

# **“You Dig Tree Tree to NUS”: Understanding Singapore English from the Perspectives of International Students**

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In the eyes of many international students, the English used by Singaporeans is very different from the English they have been learning. This study surveyed 193 newly arrived Chinese students about their opinions on the English used by Singaporeans. Results showed that these Chinese students agreed with the statement “Singaporeans should learn American or British English” but strongly disagreed with the statement “English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand”. When they answered the same questionnaire five months later, their attitudes changed, probably because of better communication with the local people. Based on the results of this study, the author suggests that language teachers develop materials which help international students familiarise themselves with this new variety of English.

## **Introduction**

Zhao (pseudonym), a student from the People’s Republic of China, told the author the following story:

The first week of my stay in Singapore was awful. Once I wanted to go to the university but I lost my way, so I asked a man for direction. “You dig tree tree to NUS lah”, said the man. I looked around and saw many trees, but I didn’t know why he told me to dig up a tree. Fortunately this good-hearted Singaporean walked me to the bus stop and pointed at a coming bus, which was bus service No. 33. ... I used to think that Singaporeans speak like Americans but they don’t. I was disappointed.

Like Zhao, other Chinese students taking an intensive English course at the National University of Singapore have told the author that they have difficulties understanding the English language used by Singaporeans. It would appear that they do not know that the English used by Singaporeans is different from other

varieties of English in the world. In order to understand these newly arrived international students' attitudes towards the English Language in Singapore, the author conducted the questionnaire study described in this paper.

## **The English Language in Singapore**

English has been the official language of Singapore since this island became a British colony in 1819. Although Chinese, Malay and Tamil gained their official status when Singapore declared her independence in 1965, English still remains the most important language of this country. Singaporeans generally consider English as the tool of business communication and the common language among the Indian, Malay and Chinese racial groups in Singapore. According to the statistics cited by Kwan-Terry (1993) in 1990, 65 percent of Singaporeans were able to use English, 61.5 percent of them could use Chinese, 16 percent of them Malay and only 3.4 percent of the Singaporeans were able to use Tamil.

In this paper the term, Singapore English, refers to the variety of English used by Singaporeans (Brown, 2000). Singapore English has received much research attention and the categorisation of this variety of English has been a controversial topic. However, since categorisation is not the main interest of this paper, the author would like to take up Gupta's (1994) diglossic view of Singapore English, which involves a "high variety" and a "low variety" of Singapore English.

According to Gupta, Standard Singapore English, or the "high variety", is used in formal circumstances such as public speeches, lectures and international communications. The written form of Standard Singapore English can usually be understood by other speakers of English, as Gupta asserts that Standard Singapore English and other Standard Englishes are different only in terms of the phonological features and some culture specific lexical terms. On the other hand, Colloquial Singapore English, or the "low variety" of Singapore English, is used in informal circumstances such as conversations among family members and friends. Used mainly in its spoken form, Colloquial Singapore English has been influenced by Malay, Tamil as well as Southern Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese (Ho & Platt, 1993).

According to some specialists (Gupta, 1994; Bao, 1998), the phonological, lexical as well as syntactical features of Colloquial Singapore English are very different from those of Standard Singapore English and other varieties of English.

Some studies have viewed Singapore English from the perspectives of Singaporeans. According to Lim (1986), many Singaporeans regard Singapore English as a national identity of Singapore. By using the two local varieties of English, the subjects of this former British colony can distinguish themselves from those who use British English. Besides, young Singaporeans use the low variety to enhance personal intimacy. In theory, the highly educated Singaporeans know both the high and low varieties of Singapore English and they use these varieties of English "appropriately". Students would use the low variety when they speak to a toilet attendant (who only knows the low variety), or write to their peers. They would "switch" to the high variety when they speak to their tutors or write their term papers. In practice, however, some highly educated people might use the low variety of Singapore English even in formal situations. The results of another study (Saravanan & Poedjosoedarmo, 1997) suggest that some teachers are positive about the use of Colloquial Singapore English in the classroom.

