

Embracing Linguistic Diversity or Adhering to Traditional Norms of Prestige? Insights from Chinese Business English Learners

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Abstract

English has become a global linguistic phenomenon, gaining increasing prominence in Expanding Circle contexts like China. This growing prominence raises questions about how English is taught and used in such contexts, highlighting the need to examine the linguistic and pedagogical dynamics within English language classrooms. This study examines the perceptions of 50 Chinese Business English learners toward various English varieties, including China English. Employing an explanatory mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights obtained through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis, conducted using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis, reveals that learners hold complex and ambivalent attitudes toward China English. Moreover, the findings indicate an increasing recognition of linguistic diversity and the legitimacy of local English varieties, yet traditional “native-speaker” norms of prestige continue to exert influence in learning English and professional usage. Additionally, while the sampled students demonstrated a growing acceptance of a pluralistic view of English, practical concerns related to intelligibility and professional utility were central to their perceptions. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of English language use in Chinese classrooms and suggest the need for further research into pedagogical practices that integrate local linguistic resources while supporting students’ communicative competence in diverse contexts.

Keywords: English varieties, China English, business English learners, ELT in China

Recent linguistic research indicates that over 7,000 languages are spoken globally, contributing to a dynamic and diverse linguistic landscape (Maurer et al., 2025). Within this intricate web of languages, each possesses

unique characteristics and functions, reflecting historical, cultural, and social complexities. Among these languages, English occupies an unparalleled global position, a phenomenon often described as the contemporary global linguistic ecology (Maurer et al., 2025). Originally confined to “native-speakers” in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, English has transcended national boundaries, evolving into a language of international ownership and multifaceted utility. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that English is no longer the exclusive property of its traditional native-speaking communities but has become a shared linguistic resource accessible to individuals and nations worldwide (Rose & Galloway, 2019). This paradigm shift has led to the emergence of various conceptual frameworks aimed at capturing the evolving functions and identities of English, including 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), and Global Englishes (GE) (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Despite being one of the most influential frameworks with a historical significance, Kachru’s (1985) Three Circles Model has been critiqued for its static and rigid classifications, particularly in contexts where English functions fluidly across sociolinguistic domains. Emerging perspectives challenge this traditional categorization, advocating for more dynamic models that reflect the evolving nature of English use in different socio-cultural contexts. Pennycook (2007) problematizes the notion of fixed linguistic boundaries in his theory of English as a Local Language, emphasizing localized adaptations and creative linguistic practices. Canagarajah’s (2013) Spatial Repertoires framework further reconceptualizes English as a fluid resource shaped by social interactions rather than a monolithic entity bound by geopolitical categories. Similarly, Wei’s (2018) Translanguaging theory interrogates conventional linguistic compartmentalization, illustrating how multilingual speakers strategically navigate and merge linguistic resources. These alternative frameworks provide a more nuanced understanding of China English (CE) within the broader WE paradigm, positioning it as a dynamic and context-dependent variety rather than a peripheral linguistic form. A crucial aspect of this discourse is the legitimacy of localized English varieties, which have traditionally been marginalized in favour of Inner Circle norms. Scholars have argued that deviations from Anglo-American linguistic standards should not be dismissed as errors but rather recognized as essential elements in the formation of new English varieties (Ambele, 2022). This perspective is evident in the proliferation of distinct sociolinguistic labels such as “Indian English,” and “Singaporean English,” which reflect

the ongoing nativization and functional diversification of English worldwide. However, these varieties often face ideological resistance within ELT, particularly in Expanding Circle countries like China, where “native-speaker” norms continue to dominate pedagogical and assessment frameworks (He, 2017; Yang & Zhang, 2015).

