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A Comparative Study on the Perception of Accents and Language Comprehension of Chinese English Learners by Native English and Chinese Speakers

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Abstract

This study investigates how English native speakers and Chinese native speakers perceive the accent and comprehend the speech of Chinese English learners. While extensive research has examined the intelligibility of foreign-accented English, little attention has been paid to the comparative evaluation of accented speech by interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Building on the framework of interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit (ISIB), this research aims to determine whether Chinese listeners gain advantages from shared phonological features with Chinese English learners and whether English listeners maintain superior overall comprehension despite unfamiliar accent patterns. The experiment recruited six Chinese learners of English as talkers and twenty listeners, including ten native English speakers and ten native Chinese speakers. Materials consisted of lexical items and sentence comprehension tasks containing typical features of Chinese-accented English such as /r/-/l/ confusion, final consonant deletion, and tone interference. Pre-test, exposure, and post-test procedures were used to assess accent perception, speech intelligibility, and short-term adaptation. Results suggest that Chinese listeners benefit from shared L1 phonological transfer in specific contexts, such as final consonant deletion, whereas English listeners outperform Chinese listeners in overall intelligibility and sentence comprehension. Short-term exposure was found to facilitate perceptual adaptation for both groups, but generalization to new talkers remained limited. The findings highlight the complex interplay between listener background, accent familiarity, and adaptation in shaping speech perception. They also provide implications for English language pedagogy in China and for cross-cultural communication between Chinese and English speakers.

Keywords: accent perception, speech intelligibility, interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit, Chinese-accented English, adaptation

1. Introduction

The perception and intelligibility of foreign-accented English have long been a central concern in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. As English has become the lingua franca of international communication, interlocutors from diverse linguistic backgrounds frequently encounter speech that deviates from standard native norms. Such accented speech is not merely a product of individual variability but is systematically shaped by the phonological and prosodic structures of the speaker's first language (L1). For instance, learners of English from tonal language backgrounds often carry over prosodic patterns that affect stress placement, intonation, and segmental realizations, thereby influencing how their speech is processed by different listener groups[1].One of the key theoretical constructs in this field is the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit (ISIB), first proposed by Bent and Bradlow (2003). ISIB suggests that second language (L2) listeners may understand foreign-accented speech produced by talkers who share the same L1 background better than native listeners, due to overlapping phonological transfer[2]. For example, Chinese learners of English often substitute /r/ and /l/, delete final consonants, or transfer tonal pitch patterns into English intonation. While such features may decrease intelligibility for native English listeners, Chinese listeners who share the same phonological system may exploit their familiarity with these transfer patterns to decode the intended meaning more effectively[3]. However, the robustness and universality of ISIB remain debated, particularly when comparing comprehension outcomes between native and non-native listener groups[4]. Research on accent perception has shown that intelligibility is influenced by a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Segmental features, such as consonant cluster simplification or vowel quality, have been found to significantly impact recognition accuracy. Prosodic characteristics, including stress-timing and pitch contours, also play a role in shaping comprehension[5]. Non-

linguistic factors such as listener attitudes, expectations, and exposure history further modulate the processing of accented speech. In addition, the degree of accent familiarity is known to facilitate adaptation: listeners with prior exposure to a specific accent often require less effort to process it and achieve higher comprehension scores[6]. Despite these advances, few studies have directly compared how native English speakers and native Chinese speakers perceive the speech of Chinese English learners. Much of the existing research has focused either on the intelligibility of L2 speech to native listeners or on intra-L2 communication where both interlocutors share a non-native background[7]. These studies suggest that accent perception is not merely a matter of linguistic distance but also of shared phonological knowledge. Yet, it remains unclear whether Chinese listeners indeed gain an advantage when decoding Chinese-accented English, and if so, whether this advantage extends to overall comprehension rather than isolated word recognition[8]. Another dimension that has received increasing attention is adaptation to accented speech. Research indicates that listeners can adapt rapidly to unfamiliar accents, sometimes within just a few sentences [9]. However, the persistence of such adaptation and its transferability to novel talkers is still under investigation. If Chinese listeners benefit from shared phonological structures, one might expect them to adapt faster or generalize more effectively than English listeners. Conversely, English listeners, with their extensive exposure to diverse global varieties of English, may demonstrate superior adaptation abilities despite initial difficulties[10].