### **The Purposes of the Present Study**

Although much effort has been made in studying Singaporeans' language attitudes, at the time when this study was designed, little effort has been made to examine Singapore English from the perspectives of international students. Yet this neglected area should be explored. Since international students may not know about the existence of the high and low varieties of Singapore English as linguists do, their attitudes towards the English used in this country may be negatively affected. This study aimed to investigate Chinese students' attitudes towards the English used by Singaporeans and to determine whether or not these students' attitudes towards Singapore English would change over time. The questions explored in this study were: (1) "What were the Chinese students' attitudes towards Singapore English when they arrived in Singapore?" and (2) "Would the Chinese students' attitudes towards Singapore English change significantly over time?"

The results of this study should help language teachers better understand their international students' opinions about the use of English in multicultural classrooms and become more aware of the communication problems that their language students might have in cross-cultural communications.

## **Method**

The subjects of this study totalled 193 (148 males, 45 females) pre-university students from the People's Republic of China. Their average age was 18. These students had been learning English as a foreign language for 6 years before they were enrolled in an intensive English course conducted by the National University of Singapore under the auspices of the Singapore Ministry of Education. They took this 6-month intensive English course to prepare themselves for undergraduate studies. These students belonged to 10 tutorial groups, each of which comprised 19 or 20 students. They had English classes 30 hours a week from December 1998 to early June 1999.

A direct attitude questionnaire of 21 items (Appendix A) was designed by the author, who was a tutor of the English course. The questionnaire attempted to measure these students' attitudes towards the English language used in Singapore and their reasons for learning English in Singapore. The questionnaire asked the students to rate 21 statements about Singapore English such as "English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand". To avoid any neutral responses, a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" ("1") to "strongly disagree" ("4") was used to obtain a positive or negative response.

To find out whether there were any attitude changes, the questionnaire was administered twice at a 5-month interval. The same questionnaire was used in the two data collection sessions. The students answered the questionnaire administered by their English tutors during class periods in mid December 1998 (Week 3 of the course, when students had had some contact with Singaporeans) and late May 1999 (Week 25, before the final tests). They were instructed that the questionnaire aimed to examine their attitudes towards the English used in Singapore. They were told that the information collected from them would be analysed anonymously and used for research purposes only. They were

asked to read the statements carefully and rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement. Most of the students completed the questionnaire within 15 minutes.

The information collected from the two data-gathering sessions was analysed using the statistical package *SPSS for Windows 9.0*. The means and standard deviations of each of the 21 items were calculated. To determine whether or not there were significant attitude changes, *Paired-samples t-tests* were performed to compare the students' ratings of the same item at two different times. Since there was no previous empirical evidence for differences in these means or for directionality, null hypothesis of no significant differences in means between the first and the second administration of the questionnaire was adopted. The significant level was set at  $\alpha < 0.05$ , non-directional.

## Results and Discussion

### *Chinese Students' Attitudes Towards the English Language in Singapore*

To answer Research Question One: "What were the Chinese students' attitudes towards Singapore English when they arrived in Singapore?", the students' responses to the first administration of the questionnaire are presented. As shown in Table 1, the Chinese students agreed with the following statements most when they answered the questionnaire for the first time:

Statement 4: "Singaporeans should learn American or British English" (mean<sub>1</sub> = 1.93)

Statement 18: "If I know Singapore English, I will understand the Singaporeans and their culture" (mean<sub>1</sub> = 2.02)

Statement 21: "The quality of English used by Singaporean TV news presenters is high" (mean<sub>1</sub> = 2.02)

**Table 1. Results of Paired-samples t tests on the mean differences between the first and second administration of the questionnaire**