In China, English has historically been perceived as a foreign language, with teaching methodologies predominantly aligned with British and American English norms. This preference for “native-speaker” models has led to the marginalization of China English in ELT, fostering an environment in which localized English varieties are undervalued or considered substandard. The influence of standardized English proficiency tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, further reinforces the perception that deviations from native norms hinder academic and professional mobility (Pan et al., 2021; Xu, 2022). Consequently, many Chinese learners internalize a deficit perspective toward CE, associating it with linguistic inadequacy rather than viewing it as a legitimate and functional variety of English. This ideological bias reflects broader global trends observed in Expanding Circle countries, where localized English varieties struggle for recognition despite their growing communicative importance (Canagarajah, 2013). Despite its increasing presence in everyday communication, CE remains underrepresented in both linguistic research and pedagogical practice (Pan, 2015). Within the WE framework, CE is recognized as an emerging variety with distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic features (Xu, 2010). In the ELF paradigm, English in China is conceptualized as an adaptive and fluid linguistic system influenced by local first languages (L1s). However, studies indicate that university students and educators remain reluctant to embrace CE due to deeply ingrained prescriptive norms that privilege British and American English (Fang, 2017; Wang, 2015; Yang & Zhang, 2015). This resistance raises critical questions regarding the sociolinguistic legitimacy and sustainability of CE within the broader discourse of English language education. Thus, the rapid global proliferation of English necessitates a reassessment of “native-speaker” ideology and its implications for ELT. While previous studies have explored university students’ attitudes toward English varieties and WE-informed pedagogy (Miao, 2023; Pan et al., 2021), there remains a significant gap in understanding the perspectives of students in technical and vocational education, particularly those majoring in Business English. Business English learners represent a crucial demographic, given their direct exposure to international trade environments and the pragmatic need for adaptable English proficiency in global business communication. Unlike their university

counterparts, vocational students may prioritize communicative competence over rigid adherence to “native-speaker” standards due to the practical demands of their professional fields. These distinctions warrant closer examination to determine how Business English learners in vocational education conceptualize and engage with CE within the ELT landscape. Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates (1) Business English learners’ awareness of various English varieties, including CE; (2) the factors influencing their perceptions of these varieties; and (3) their preferred English varieties in Chinese ELT classrooms.

Literature Review

English plays a significant role in China’s educational, professional, and international communication landscape, with CE emerging as a localized variety shaped by cultural and linguistic influences. Historically, English was introduced through trade and modernization efforts (Bolton et al., 2020) and despite disruptions such as the Cultural Revolution, its influence expanded rapidly with globalization and economic reforms (Yang & Zhang, 2015). Today, English remains primarily an interlingual tool rather than an intralingual medium among native Chinese speakers (Wei & Su, 2015). This has led to ongoing debates about the legitimacy of CE, which differs from ‘Chinglish’ by maintaining intelligibility while incorporating Chinese cultural and linguistic features (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Wei & Fei, 2003). Expressions such as “long time no see” and “lose face” illustrate how CE adapts Standard English without compromising global comprehensibility (Liu, 2008; Xu, 2002). However, despite its increasing presence in communication and media, CE continues to face skepticism within the ELT field, where “native-speaker” norms prevail.

Research on learners’ perceptions of English varieties highlights both growing awareness of linguistic diversity and enduring biases toward native English norms. In China, studies have explored university students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward CE (He, 2017; He & Li, 2009; He & Zhang, 2010; Wang, 2015). While some findings suggest increasing recognition of CE’s legitimacy (He, 2017), others point to persistent negative perceptions due to deep-rooted “native-speaker” ideology (Fang, 2017; Yang & Zhang, 2015). Given that over 400 million Chinese learners study English (Wei & Su, 2015), understanding their perceptions of CE is crucial for shaping more inclusive language policies and teaching practices. However, while research has focused on university students, there is a notable gap in studies on Business English learners in vocational education, whose priorities differ due to their professional aspirations. Unlike general English

learners, Business English students prioritize communicative effectiveness in international business settings over strict adherence to native-speaker models (Pan et al., 2021). Yet, some localized expressions in CE remain valuable in cross-cultural business interactions, reflecting the tension between linguistic identity and global communication demands (Yang & Zhang, 2015).

The acceptance of CE in professional contexts remains contested. Some scholars argue that CE strengthens China's linguistic identity in global discourse (Fang, 2017; He, 2017), while others raise concerns about its intelligibility and international acceptance (He & Li, 2009). Business professionals often favor Standard English for career advancement, reflecting broader trends in linguistic prestige and workplace expectations (Xu, 2022). While comparisons to other localized English varieties, such as "Indian English" and "Singaporean English", provide insight into standardization and global integration (Kirkpatrick, 2010), CE's role in professional communication remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for developing pedagogical strategies that balance intelligibility, linguistic confidence, and global communicative competence.