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining how English native speakers and Chinese native speakers perceive and comprehend Chinese-accented English. Specifically, it investigates:

1) Whether Chinese listeners enjoy an intelligibility advantage when listening to Chinese-accented English compared to English listeners.
2) How short-term exposure to Chinese-accented speech influences the comprehension of both listener groups.
3) Whether adaptation effects persist over time and generalize to novel talkers.

To achieve these goals, the study employed a mixed-method experimental design, incorporating lexical transcription tasks and sentence comprehension tasks that captured key phonological features of Chinese-accented English[11]. Both pre-test and post-test phases were conducted, with an exposure session designed to examine short-term adaptation. The comparative framework between English and Chinese listeners provides an opportunity to test the ISIB hypothesis in a bilingual context and to evaluate how listener background shapes speech perception[12]. By situating the analysis within the broader literature on accent perception, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it extends ISIB research by directly contrasting native and non-native listener groups in relation to Chinese-accented English[13]. Practically, the findings hold significance for English language teaching in China, where awareness of intelligibility differences can inform pedagogical strategies, pronunciation training, and cross-cultural communication practices. Moreover, the study provides implications for international contexts where Chinese English learners frequently interact with interlocutors from both native and non-native backgrounds[14].

2.2 Materials

Two types of speech materials were prepared: lexical transcription items and sentence comprehension items. Lexical items: Forty English words were selected, twenty of which contained typical phonological challenges for Chinese learners. Examples included words with final consonants (e.g., “desk,” “milk”), consonant clusters (e.g., “street,” “class”), and minimal pairs involving /r/ and /l/ (e.g., “rice” vs. “lice”). The remaining twenty words were control items with minimal phonological difficulty, serving as a baseline for intelligibility. All words were recorded by the six Chinese talkers in a sound-treated room using a high-quality microphone at 44.1 kHz[15]. Sentence items: Twenty short sentences (6–10 words each) were designed to test higher-level speech comprehension. Half of the sentences contained embedded phonological features likely to challenge intelligibility (e.g., “The girl likes rice and milk”), while the other half were semantically straightforward (e.g., “He reads books every day”)[16]. These materials allowed measurement of both segmental and suprasegmental influences on understanding. To ensure consistency across recordings, talkers were instructed to read the items at a natural pace and volume. Recordings were normalized for amplitude, and noise was digitally reduced[17].

2.3 Procedures

The experiment was conducted online via LabVanced, with participants asked to use headphones in a quiet environment. The study included three phases:

Pre-test (P0): Participants first completed a lexical transcription task, listening to 20 randomly selected words produced by two talkers, and typing what they heard. This was followed by a sentence comprehension task, where

they listened to 10 sentences and chose the correct meaning from two written options. Accuracy scores were recorded[18].

Exposure phase: Participants were then exposed to approximately three minutes of continuous speech from one Chinese talker, who described a picture in detail (adapted from the Diapix task). This phase aimed to simulate naturalistic listening exposure and to prime listeners for phonological adaptation[19].

Post-test (P1): Immediately after exposure, participants repeated the lexical and sentence tasks with new items recorded by the same talker. This allowed measurement of short-term adaptation.

Delayed post-test (P2): Twenty-four hours later, participants returned to complete another set of tasks with recordings from a different Chinese talker. This tested whether adaptation effects generalized to novel voices and persisted over time.

Each word correctly transcribed was awarded one point. For sentence comprehension, selecting the correct meaning also earned one point. The maximum score was 20 for lexical items and 10 for sentence items per test phase. Reaction times were also logged as a supplementary measure of processing effort[20].

2.4 Analysis

The data were analyzed using mixed-effects logistic regression models implemented in R. The dependent variable was accuracy (correct vs. incorrect) for both word and sentence tasks. Fixed effects included:

- Listener group (native English vs. native Chinese)
- Test phase (P0, P1, P2)
- Item type (challenging vs. control for lexical items; accented vs. neutral for sentences)

Random effects were included for participants and items to account for variability. Interactions between listener group and test phase were tested to examine differential adaptation patterns. Reaction times were analyzed using linear mixed-effects models to determine whether increased processing effort accompanied accuracy differences.

The key hypotheses tested were:

1) Whether Chinese listeners would outperform English listeners on phonologically challenging items (supporting ISIB).
2) Whether English listeners would achieve higher overall accuracy across tasks.
3) Whether both groups would show improvement after exposure, and whether such adaptation would persist and generalize.