Statements	1 <sup>st</sup> Adm. Mean <sub>1</sub> <sup>#</sup> (SD)	2 <sup>nd</sup> Adm. Mean <sub>2</sub> <sup>#</sup> (SD)	t value
1. Singapore English is the symbol of an uneducated person.	2.97 (0.64)	3.03 (0.70)	-1.19
2. English written by Singaporeans is easy to understand.	2.46 (0.57)	2.40 (0.65)	1.01
3. English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand.	3.14 (0.70)	2.80 (0.74)	5.32**
4. Singaporeans should learn American or British English.	1.93 (0.68)	2.28 (0.87)	-4.93**
5. As long as it is understood, incorrect English is acceptable.	2.47 (0.74)	2.31 (0.66)	2.55*
6. I prefer friends from USA or UK to those from Singapore.	2.89 (0.77)	3.00 (0.79)	-1.64
7. I am interested in the English of Singapore.	2.69 (0.73)	2.66 (0.71)	0.45
8. If I use Singapore English, my local friends and classmates will accept me.	2.28 (0.71)	2.19 (0.71)	1.22
9. I study English because it is required for graduation.	2.75 (0.86)	2.84 (0.80)	-1.29
10. I like to listen to local English radio channels.	2.48 (0.69)	2.39 (0.71)	1.33
11. Studying English in Singapore is enjoyable.	2.13 (0.73)	2.30 (0.65)	2.91**
12. If I speak Singapore English, people will think I am not well educated.	3.01 (0.65)	3.06 (0.58)	-0.86
13. Singaporeans can write accurate English.	2.09 (0.50)	2.08 (0.61)	0.22
14. Singaporeans can speak correct English.	2.45 (0.68)	2.23 (0.65)	3.80**
15. Unlike American or British English, Singapore English is a non-standard language.	2.30 (0.63)	2.46 (0.66)	-2.36*
16. Even if I make mistakes in English, people will still understand what I mean.	2.07 (0.56)	2.04 (0.47)	0.49
17. I do not like to make friends with Singaporeans.	3.58 (0.58)	3.48 (0.65)	1.93
18. If I know Singapore English, I will understand the Singaporeans and their culture.	2.02 (0.75)	2.10 (0.71)	-1.33
19. I think that by using Singapore English I will feel like a Singaporean.	2.70 (0.72)	2.62 (0.78)	1.08
20. I learn English in Singapore because I want to work here.	2.66 (0.73)	2.68 (0.61)	-0.36
21. The quality of English used by Singaporean TV news presenters is high.	2.02 (0.60)	1.93 (0.63)	1.49

\*  $p < 0.05$  (2-tailed), \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed)

# The smaller the mean score, the more the respondents agreed with the statement

The respondents agreed most with Statement 4, "Singaporeans should learn American or British English" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 1.93$ ). In fact, it is not surprising to find that these Chinese students preferred North American or British English to Singapore English because North American or British English were the only varieties they had ever known. According to Zhao and Campbell (1995), several English teaching programmes have been aired in China for many years by BBC and Radio Canada International. However, to the best knowledge of the author, no Singapore English programmes have ever been broadcast on Chinese television or radio. Since the students learned American or British English when they were in China, they thought that Singaporeans should also learn these popular varieties of English.

The Chinese students disagreed with the following statements most:

Statement 17: "I do not like to make friends with Singaporeans" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 3.58$ )

Statement 3: "English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 3.14$ )

Statement 12: "If I speak Singapore English, people will think I am not well educated" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 3.01$ )

It is noted that the respondents only disagreed or strongly disagreed with Statement 3, "English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 3.14$ ) but not Statement 2, "English written by Singaporeans is easy to understand" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.46$ ), which implies that these Chinese students had negative attitudes towards the spoken English of the local people only. A possible interpretation of this result is that these Chinese students have more opportunities to listen to Singaporeans, who usually use Colloquial Singapore English in informal conversations. For example, these Chinese students might have heard local students chatting at the canteen. However, these students might have read the local English newspapers or teaching materials prepared by their English tutors only, which are all constructed in standard English. They might not have read Singaporeans' English at informal occasions, which could be written in other varieties of Singapore English since educated English-speakers in Singapore can shift between standard and colloquial Singapore English (Lim, 1986; Gupta, 1994).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Chinese students did not have negative attitudes towards the English written by Singaporeans.