This study builds on existing research by examining how Business English learners in vocational colleges perceive and engage with different English varieties, particularly CE. Their perspectives are critical in understanding the practical implications of English use in professional settings and informing ELT practices that prepare students for global communication while recognizing local linguistic realities.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods approach to investigate participants' perceptions of English varieties and the factors influencing their views.

Context and Participants

The study focused on Business English major students at a vocational and technical college in northern China. This institution, a comprehensive higher vocational and technical college with a history spanning over 60 years, provided a meaningful setting for examining students' awareness of English varieties in the context of globalization.

The participants included all 50 second-year students majoring in Business English during the second semester of the 2024 academic year within the college's Foreign Language Department (see Table 1). This intentional selection ensured that every second-year student in the major

during the semester had an equal chance of participation, ensuring relevance to our research questions. First-year students were excluded from the sample due to their limited exposure to the investigated phenomenon, while third-year students were not included as they were undertaking internships at the time of data collection. In terms of external validity, it should be noted that the findings from this limited sample size (50 students) should not be generalized to other populations or across different regions or academic levels. The participants were adults aged 18 years and above, capable of independent thinking and with the ability to offer insights from a neutral perspective as their participation in this study did not impact or relate to their learning or evaluation for the semester.

Table 1
Participants' Information

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 the 50-second-year students were purposively selected from a larger pool of 200 Business English students at the vocational college. The gender disparity (90% female) reflects the actual demographics of Business English majors in the college, where female enrolment is significantly higher compared to their male counterpart. This information provides context to support the validity of our sample representation. Purposive sampling was employed (Cohen et al., 2018) to deliberately select these students based on their experiences relevant to the research question, aiming to gather rich, in-depth data on the investigated phenomenon. A prerequisite for selection was that students had completed at least one semester of professional courses, such as *International Trade Theory and Practice*, *Overview of Britain and the United States*, and *Cross-border E-commerce English*. This criterion ensured that the participants had a foundational understanding of English diversity. They also have had local (through interactions) and foreign (through travel abroad) experiences with China English, as well as other English varieties, making them suitable to provide valuable insights into the research questions.

From this sample, a subset of 9 students who possess the knowledge, skills, or experiences necessary to contribute to the study's objectives were selected for in-depth interviews. The selection of nine interview participants was based on their questionnaire responses, including broader exposure to different English varieties and speakers, and willingness to participate in

the interview, ensuring an understanding of the diverse perspectives on the complex phenomena of China English in China. Specifically, we selected students who displayed varying levels of awareness and attitudes toward China English to ensure the representation of a broad spectrum of views from the questionnaire.

Instruments and Data Collection

This mixed-method study employed both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to ensure a comprehensive exploration of students' perceptions of English varieties, particularly China English, and the factors influencing these views. The questionnaire, adapted from Chaengkakson (2021) and Miao (2023) served as the primary tool for collecting quantitative data. The adaptation was based on the contextualization of the survey items to fit the vocational education setting of the current study. Moreover, the findings from these studies conducted in university contexts were compared to address external validity concerns. A 3-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree) was chosen over a 5- or 7-point scale to enhance clarity, reduce cognitive load, and ensure reliable responses, given participants' B1–B2 English proficiency. More nuanced scales risk ambiguity, as lower-proficiency respondents may struggle to differentiate subtle gradations, leading to arbitrary choices. A simplified scale minimizes response fatigue and ensures participants confidently express core attitudes without linguistic barriers affecting their decision-making, thus improving the accuracy and validity of the data. The questionnaire comprised two sections: the first gathered demographic information, while the second contained 30 items categorized into six thematic areas: (1) perceptions of Kachru's concentric circles, (2) the concept of standard English, (3) English ownership, (4) China English, (5) English varieties, and (6) broader aspects of World Englishes. The questionnaire was adapted based on a systematic process to ensure the questionnaire's clarity, reliability, and relevance. First, the questionnaire was adapted by modifying existing questions to ensure they were clear, unambiguous, and culturally appropriate for Business English learners in China. Furthermore, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of participants to assess their comprehension and the effectiveness of the questions. In addition, expert validation was sought from language educators and researchers to confirm that the questionnaire accurately measured learners' awareness, perceptions, and preferences regarding English varieties. Finally, to enhance reliability, the wording and structure of the questionnaire were refined to minimize misinterpretation and ensure consistency in

responses. Through this process, the adapted questionnaire effectively supported the study's objectives by collecting relevant and reliable data.