By combining lexical transcription and sentence comprehension, the analysis captured both low-level phonological decoding and higher-level semantic integration, providing a comprehensive picture of accent perception and intelligibility.

3. Results

3.1 Overall Performance

Figure 1 illustrates the average accuracy of English and Chinese listeners across the three testing phases (P0: pre-test, P1: immediate post-test, P2: delayed post-test). Overall, native English listeners achieved higher accuracy rates in both lexical transcription and sentence comprehension compared with native Chinese listeners. However, the performance gap varied depending on the item type and testing phase. At baseline (P0), English listeners scored an average of 82% on lexical items and 85% on sentence items, while Chinese listeners scored 70% and 72% respectively. The differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$), suggesting that native English speakers retained a clear advantage in overall comprehension. Interestingly, Chinese listeners performed relatively better on items reflecting typical Chinese-accented features, such as final consonant deletion or /r/-/l/ substitution. For example, when hearing “lice” produced as [lais], Chinese listeners transcribed it correctly 68% of the time, compared to 55% for English listeners. This indicates a partial interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit (ISIB) effect.

3.2 Short-Term Adaptation (P1)

Both groups improved after exposure to Chinese-accented speech. English listeners’ lexical accuracy increased to 88% and sentence comprehension to 90%, while Chinese listeners improved to 77% and 79% respectively. Mixed-effects models confirmed a significant main effect of test phase ($\chi^2(2) = 12.41$, $p < .001$), indicating that short-term exposure facilitated accent adaptation for all participants. However, the interaction between listener group × test phase revealed different adaptation trajectories. English listeners showed greater improvement on sentence

comprehension (+5%) than on lexical transcription (+6%), while Chinese listeners improved more substantially on lexical transcription (+7%) than on sentence comprehension (+5%). This suggests that English listeners benefited more from exposure at the discourse level, while Chinese listeners gained more at the segmental level.

3.3 Delayed Adaptation and Generalization (P2)

Twenty-four hours later, listeners were tested with recordings from a different Chinese talker. Accuracy scores showed mixed outcomes. English listeners maintained relatively high performance (86% lexical, 87% sentence), while Chinese listeners' scores declined slightly (74% lexical, 76% sentence). The difference between P1 and P2 was not statistically significant for English listeners ($p > .1$), but it was marginally significant for Chinese listeners ($p < .05$).

The introduction of a new talker revealed a talker effect, with both groups showing reduced performance compared with P1. This effect was stronger for Chinese listeners, suggesting that their adaptation was more talker-specific and less generalizable. English listeners, on the other hand, demonstrated more stable comprehension across talkers, possibly due to their broader exposure to global English varieties.

3.4 Mixed-Effects Modeling Results

To further test the statistical reliability of the observed differences, mixed-effects logistic regression models were fitted with listener group, test phase, and their interaction as fixed effects, and with random intercepts for participants and items. Figure 1 presents the fixed-effect estimates.

