

# Acceptability of China English Collocations

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to investigate native Chinese speakers and non-native Chinese speakers' attitude towards China English by comparing their acceptability of China English collocations. The study finds that the two groups show a similar acceptability of the China English collocations although they have different opinions on the most acceptable and unacceptable collocations. As for their attitudes towards China English, native Chinese speakers at abroad tend to be more strict with China English. In addition, neither native Chinese speakers nor non-native Chinese speakers know clearly about China English.

**Keywords:** native Chinese speaker; native English speaker; China English

## 1. Introduction

As an international language, English has been used by more and more non-native English speakers and has been widely spread around the world<sup>[1]</sup>. Non-native English speakers even greatly outnumber native English speakers and become the majority of English using population<sup>[2]</sup>. Among countries where English is a foreign language, China is believed to have the largest number of people who are learning or speaking English in the world. As a consequence, it seems inevitable that this tremendous number of people learning and speaking English will naturally lead to a distinctive Chinese variety of English, 'China English'<sup>[3]</sup>.

The popularity of English in China has attracted more and more scholars' interest about how English will develop in China<sup>[4]</sup>. Many people have realized the existence of China English<sup>[5]</sup>, while whether China English has acquired the status of a new English variety is still an open question.

## 2. Literature review

A considerable studies has been devoted to China English<sup>[6]</sup>. According to Wu (2014), these studies can generally be divided into three categories: the studies on the definition and the distinction between China English and Chinglish, the studies on the linguistic features of China English and the acceptability of China English<sup>[7]</sup>. With the development of China English, the studies on China English have moved on to the third stage-the acceptability of China English among different groups.

As China English is used for international communication, it must be able to be understood by both native Chinese speakers and non-native Chinese speakers. Many scholars have conducted studies on the intelligibility and acceptability of China English among different groups. But most of the studies are confined to the specialized Chinese nouns, quite few studies carried out from the perspective of collocations<sup>[6][8]</sup>. As for the participants in previous studies, most scholars have taken it for granted that all native Chinese speakers can understand and accept China English, few study have taken native Chinese speakers at abroad into consideration and compared their acceptability of China English with non-native Chinese speakers<sup>[9]</sup>.

The present study will compare the acceptability of China English collocations between native Chinese speakers at abroad and non-native Chinese speakers from the perspective of collocations<sup>[10]</sup>. Several questions are going to be answered in present study:

- 1) What are the attitudes of native Chinese speakers at abroad and non-native Chinese speakers towards the acceptability of China English collocations? Can they accept these collocations?
- 2) What are the most acceptable and unacceptable collocations of the two groups?
- 3) Is there any difference between these two groups? If there are, what are the difference?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

Two groups, native Chinese speakers at abroad and non-native Chinese speakers are included in the study. In the native Chinese speaking group, there are 24 participants (20 female, 4male), aged 18 to 25. They are all Chinese students studying in English speaking countries, mainly in American and Britain. As for their English level, 45.8% reported “advanced”, 20.8% reported “intermediate” and 32% reported “proficient”. 75% of the participants in this group have studied abroad within one year and the rest of them have studied abroad over one year but no more than four years.

There are 20 participants (9 female, 11 male) in the non-native Chinese speaking group, including 6 native English speakers and 14 native speakers of other languages, for example, Spanish, Russian, Tajik language, German, Burmese, Kazakh, Pashto, Hindi, Farsi, Sinhalese. As for their familiarity with Chinese, 30% of the participants in this group know Chinese well and can speak Chinese, 30% know some Chinese, 20% know a little Chinese and 20% do not know Chinese at all. In terms of the time that they have stayed in China, 45% of them have stayed in China for more than 2 years, 35% have stayed in China within 1 year and 20% never come to China.

#### 3.2 Instrument

The study is conducted in the form of online questionnaires which is composed of three parts. The first part is the personal information of the participants, i.e. their mother tongue, age, gender, English or Chinese proficiency level, the length of time of being abroad/ at China, etc. The second part consists 20 Chinese characteristic collocations which are presented in sentences in order to make them easy for understanding<sup>[11][12]</sup>. A five point Likert scale is used to measure how much the participants accept the collocations (1= Definitely no, 5= Definitely yes.) The last part includes several open questions, asking respondents to answer their understanding of China English and Standard English<sup>[13]</sup>.