If these Chinese students had relatively negative attitudes towards the English language in Singapore, why did they come to Singapore to learn English? Would they like to learn Singapore English? The answers to the above questions can be seen from their responses to the following statements:

Statement 18: “If I know Singapore English, I will understand the Singaporeans and their culture” ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.02$ )

Statement 8: “If I use Singapore English, my local friends and classmates will accept me” ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.28$ )

Statement 10: “I study English because it is required for graduation” ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.48$ )

Statement 20: “I learn English in Singapore because I want to work here” ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.66$ )

It can be argued that these Chinese students studied English in Singapore probably because English is widely used in university and the work place (Statements 10 and 20). However, the surveyed Chinese students did not seem to reject the local variety of English as they agreed that a command of Singapore English would help them know the Singapore culture. They also realised that the function of Singapore English was mainly to communicate with their local classmates and friends. These findings are consistent with the results of a previous study that Singapore English is a national identity of Singaporeans, and that this unique variety of English is used to enhance personal intimacy (Lim, 1986).

### ***Chinese Students’ Attitudinal Changes Towards Singapore English***

To answer Research Question Two: “Would the Chinese students’ attitudes towards Singapore English change significantly over time?” the results of the two administrations of the questionnaire were compared using *Paired-samples t-Tests*. It was found that there were significant differences in some of the mean



scores between the first and second administration of the questionnaire (Table 1).

Regarding the spoken English used by Singaporeans, the mean scores of Statement 3, "English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 3.14$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.80$ ,  $t = 5.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) were significantly different at the 0.01 level. As mentioned above, the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement when they answered the questionnaire at the beginning of the course. However, the lower mean score in the second administration of the questionnaire indicated that they changed their minds and that these Chinese students had clearly become more positive. Besides, a significant mean difference was shown in the students' responses to Statement 14, "Singaporeans can speak correct English" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.45$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.23$ ,  $t = 3.80$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), implying that these students began to realise that the spoken English of Singaporeans is not incorrect English.

It is interesting to note that the students' attitudes towards the written English used by Singaporeans did not show any significant changes over time. The mean scores of Statement 13, "Singaporeans can write accurate English" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.09$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.08$ ) were almost identical. Similarly, little mean difference was shown in Statement 2, "English written by Singaporeans is easy to understand" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.46$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.40$ ). Again it is possible that the students had more access to Singaporeans' spoken English than their written English.

As for the students' opinions of Singapore English and American/British English, significant mean differences were found in Statement 4, "Singaporeans should learn American or British English" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 1.93$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.28$ ,  $t = -4.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) as well as Statement 15, "Unlike American or British English, Singapore English is a non-standard language" ( $\text{mean}_1 = 2.30$ ,  $\text{mean}_2 = 2.46$ ,  $t = -2.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The mean scores indicated that fewer Chinese students agreed with these statements, showing that they began to regard Singapore English as another variety of English. They realised that Singapore English was not worse than other varieties such as American or British English. One possible reason for the attitudinal change is that these students had more contact with the local people.

## Teaching Implications

The results of this questionnaire study clearly show that the Chinese students had relatively negative attitudes towards the spoken form of Singapore English. It would seem that these students did not know much about the different varieties of English in the world and how spoken English is used in real life. Their lack of knowledge might make it difficult for these students to adjust to the new language environment. The findings support the view that the education system in China focuses more on the importance of examinations than students' communication ability (Zhao & Campbell, 1995). To polish Chinese students' English communication skills, it is recommended that the language teachers in China would do well to take time to clarify precisely what Singapore English is and how Singapore English is different from North American or British English before their students leave for overseas studies. Language teachers who have access to the Internet could use online teaching materials with audio files of world Englishes. In this way, Chinese students who are planning to further their studies in Singapore would have an opportunity to listen to this new and yet unfamiliar variety of English before leaving home.