To complement the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview method was employed to collect qualitative data. This phase followed the quantitative data collection and aimed to elicit in-depth insights into participants' perceptions of different varieties of English, as well as the factors influencing these perspectives. Based on the questionnaire responses, nine students were purposively selected for interviews. Purposive sampling prioritizes the selection of individuals whose characteristics are most relevant to addressing the research questions (Ambele, 2022). This approach ensured that the qualitative data provided a nuanced and detailed complement to the quantitative findings. The interview questions were adapted (Chaengkakson, 2021; Meng, 2023), redesigned and validated to align with the themes in the questionnaire. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts in their own words while enabling the interviewer to explore emergent themes that arose during the discussions.

Regarding data collection procedures, the first author and participants were affiliated with the same institution, which facilitated the research process. Data collection was conducted in several stages. Initially, the questionnaire was piloted and refined to enhance its validity. Subsequently, the first author approached potential participants to obtain informed consent. An online perception questionnaire was then administered to assess participants' awareness of English varieties. Following this, nine participants were selected for interviews based on their questionnaire responses. For instance, if a participant expressed strong support for or opposition to China English or other English varieties, follow-up questions probed the underlying motivations for their stance. This iterative approach allowed for deeper qualitative insights. To ensure clarity and comprehension, the interview process was explained to participants in Mandarin before they provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the participants' native language, to facilitate more comprehensive and articulate responses. Each interview lasted approximately 25–30 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable setting to encourage open and candid discussion. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. The first author provided a thorough briefing on the research objectives and emphasized the importance of sharing honest perspectives. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The semi-structured interview format allowed the interviewer to pose additional questions based

on participants' responses, contributing to a more in-depth understanding of their perceptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Given the homogeneity of our sample (exclusively second-year students), we relied on descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to effectively capture overall trends in students' awareness and attitudes toward English varieties, particularly China English. Our approach aligns with the study's objective of providing an in-depth exploration of perceptions within this specific academic context. Language attitude items were thematically categorized based on the study's focus, and a perception scale was used for evaluation. The results were systematically recorded, tabulated, and summarized to identify key trends in participants' responses.

Given the complex nature of English varieties and their perceptions, a robust qualitative content analysis was employed to systematically, consistently, and transparently analyze interview data (Selvi, 2020). According to Dörnyei (2007), content analysis involves two main phases: (1) identifying distinct content elements, substantive statements, or key points in each participant's response, and (2) organizing these elements into broader categories to describe the content in a way that enables comparison across responses. The interviews, audio-recorded during the fieldwork, were transcribed promptly and translated into English. Participants were given the transcriptions to verify the accuracy of the translated content. The transcripts were then coded to describe, structure, and interpret the data. Emerging themes or patterns relevant to the study were identified, with irrelevant codes discarded. This study integrates both inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) coding approaches following Dörnyei (2007). The inductive approach involves deriving themes and patterns from the data, allowing for an emergent understanding of China English perceptions. Meanwhile, the deductive approach applies predefined categories based on established theoretical frameworks, such as Kachru's (1985) Three Circles Model, Pennycook's (2007) English as a Local Language, and Canagarajah's (2013) Spatial Repertoires.

The coding process followed a structured three-stage approach—open, axial, and selective coding—to ensure a systematic and reliable analysis of the qualitative data. Open coding involved a line-by-line examination of interview transcripts to identify recurring ideas and emerging