Two versions of questionnaires which are slightly different, are prepared for the two groups. There are two reasons to choose online questionnaire as the instrument. First, it's a practical and efficient way to collocate data in a limited time<sup>[14]</sup>. Second, the responses can be gathered and analyzed in a standardized way.

#### 3.3 Data collection

The online questionnaire is sent through social network. The data of native Chinese speakers is easy to collect while for the another group, it is relatively difficult due to the author's limited contact with foreigners and many other practical factors. In three days, 45 questionnaires are collected and only one questionnaire is excluded because of its contradictory answers. As a result, there are 24 questionnaires in the native Chinese speaking group and 20 in the non-Chinese speaking group.

The questionnaire is not enough to reflect the true language attitude of respondents since language attitude is an abstract concept or an opinion deep in participants' mind. To have a better understanding of their acceptability of China English, online interview is also conducted as a supplementary to the questionnaire. Through social network, the author interviewed several participants in each group separately<sup>[15][17]</sup>. Some simple questions about their attitudes toward China English and Standard English were asked<sup>[16]</sup>. The answers which are repeated over and over again by participants should be primarily focused on.

### 4. Results

Participants' acceptability of China English collocations are presented in the following table.

As shown in table1, the average rate of acceptability of the selected collocations of these two groups is 3.73 and 3.725 respectively. There is no significant difference between these two groups. What is surprising is that the native Chinese speakers' acceptability of these collocations is just slightly higher than that of non-native Chinese speakers<sup>[18]</sup>.

The most acceptable collocation of native Chinese speakers is “harmonious society” (M=4.29, SD=1.12) and the least acceptable collocation is “accelerate transformation” (M=3.42, SD=1.25). The collocation “deepen reform” (M=3.67, SD=1.345) has the largest standard deviation which indicate the

agreement on the acceptability of this collocation is spread out over a wider range. The smallest standard deviation appeared in “ensure funding” (M=3.58, SD=0.88) which indicates that the general acceptability of this collocation is relatively consistent among native Chinese speakers.

Table 1: Acceptability of China English collocations

Collocations	Native Chinese Speaker		Non-native Chinese Speaker	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
steady development	3.79	1.25	3.9	1.17
nongovernmental investment	3.63	1.31	3.65	1.39
basic insurance	3.71	1.23	3.5	1.47
proactive policy	3.5	1.14	3.7	1.13
ethical progress	3.71	1.08	3.7	1.3
compulsory education	4.04	1.08	3.65	1.42
beneficial cooperation	3.88	1.08	3.5	1.28
financial oversight	3.5	1.18	3.7	1.3
harmonious society	4.29	1.12	3.85	1.48
improve the mechanism	3.67	1.01	3.75	1.42
deepen reform	3.67	1.34	3.35	1.3
strengthen supervision	3.83	1.09	3.7	1.3
promote innovation	4	1.22	4.05	1.43
ensure funding	3.58	0.88	3.9	1.21
standardize market	3.75	1.03	3.4	1.31
maintain growth	3.96	1.16	4	1.38
accelerate transformation	3.42	1.25	3.85	1.46
mechanistic problems	3.71	0.95	3.6	1.31
realize goals	3.46	1.32	4.15	1.35
persist in fight against	3.5	1.18	3.6	1.47
Average	3.73		3.725	

While the acceptability of these collocations among non-native Chinese speakers is quite different from that of native Chinese speakers. The most acceptable collocation of non-native Chinese speakers is “realize goals” (M=4.15, SD=1.35) and the least acceptable collocation is “deepen reform” (M=3.35, SD=1.3). The largest standard deviation appears in the collocation “harmonious society” (M=3.85, SD=1.48). The smallest standard deviation appeared in “proactive policy” (M=3.7, SD=1.13).

## 5. Discussion

In general, the statistics show that the selected China English collocations can be accepted by both groups. As for the general acceptability of two groups, there is no significant difference. As native Chinese speakers, it is assumed that they will show much higher acceptability of Chinese characteristic collocations than non-native Chinese speakers. While the results do not support the assumption. The main reason is that most of the non-native Chinese speakers know some Chinese and 80% of them have stayed in China for at least several months<sup>[19]</sup>. They are influenced by the Chinese context.