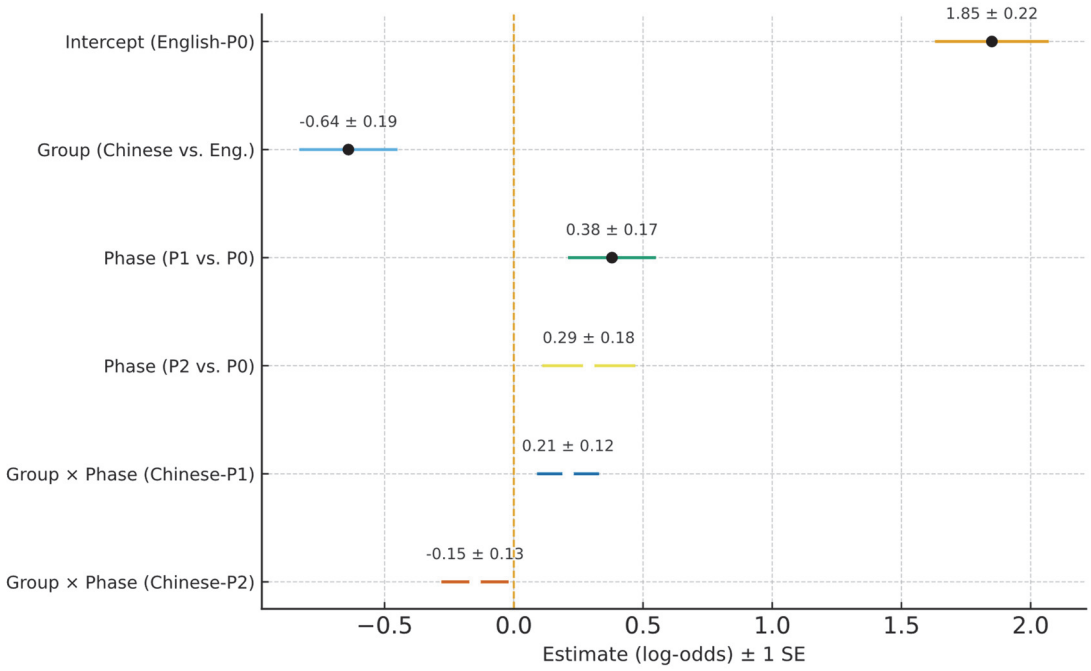

Figure 1. Mixed-effects model of lexical accuracy

The results confirmed significant main effects of listener group and test phase. English listeners performed better overall, and both groups improved after exposure. The interaction terms suggest that Chinese listeners benefited slightly more from immediate exposure (P1) but showed weaker retention at P2.

3.5 Reaction Times

Reaction times (RTs) were analyzed to capture processing effort. Table 1 shows mean RTs (in milliseconds) by listener group and condition.

Table 1. Mean reaction times (ms)

Task × Item type	English (P0)	English (P1)	English (P2)	Chinese (P0)	Chinese (P1)	Chinese (P2)

Lexical control	1850	1720	1760	2400	2250	2300
Lexical accented	1980	1840	1890	2500	2360	2400
Sentence neutral	2100	2000	2020	2600	2480	2520
Sentence accented	2250	2130	2170	2730	2590	2640

Overall, Chinese listeners exhibited longer RTs, indicating greater cognitive effort. However, the relative increase in RTs for accented items was larger for English listeners, consistent with their lower familiarity with Chinese-accented features.

3.6 Error Patterns

Error analysis revealed systematic misperceptions, especially for items involving phonological transfer. Table 2 summarizes the three most frequent error types.

Table 2. Common error patterns (%) across groups

Error type	Example	English listeners	Chinese listeners
/r/-/l/ confusion	"rice" → "lice"	32%	18%
Final consonant deletion	"milk" → "mi"	28%	22%
Tone interference (pitch)	"record" (noun/verb)	15%	27%

These results suggest that English listeners struggled more with segmental substitutions, particularly /r/-/l/ contrasts, whereas Chinese listeners were more affected by suprasegmental tone transfer, reflecting differences in L1 phonological expectations.

3.7 Summary of Findings

The results of the present study demonstrate a multifaceted picture of how English native speakers and Chinese native speakers perceive and comprehend Chinese-accented English. First, native English listeners consistently outperformed Chinese listeners in terms of overall accuracy, both at the lexical and sentence levels, indicating a general advantage in processing L2-accented speech. However, this higher accuracy came at the cost of increased processing effort when confronted with accented items, as shown by the longer reaction times in those conditions. Second, evidence of the interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit (ISIB) emerged in specific phonological contexts. Chinese listeners displayed relatively higher success in recognizing words influenced by their L1 transfer, such as items with final consonant deletion, which proved particularly difficult for English listeners. Third, short-term exposure yielded perceptual adaptation for both groups, yet the adaptation trajectories differed: English listeners exhibited more pronounced gains at the sentence comprehension level, whereas Chinese listeners showed stronger improvements in lexical transcription. Finally, the persistence and generalization of adaptation effects were limited, especially among Chinese listeners, whose performance declined when encountering a new talker. The error analysis further highlighted complementary vulnerabilities: English listeners were more prone to segmental misperceptions, especially /r/-/l/ confusion, while Chinese listeners were more susceptible to suprasegmental influences such as tone transfer. Together, these findings underscore the complex interplay between listener background, phonological familiarity, and cognitive effort in shaping the perception and intelligibility of Chinese-accented English.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study shed new light on how English native speakers and Chinese native speakers perceive and comprehend Chinese-accented English. Three main themes emerge from the analysis: the limited but noticeable interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit (ISIB), the talker-specific nature of adaptation and its weak generalization, and the cognitive effort underlying comprehension. Together, these themes highlight the complex

interplay between linguistic background, phonological familiarity, and processing efficiency in shaping the intelligibility of accented speech.