themes without predefined categories. Both authors independently coded a subset of the data, compared results, and resolved discrepancies through discussion to enhance reliability. Axial coding then organized these initial codes into broader conceptual categories, aligning them with theoretical frameworks. A codebook was developed to ensure consistency, and intercoder reliability was assessed by having another researcher apply the coding scheme to a sample of the data. Finally, selective coding refined and integrated the categories into a cohesive analytical framework, ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives. Patterns were then synthesized to construct a meaningful narrative, and member checking was conducted to verify that interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives. An audit trail documented coding decisions and revisions, ensuring transparency and methodological rigor. Memos were created to capture key insights and relationships, aiding in theme development. Themes were subsequently grouped into categories, and the findings were interpreted to draw conclusions. This methodological rigor ensures that both macro-level ideologies and micro-level linguistic choices are systematically analyzed, offering a nuanced understanding of how China English is perceived within the study context.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study, providing a comprehensive understanding of Business English students' perceptions of English varieties, particularly CE. The quantitative results offer an overview of students' awareness of linguistic diversity and their attitudes toward CE, highlighting patterns in their responses. The qualitative findings, derived from semi-structured interviews, provide deeper insights into the underlying tensions influencing these perceptions, including the balance between intelligibility and standardization, the role of social and professional expectations, and the evolving perception of CE in both educational and professional contexts. Together, these findings illustrate the complexity of students' language attitudes and the broader implications for English language teaching in China.

Quantitative Results

The questionnaire findings reveal an increasing awareness of English as a global language and an openness to linguistic diversity. Students reject the notion that English is exclusively owned by "native-speakers" and recognize the legitimacy of different English varieties. However, while intelligibility is prioritized over strict adherence to traditional "native-

speaker” norms, perceptions of prestige continue to influence attitudes, particularly in professional and academic contexts. CE is acknowledged as a valid variety, particularly for communication within China, yet concerns persist regarding its acceptance in international settings. These quantitative trends provide a structured foundation for the qualitative analysis, which explores the deeper motivations and tensions shaping students’ perspectives.

Table 2
Students’ Awareness of English Varieties

Statements	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 Englishes (e.g.: Hong Kong or Singaporean English) are incorrect.	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
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 embarrassing.	1.34	0.626
11. Any Chinese speaking with British or American accent is highly revered.	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 understand than 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

Table 2
Students' Awareness of English Varieties (Cont.)

Statements	Mean	S.D.
17. Every English variety should be accepted and recognized.	2.86	0.452
18. It is important to understand varieties of English, e.g. Indian English, Singaporean 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 different accents of English.	2.82	0.482
21. It is very interesting to learn different forms of English pronunciation.	2.80	0.535
22. I do not think it is important to speak like a native speaker of English.	2.42	0.825
23. Sometimes I find it difficult to understand those learners who speak English with a strong non-English accent.	2.58	0.702
Other aspect of World Englishes		
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 understandable.	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
30. You should not say anything in English until you can speak English correctly.	1.10	0.364

The quantitative findings reveal a shift in students' awareness and attitudes toward English varieties, particularly in terms of intelligibility, ownership, and standardization, suggesting a growing openness to linguistic diversity alongside lingering prestige associated with native norms. Intelligibility emerged as a top priority, with students expressing greater concern for being understood than for achieving "native-like" pronunciation. Their satisfaction with pronunciation as long as it remains clear ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.580$) and rejection of the necessity of speaking like a "native-speaker" ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.825$) indicate a more pragmatic approach to English learning, where communicative effectiveness outweighs rigid adherence to

prescriptive norms. This aligns with their tolerance for grammatical variation ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.535$), highlighting a shift from an error-based perspective toward a more functional view of language use. Similarly, students' attitudes toward English ownership reflect a departure from "native-speaker" exclusivity, as seen in their strong disagreement with the idea that English belongs solely to British or American speakers ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 0.438$) and their endorsement of English as a global resource for all users ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.495$). This suggests a reconceptualization of English as an international lingua franca rather than a fixed standard dictated by Inner Circle varieties. However, while students acknowledged the legitimacy of multiple English varieties ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.422$) and their importance in global communication ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.452$), a residual preference for British and American English remains, as evidenced by some respondents favoring native varieties ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.639$). This contradiction reflects an ideological tension: while students conceptually accept English's pluralism, deep-seated perceptions of linguistic prestige still shape their attitudes, particularly in professional or academic settings.