In order to have a clear idea of native English speakers' attitudes towards these China English collocations, the author especially analyzed the answer of six native-English speakers. The general mean acceptability of selected collocations of them are much higher (M=4.43). Online interviews were also conducted to figure out their opinions attitudes towards China English and these collocations. During the online interview, they also show that they can accept and understand most of the these collocations. Some repeated answers were quoted as following.

*Example 1: “**Yes, I accept and understand most forms of China English. ...I find internet MEME terms as being difficult to understand without an explanation, but easy to accept if you're in an***

**environment that supports the use of China-English.** *In our school, many teachers and students happily use terms such as "heavy taste" or "too young, too simple, sometimes naive" to create a positive rapport. " (Participant 5, from America, ESL Instructor)*

*Example 2: "**China English is an unavoidable consequence of China's growing influence on the international stage.** Most of these collocations are perfectly correct, and **all are understandable.** " (Participant 18, from America, English teacher)*

*Example 3: "I think they were **all easy to understand, great explanations!**" (participant 19, from America, students, major in Communications)*

Participant 5 is an ESL Instructor from Hawaii. He have stayed in China for more than 5 years and can speak Chinese fluently. He clearly expressed that the environment pays an important role in deciding the acceptability of China English. Participant 18 also realize that China English is an unavoidable trend with the rapid development of China. Other native English speakers' answer also indicate they are aware of the existence of China English and show great tolerance to these collocations<sup>[19]</sup>. The results coincide with the findings of Gao and Wen (2012) although the participant groups are not equivalent<sup>[6]</sup>. Gao and Wen (2012) compared the intelligibility and acceptability of the nativized English between native English speakers and non-English speakers. The results show that both English native speakers and non-native English speakers can understand and accepted the nativized English in China's context<sup>[18][20]</sup>. In addition, they are less strict with the standard way of using English because they are aware of the existence of innumerable varieties of English<sup>[6]</sup>.

As for the native Chinese speakers, they do not show high acceptability of China English collocations as assumed, even though 87.5% of participants in this group think that these collocations are easy to understand. 12.5% of them think these collocations are not easy to accept because they view these collocations as the "direct translation" of Chinese collocations. For these who think China English collocations are easy to accept, only 19% of them clearly express that they like China English, 75% of them still prefer standard English and only 9.5% of them think that China English and standard English have the same functions.

The study finds that most native Chinese speakers at abroad do not think China English could be equivalent to standard English. The author paid special attention to those participants with advanced English proficiency<sup>[21]</sup>. Some answers from native Chinese speakers were quoted as following.

*Example 4: "**...Not everyone can understand China English.** However, **everyone can communicate with each other with Standard English easily.** "*

*Example 5: "**Standard English is more acceptable.** That's why we learn English. "*

*Example 6: "...it's like asking **why you want to speak mandarin correctly...** "*

*Example 7: "I need to **be understood by the world not Chinese people only.** It's just like **for Chinese people, standard Chinese would be the best choice**"*

From their answers, it is easy to find that most of them think China English will not be accepted by non-native Chinese people. Standard English has a much higher status than China English. As English learners, they are eager to use standard English excellently. The finding is consistent with Cao (2012) as she also points out that the majority of Chinese EFL learners prefer to follow native-speaker norms because it can give them more confidence and can help them communicate better<sup>[8]</sup>. Another main reason is that they are influenced by the western environment, just as one participant said: "We use standard English to be consistent with western culture<sup>[20][22]</sup>. In addition, we need to consider the feelings of native speakers." Similarly, the native English speakers in China also influenced by the Chinese context, just as mentioned before.

### **5.1 Opinions on the acceptability of different collocations**

Various answers were provided by participants when asking for their opinions on the most acceptable and unacceptable collocations.

The results show that "harmonious society" (M=4.29) is the most acceptable collocation among native Chinese speakers while it is the most controversial one among non-native Chinese speakers. The author paid attention to the native English speakers' opinions.