The survey results also indicated that the Chinese students' attitudes towards Singapore English changed gradually. The author speculates that this is probably because these Chinese students had better communication with the local people. To accelerate this process, language teachers in Singapore could design language materials or activities to help the Chinese students familiarise themselves with the variety of English used by Singaporeans. They could play a local TV programme in class and explain the meanings of some Colloquial Singapore English expressions to their international students. In a multicultural classroom, the language teacher could design a language game for their local and Chinese students. They could have one local student read aloud a sentence in Colloquial Singapore English and have a Chinese student translate it into Standard English. The advantages of this game are that the Chinese students would know more about the English used by Singaporeans in informal situations and that the local Singaporean students would become more aware of the problems that the use of Colloquial Singapore English might bring about in international communication.

Finally, it was found that some Chinese students might have problems comprehending the low variety of Singapore English. Therefore, the author suggests that teachers refrain from using Colloquial Singapore English in class. Although some teachers prefer to use Colloquial Singapore English to explain some concepts to their Singaporean students (Saravanan & Poedjosoedarmo, 1997), they should know that international students such as those from China would not understand what they mean. Therefore, they should use the high variety of English as often as possible.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the author would like to cite an email message from Lin (pseudonym), who participated in this survey:

Actually I realised one "mistake" I made when I filled in the questionnaire. The statement was "If I use Singapore English, my local friends and classmates will accept me." At that time, I chose the "Disagree" option. But now if I were given a second chance, I would tick "Agree" or even "Strongly Agree". I have no explanation for such an answer. It was derived from my experience and what the Singaporeans told me.

The above message shows us that some Chinese students like Lin might one day become very positive towards the use of Singapore English. A more distinct difference might be seen if the same questionnaire was administered again later. Teachers or researchers who are interested in this topic may like to design a similar study to examine the language attitude changes of international students over a longer period of time. Alternatively, a longitudinal case study of individual students could reveal their changes of attitudes towards Singapore English. The present study has focused on Chinese students and examined their opinions on Singapore English; however, it will be equally interesting to survey students from other nations so that a more comprehensive view of international students' attitudes towards Singapore English could be obtained.

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## Appendix A. The Questionnaire Used in the Present Study

### Chinese Students' Attitudes Towards Singapore English

This questionnaire examines your attitudes towards Singapore English. All the data collected from this survey will be used for research purposes only. Please answer **all** the questions truthfully.

Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. **Circle** the appropriate number using the scale below

**1 = I Strongly Agree with this statement.**

**2 = I Agree with this statement.**

**3 = I Disagree with this statement.**

**4 = I Strongly Disagree with this statement.**

Statements	Responses
1. Singapore English is the symbol of an uneducated person.	1 2 3 4
2. English written by Singaporeans is easy to understand.	1 2 3 4
3. English spoken by Singaporeans is easy to understand.	1 2 3 4
4. Singaporeans should learn American or British English.	1 2 3 4
5. As long as it is understood, incorrect English is acceptable.	1 2 3 4
6. I prefer friends from USA or UK to those from Singapore.	1 2 3 4
7. I am interested in the English of Singapore.	1 2 3 4
8. If I use Singapore English, my local friends and classmates will accept me.	1 2 3 4
9. I study English because it is required for graduation.	1 2 3 4
10. I like to listen to local English radio channels.	1 2 3 4
11. Studying English in Singapore is enjoyable.	1 2 3 4
12. If I speak Singapore English, people will think I am not well educated.	1 2 3 4
13. Singaporeans can write accurate English.	1 2 3 4
14. Singaporeans can speak correct English.	1 2 3 4
15. Unlike American or British English, Singapore English is a non-standard language.	1 2 3 4
16. Even if I make mistakes in English, people will still understand what I mean.	1 2 3 4
17. I do not like to make friends with Singaporeans.	1 2 3 4
18. If I know Singapore English, I will understand the Singaporeans and their culture.	1 2 3 4
19. I think that by using Singapore English I will feel like a Singaporean.	1 2 3 4
20. I learn English in Singapore because I want to work here.	1 2 3 4
21. The quality of English used by Singaporean TV news presenters is high.	1 2 3 4