Chinese Attitudes towards Varieties of English: A Pre-Olympic Examination

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Purpose
The purpose of this study was to move beyond an investigation of the native speaker/non-native speaker paradigm and investigate the role of solidarity and legitimacy in shaping the attitudes of Chinese college students towards varieties of English.

The Article
Past research into the attitudes non-native speakers hold towards English have generally found that native and standard varieties of the language receive the most positive evaluations. However, more recently, another strand of research has suggested that when issues of solidarity are taken into account, local and non-standard varieties of English are perceived as more legitimate. As China continued its emergence as a player in the world economic stage, in which English was the lingua franca, this paper sought to extend this more recent line of research and investigate the attitudes of Chinese college students towards varieties of English just prior to the Beijing Olympics. Toward these ends, data was collected from 108 Mainland Chinese students regarding their evaluations of six varieties of English. The students evaluated the varieties in terms of social status, attractiveness and language quality. Post-listening interviews were also collected to supplement the evaluations. Findings indicated that while students rated standard varieties of American and British English more highly than their own non-native varieties, they also showed an awareness for and appreciation of non-standard varieties, and displayed instances of challenging the standards of acceptable English. The students also acknowledged that the presence of standard varieties in their learning materials influenced their perceptions of those varieties.

What this Means for the Field
The findings of this study confirm the existence of multifaceted attitudes towards English. They also raise the importance of addressing students’ pragmatic needs when learning English. As English traverses borders in an age of globalization, and when native speakers of English no longer constitute the majority of English speakers, teachers must be mindful of the way they represent varieties of English, and must consider the communicative needs of their students before promoting a given variety.

Citation

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