*Example 8: "I have **never encountered** 'harmonious society', **except in China**"*

Participant 20 expressed that she only heard “harmonious society” in China and she is not sure whether other native English speakers will accept it or not. Her opinion coincides with that of another American English speaker (Participant 12).

*Example 9: “I understood everything, but this is perhaps because I have been an ESL teacher for more than a decade. I tried to judge the collocations based on what I felt others from the USA would understand. **The collocations I gave a low number, I believe to be less commonly used or not used in the USA.** (Participant 12, from America, an ESL teacher)*

Just as she mentioned, as an ESL teacher for more than a decade, she can understand all the collocations but she tries to judge the collocations based on native American thinking. She has never encountered such collocations in the USA<sup>[23]</sup>. For those who know nothing about China, the acceptability of these collocations may be quite different.

Similarly, for the most acceptable collocation “realize goals” (M=4.15) among non-native Chinese speakers, native Chinese speakers also hold different opinions. In the interview, 12.5% of native Chinese speakers think this collocation is the most unacceptable one because they think it belongs to Chinglish<sup>[24][25]</sup>.

The least controversial collocation among non-native Chinese speakers is “proactive policy” (M=3.7, SD=1.13). Interestingly, in the interview, 25% of native Chinese speakers viewed “proactive policy” as the most unacceptable collocation (M=3.5, SD=1.14).

Besides these differences, there are also some similarities between the two groups. The most unacceptable collocation among non-native Chinese speakers is “deepen reform” (M=3.35). Although the native Chinese speakers show a higher acceptability of this collocation (M=3.67), it is the most controversial one among native Chinese speakers (SD=1.34). During the interview, 16.7% of native Chinese speakers said that this collocation is the most unacceptable one, which may indicate that native Chinese speakers at abroad are influenced by the western culture although this collocation is quite common in Chinese government report<sup>[26]</sup>.

Other controversial collocations and suggestions are also provided by some native English speakers.

*Example 10: “The only one awkward enough for me to recommend changing it is ‘**deepen reform.**’ ‘**beneficial cooperation**’ is also redundant, as all cooperation is mutually beneficial by definition.” (participant 18, from America, English Teacher )*

*“**The most acceptable terms are the ones that have made an international appearance in media and official institutions** such as “yuan” and many culinary terms, namely Cantonese cuisine, such as “dim sum”. ...**Chinglish and literal translations that do not take standard English structures in consideration are for the most part unacceptable** in my opinion.” (Participant 5, from America, ESL Instructor)*

Although non-native Chinese speakers show their great acceptability of China English collocations, they still suggest to revise some collocations to make it more easy to understand for those who know nothing about China<sup>[27]</sup>. For the Chinese characteristic collocations, it’s better to give detailed explanations or annotations.

## 6. Conclusion

Generally speaking, for the average rate of acceptability, two groups have showed similar acceptability of the selected China English collocations and most of the collocations can be accepted by both native Chinese speakers at abroad and non-native Chinese speakers in the world<sup>[28][29]</sup>. However, the native Chinese speakers’ acceptability of these collocations is not much higher than that of non-native Chinese speakers as supposed. As for their opinions on the most acceptable and unacceptable collocations, the results are quite various due to their different social backgrounds, occupations, personal experiences, etc.

In addition, by comparing their attitudes towards China English, native Chinese speakers at abroad tend to be more stricter with China English expressions. Most native Chinese speakers think that the purpose of learning English is to master the Standard English rather than the China English.

Another important finding is that neither native Chinese speaker nor non-native Chinese speaker are clear about what China English is. Both of the group regard China English as the “direct translation” of Chinese language or the vocabularies to express things with Chinese characteristics. The collocations

which are not commonly used in English speaking countries are often considered to be false. The main reason is that the definition of China English is still unambiguous and it is not well known by people around the world.

In brief, this is merely a tentative study on the acceptability of China English collocations. Limited by time, space and many practical factors, limitations of the study are inevitable. Firstly, the classification of the investigated two groups is not scientific enough due to the limited number of native English speakers. Secondly, the reliability of the online questionnaires and interviews can not be guaranteed. They are not authoritative and authentic enough to reflect the participants' real thinking. Lastly, the sample is not big enough to represent the two groups. These deficiencies should be avoided in the future study.

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