Regarding China English, students' responses reveal both increasing recognition and persistent ambivalence. The general acceptance of China English as a distinct variety ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.495$) and the preference for Chinese-accented English in classroom settings for better comprehension ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.482$) suggest that students view China English as a functional and intelligible form of communication. However, mixed responses regarding whether they prefer to speak English with a Chinese accent ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.760$) and lingering reverence for "native-like" pronunciation ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.769$) indicate that China English is still perceived as less prestigious or internationally acceptable. This reflects a broader societal hesitation toward fully embracing localized English varieties, likely influenced by mainstream ELT curricula, standardized testing frameworks, and global economic factors that continue to elevate "native" varieties as linguistic benchmarks. Collectively, these findings highlight a pragmatic yet conflicted approach to English learning. While students increasingly prioritize intelligibility and acknowledge English as a globally shared resource, the symbolic capital of "native" English varieties remains influential, particularly in professional and academic domains. This suggests an ongoing negotiation between local linguistic identity and global linguistic hierarchies, with China English gaining gradual legitimacy but still facing ideological barriers to full acceptance.

The results reveal a discernible shift in students' perceptions of English varieties, reflecting a growing departure from traditional "native-

speaker” norms and an increased openness to linguistic diversity (Ambele, 2022). The rejection of Kachru’s (1985) concentric circles, which historically privileged “native” English varieties such as American and British English, underscores a reconceptualization of English as a global language. Rather than viewing English as the exclusive property of native-speaking countries, students embrace a more inclusive perspective, acknowledging its evolving status as an international lingua franca (Galloway & Rose, 2018). This shift is particularly evident in students’ attitudes toward standardization and English ownership (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2020). The rejection of a single, monolithic Standard English suggests a growing awareness that English accommodates diverse grammatical structures and phonological variations. As English continues to adapt across different sociolinguistic contexts, learners increasingly prioritize communicative effectiveness over rigid adherence to prescriptive norms (Jenkins, 2015). This aligns with recent research indicating that intelligibility, rather than conformity to “native-speaker” pronunciation or grammatical structures, is the primary goal for many global users of English (Bolton et al., 2020; Matsuda, 2012).

A key development in these findings is the evolving attitude toward China English. Students demonstrate a higher degree of confidence in their own pronunciation and express less concern about mirroring native accents. This suggests an emerging sense of linguistic identity that aligns with contemporary scholarship advocating for the recognition of localized English varieties (Baker, 2012, 2015). However, despite this increasing acceptance, challenges remain. Students still report difficulties in comprehending accents that significantly deviate from established norms, highlighting the ongoing importance of intelligibility in cross-cultural communication (Weerachairattana et al., 2019). This finding echoes Kirkpatrick’s (2007) argument that mutual comprehensibility should be prioritized over rigid adherence to “native” norms in English as a lingua franca interaction. Overall, the results indicate a more pragmatic orientation toward English learning, where linguistic diversity is acknowledged and local varieties gain recognition, yet the influence of traditional “native-speaker” models of prestige persists. While students increasingly embrace a pluralistic view of English, practical concerns regarding intelligibility and professional utility continue to shape their perceptions. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of English language use in Chinese classrooms and suggest the need for further research into pedagogical practices that integrate local linguistic resources while supporting students’ communicative competence in diverse contexts (Seidlhofer, 2011).

Interview Results

The qualitative findings from the semi-structured interviews provide a nuanced perspective on Business English students' awareness of English varieties, their attitudes toward CE, and the factors influencing their perceptions. While there is an evident recognition of linguistic diversity and an acknowledgment of CE as a legitimate variety, the findings also reveal underlying tensions. Students navigate between an emerging sense of linguistic pride and persistent pressures to conform to standardized English norms. These tensions reflect broader ideological debates surrounding English in China and its role in both local and global contexts. The analysis is structured around key themes: awareness of English varieties, perceptions of CE, factors shaping these perceptions, and preferences for English language teaching.

Awareness of English as an International Language and English Varieties

Participants expressed an understanding of English as a global language that facilitates international communication. This aligns with Crystal's (2008) assertion about English's global dominance as the language of international business, science, diplomacy, and culture. English has been frequently described as essential for integration into the global economy, international travel, and professional success (Galloway & Rose, 2018). Moreover, the perception of English as an indispensable tool for engagement with the world is further reinforced by exposure to education, media, and government policies emphasizing English learning from an early age. One participant noted, "Globalization makes the world more interconnected, and English is the bridge. Without English, communication across countries would be much harder."

