suggested that most students held a positive attitude towards their accent, but some students still viewed the Chinese accent negatively and regarded the native English accent as their learning goal.

The responses for the aspired English accent further strengthen the previous conclusion. 64% of the respondents wished to attain a native-like accent, whereas 26% wanted to retain their own accent, and 6% said they did not care.

4.2 Semi-structured Interview

The interview results reflected that intelligibility could be a vital factor influencing participants' attitudes towards English accents. According to participants' experiences, they use textbooks with recordings in either SBE or GA accent, and in daily life they have more opportunities to expose to native English resources like movies and songs which enhance the intelligibility of native English accents. That is probably why native English accents were perceived to be more standard and pleasant. Conversely, students had limited exposure to non-native English accents, so intelligibility was likely affected when they encountered these accents, resulting in their negative attitudes towards non-native accents.

Some interviewees agreed that as long as intelligibility was not influenced, native and non-native accents were essentially the same. Instead of pursuing a native-like accent, they would rather improve the intelligibility of their own accent. Just as Laura pointed out: "I don't care what my accent is. There is no need to be native-like. I think I should improve my pronunciation and fluency and let others understand me."

Some interviewees indicated a shift in attitudes towards English accents after entering EMI university. Angel said: "In the past, I always tried to sound like native speakers because I thought the native accent was the best. But later in the university, I found accent didn't necessarily influence communication, so I wasn't so keen on being sound native-like." Jack said: "In my university, I have many opportunities to communicate with people with different English accents. We understand each other, and no one cares about accents. So, I just keep my own accent instead of learning the standard one."

Although changes have happened to some interviewees' attitudes, other interviewees still insisted on attaining a native English accent for certain reasons. John said: "A native-like accent receives people's praise and helps to get higher scores in the oral tests." Jasmine said: "I can be better understood using a native-like accent."

5 Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to investigate Chinese EMI undergraduates' attitudes towards different English accents. The results indicated that most students held more positive attitudes towards native English accents. Although nearly half of them perceived their own accent positively, more than half of the respondents still wished to sound like a native speaker. However, part of them mentioned that as long as the accent was intelligible, they viewed each accent equally and thought it was unnecessary to attain a native-like accent. Some students even reported an attitude change under the influence of EMI.

Based on the results, some pedagogical implications can be proposed for EFL teaching in China. The government should promote the application of EMI to provide an authentic environment for learners to communicate with people having different

accents. In non-EMI institutions, teachers should maximize students' exposure to different English accents rather than only native English accents by supplementing their teaching materials with videos or recordings produced by non-native English speakers. Activities that can foster students' communication should also be designed. Teachers should emphasize the intelligibility of students' expressions and encourage the maintenance of their own accent instead of praising native-like accents and treating them as the sole learning goal.

Although the study did an in-depth investigation of Chinese EMI students' attitudes towards English accents, several limitations still exist. First, the sample size is insufficient, which may affect the sample's representativeness. Second, the snowball sampling caused an unequal distribution of participants of different ages, divisions, and genders which may be the potential factors influencing the results. Hence, future studies may enlarge the sample size and utilize random sampling to ensure reliability. The research scope can also be expanded to several EMI universities or other EMI institutions like primary schools and secondary schools in China to compare learners' attitudes in different contexts.

References

1. R. McKenzie, *The Social Psychology of English as a Global Language*, 1st ed, Heidelberg: Springer, 2010, pp. 26-27.
2. A. Kirkpatrick, *World Englishes*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
3. Z. Wang, A study of English accent: Attitudes of Chinese undergraduate English-major students in southwest forestry university in China, *Language in India*, 20(9), 2020, 1.
4. P. Garrett, *Attitudes to language*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, from <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844713>.
5. K.L.R. Chan, *Verbal Guise Test: Problems and Solutions*, Academia Letters, Article 1493, 2021.
6. R.E. Franssisca, A.S. Subekti, Indonesian high school students' attitudes towards varieties of English: A survey study. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 9(1), 2022, 318-330. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v9i1.21911>.
7. S. Kim, English as a lingua franca in japan: Multilingual postgraduate students' attitudes towards English accents, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2021, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2021.1909053>.
8. E.A. Ambele, Y. Boonsuk, Thai tertiary learners' attitudes towards their Thai English accent, *PASAA*, 61, 2021, 87-110.
9. L. Veliz, M. Veliz-Campos, International students' perceptions of and attitudes towards their Chinese accented english in academic contexts, *Mextesol Journal*, 45(2), 2021.
10. Y. Huang, A. Hashim, A quantitative study of chinese learners' identities as reflected in their attitudes toward english accents, *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 20(1), 2020, 151-168. from <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2020-2001-10>.
11. E. Macaro, *English medium instruction: Content and language in policy and practice*, Oxford University Press, 2018.
12. G. Hu, English-medium instruction in higher education: Lessons from China. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 16(1), 2019, 1-11, from <https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2019.16.1.1.1>.
13. H. Rose, J. McKinley, X. Xu, S. Zhou, *Investigating policy and implementation of English-medium instruction in higher education institutions in China*, British Council, 2019.

14. Y. Wang, Research on the Attitudes of Chinese English-Major Students toward the Native-English-Speaker Accent, M.A. Thesis, Hebei: Hebei University of Science and Technology, 2015.
15. F. Fang, An investigation of attitudes towards English accents: A case study of a university in China, In Z. Xu, D. He & D. Deterding (Eds.), *Researching Chinese English: The state of the art*, Springer, 2017, pp. 141-156.

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.