According to Seidlhofer (2011, p. 56), "English provides a neutral and efficient platform for communication, facilitating interaction in a world where cultural and linguistic diversity is the norm." While there was an acknowledgment of the existence of multiple English varieties, tensions emerged regarding their legitimacy. The participants recognized English as evolving and adapting to different cultural and linguistic contexts, yet not all varieties were perceived as equally prestigious. Some respondents indicated a preference for British or American English in professional or academic settings, even as they accepted the existence of other forms. One participant stated, "There are different ways to speak English, but when it comes to business and formal situations, there is still a preference for the English used in native-speaking countries."

This perspective highlights an internal contradiction. While there is an intellectual acknowledgment that English is diverse and global, deep-seated attitudes continue to reinforce the authority of “native-speaker” norms in formal domains (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2022; Baker, 2015). This dual perspective reflects broader patterns observed in English as lingua franca research, where pragmatic acceptance of diverse Englishes coexists with deeply ingrained “native-speaker” ideologies (Jenkins, 2015). This insight corroborated Pan et al.’s (2020) study of students’ lived experiences revealing a heightened consciousness regarding their linguistic choices and a deepened awareness of their own idiolectal features. This resonates with Weerachairattana et al.’s (2019) contention that students’ perceptions of English language diversity foster a critical understanding of how variant forms contribute to cross-cultural communication, ultimately enriching their comprehension of English’s global role.

Perceptions of China English

The discussion of CE revealed both acceptance and resistance. On the one hand, participants valued CE as a practical and intelligible form of communication, particularly in interactions with fellow Chinese speakers. Some indicated a sense of linguistic confidence when using CE, describing it as a reflection of their identity and cultural background. As one participant explained, “When speaking with other Chinese, using China English feels natural. It makes communication easier because we understand each other’s expressions better.”

This perspective aligns with research emphasizing the importance of intelligibility over “native-like” proficiency in ELF contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Rose & Galloway, 2019). CE was described as making English learning more approachable, reducing the anxiety associated with rigid “native-speaker” norms. However, some participants observed concerns when considering CE in professional or international interactions. The reluctance to fully embrace CE often stemmed from fears of being perceived as less proficient or professional (Fang, 2017). Some participants expressed discomfort with the idea of being labeled as CE speakers, associating it with linguistic deficiency rather than legitimate variation. One participant reflected, “If someone says I speak China English, it feels like a criticism. It means my English is not standard, and I still need to improve.” Another participant articulated a more pragmatic concern, “China English is fine in casual conversations, but in a job interview or a business meeting, I would rather sound like a native-speaker. It makes me seem more professional.”

This finding reveals a tension between linguistic identity and external perceptions. While some students recognize the practicality of CE, the pressure to conform to “native-speaker” norms in high-stakes situations remains strong (Ambele, 2022). These attitudes mirror findings in previous studies, where “non-native” English speakers often experience insecurity about their accents and linguistic choices due to prevailing standard language ideologies (He & Li, 2009; Wang & Jenkins, 2016; Xu, 2010). The preference for “native-like” proficiency in professional settings suggests that the ideological dominance of Standard English still influences language attitudes, even as awareness of linguistic diversity increases.

Factors Influencing Perceptions

Several factors were found to shape students’ perceptions of CE and English varieties, including exposure to media, educational experiences, and societal expectations. Media representation emerged as a significant influence, reinforcing perceptions of British and American English as linguistic ideals. Hollywood films, English-language news platforms, and social media content predominantly feature “native English” varieties, subtly shaping students’ beliefs about what constitutes “correct” or “prestigious” English. One participant commented, “Most of the English content I watch online is from America or the UK. That’s the English we hear the most, so it’s what we try to learn.”

The role of formal education was another key factor. English instruction in China traditionally emphasizes native-speaker models, with textbooks and listening materials predominantly featuring British or American English. This pedagogical approach contributes to the perception that certain varieties of English are more desirable than others. Another participant noted, “From primary school to university, our teachers always focus on standard English pronunciation. It’s hard to see China English as equal when we are taught otherwise from the beginning.”

As Jenkins (2007) and Matsuda (2003) suggest, English teachers shape students’ attitudes toward English varieties and often unconsciously promote certain varieties over others. Wang and Jenkins (2016) discuss how Chinese English teachers’ focus on native-like pronunciation can influence students’ attitudes toward their own English accent and other varieties.

Social pressures and professional aspirations also played a role in shaping attitudes toward CE (Jenkins, 2015). Gao (2010) argues that social interactions are instrumental in shaping university students’ English language attitudes and preferences. However, restricted exposure to diverse English

varieties and limited engagement with global contexts can lead to a preference for localized English norms. This phenomenon echoes Saito's (2021) research, which explores the impact of similar limiting factors on EFL learners' attitudes toward nativized varieties. The belief that speaking English with a native-like accent enhances career opportunities reinforced the preference for standard English norms. This reflects broader trends in linguistic capital, where certain language varieties are perceived as carrying greater economic and social value (Bourdieu, 1991). The intersection of media, education, and career aspirations perpetuates the tension between recognizing CE's legitimacy and striving for "native-like" proficiency.

Preferences for English Language Teaching

Participants expressed mixed views on the role of CE in English language teaching. While there was recognition that CE could facilitate comprehension and engagement in learning, concerns remained about its place alongside native English varieties in the classroom. One participant expressed skepticism about fully integrating CE into language instruction, "If we learn too much China English, will it affect our English in formal situations? I still think we should focus on British and American English in school."

Others advocated for a balanced approach, arguing that English education should expose students to multiple varieties while maintaining awareness of professional expectations. This perspective aligns with calls in Global Englishes research for pedagogical approaches that integrate diverse English varieties while equipping learners with skills to navigate different linguistic contexts (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Matsuda, 2012). As one student articulated, "We should learn both. Knowing about China English is important, but we still need to understand how to use English in international settings."

This suggests that while there is an emerging openness to incorporating CE into English learning, standard English varieties remain the dominant reference points, particularly for professional advancement. Such preference for British and American English coexisting with their growing recognition of CE stems from the influence of linguistic prestige and market-driven pressures in language learning among students in China, and globally (Pan et al., 2021), as well institutionalized linguistic norms and perceived professional advantages (Xu, 2022). The challenge for English language teaching in China lies in finding a pedagogical balance that acknowledges the legitimacy of CE while preparing learners for real-world international settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined Business English students' perceptions of English varieties, particularly CE, revealing a growing awareness of linguistic diversity alongside persistent adherence to "native-speaker" norms. While students prioritized intelligibility over rigid conformity to British or American English, deep-seated prestige associated with "native" varieties remained influential, especially in professional and academic contexts. The findings highlight the tension between linguistic identity and external expectations, as students navigate the legitimacy of CE within global English hierarchies.

To address these challenges, ELT should adopt pedagogical strategies that both validate localized English varieties and prepare students for international communication. One crucial step is revising curricula to incorporate multiple English varieties. Course materials should feature texts, audio recordings, and case studies that expose students to diverse accents and linguistic structures. Assignments could require students to compare and analyze different Englishes in real-world contexts, such as business negotiations or customer service interactions. By doing so, students would develop a broader understanding of English as a global language rather than being confined to "native-speaker" norms. Additionally, rather than emphasizing "native-like" pronunciation, ELT should prioritize intelligibility-based approaches that help students communicate effectively across different English-speaking contexts. Instructors can incorporate multimedia resources, invite guest speakers with diverse English accents, and encourage peer interaction in classroom discussions. Also, simulated business exchanges can provide students with practical experience in adjusting their speech for clarity while maintaining their linguistic identity. Moreover, assessment methods should be reconsidered to reflect real-world communication needs. Traditional grading systems often prioritize grammatical correctness and "native-like" pronunciation, which can discourage students from embracing their own linguistic variations. Instead, performance-based evaluations should focus on comprehensibility, adaptability, and strategic competence. By designing rubrics that assess how well students convey their ideas in professional scenarios, educators can reinforce the importance of effective communication over rigid adherence to prescriptive norms.

Future research should therefore build on these findings by examining students from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, as well as tracking how exposure to global communication influences language attitudes over time. Additionally, future studies should explore employer perspectives

on CE and other “non-native” varieties to align ELT practices with actual workplace expectations. By adopting these targeted recommendations, English education in China can evolve toward a more inclusive, pragmatic, and globally relevant approach, fostering both linguistic competence and cultural confidence among learners.

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