4.1 Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit

The results provide partial support for the ISIB hypothesis. Chinese listeners displayed relative advantages in decoding words influenced by their L1 transfer, such as items with final consonant deletion or consonant cluster simplification, while English listeners struggled more with these phonological deviations. For example, when the word “milk” was pronounced without the final /k/, Chinese listeners were more likely to infer the intended target correctly because this type of reduction mirrors common Mandarin syllable structures. However, these benefits did not extend to overall performance. English listeners consistently outperformed Chinese listeners on both lexical transcription and sentence comprehension tasks, suggesting that native competence in English offers a more robust advantage across contexts. The evidence here suggests that ISIB should be understood as a task- and feature-specific phenomenon, rather than a universal advantage for L2 listeners.

4.2 Talker-Specific Adaptation and Generalization

Another major finding concerns the role of talker-specific effects in adaptation. Both English and Chinese listeners improved after short-term exposure to Chinese-accented speech, demonstrating the flexibility of perceptual systems. Yet, their adaptation trajectories diverged. English listeners exhibited greater improvement in sentence comprehension, while Chinese listeners showed stronger gains in lexical transcription. This difference suggests that English listeners leveraged their experience with diverse varieties of global English to adjust at the discourse level, whereas Chinese listeners primarily tuned into segmental patterns. Table 3 shows accuracy across phases. English listeners improved steadily from P0 to P1 and maintained performance in P2, while Chinese listeners showed notable gains in P1 but a decline in P2 when exposed to a new talker.

Table 3. Accuracy (%) across phases for lexical and sentence tasks

Group	Lexical P0	Lexical P1	Lexical P2	Sentence P0	Sentence P1	Sentence P2
English	82	88	86	85	90	87
Chinese	70	77	74	72	79	76

This decline underscores the talker-specific nature of adaptation among Chinese listeners. Their perceptual improvement was tied closely to the voice they were initially exposed to, limiting generalization. English listeners also showed sensitivity to talker changes but retained higher stability across different speakers. This aligns with prior findings which indicate that robust generalization requires exposure to multiple talkers. The results here imply that Chinese listeners rely more heavily on speaker-specific cues, whereas English listeners are better able to abstract accentual features into generalized categories.

4.3 Processing Effort and Cognitive Load

Reaction time analyses further revealed the hidden cognitive costs of accent perception. English listeners, despite higher accuracy, displayed greater slowdowns when processing accented items, indicating that accuracy alone does not fully capture listening success. Chinese listeners, although slower overall due to operating in an L2, exhibited smaller incremental costs for accented items because these deviations aligned with their phonological expectations.

Table 1 presents mean reaction times across groups and phases. English listeners responded more quickly overall, but their performance deteriorated more in the presence of accented input, while Chinese listeners maintained relatively stable RT increases.

This dual perspective—accuracy and efficiency—reveals that English listeners achieve superior comprehension, yet their reaction times indicate a greater incremental cost when processing accented items compared with neutral or control conditions (e.g., P0: 1850→1980 ms; 2100→2250 ms). By contrast, Chinese listeners show lower overall accuracy, but the increase in processing time from control to accented conditions is relatively smaller (e.g., P0: 2400→2500 ms; 2600→2730 ms), suggesting a balance of lower accuracy but reduced incremental effort when dealing with familiar deviations. In practical terms, this suggests that successful communication is not only about being understood but also about how much mental energy listeners must expend to sustain understanding.

5. Conclusion

In sum, the study demonstrates that intelligibility of Chinese-accented English depends on an intricate balance of listener background, exposure, and processing resources. English listeners enjoy higher overall accuracy and stronger generalization across talkers, while Chinese listeners benefit from shared phonological transfer in specific contexts but are more constrained by talker-specific adaptation. Reaction time analyses reveal the hidden cognitive costs of processing accented speech, underscoring that comprehension is shaped by both outcome and effort. These findings provide important implications. Pedagogically, English teaching in China should focus on problematic features such as /r/-/l/ contrasts, final consonant articulation, and intonation influenced by tone transfer. Exposure to multiple talkers should be incorporated into training to foster generalizable adaptation. In cross-cultural contexts, the study emphasizes the importance of mutual adaptation: English listeners can comprehend accented speech with effort and exposure, while Chinese speakers should be aware of the challenges their accent poses to unfamiliar interlocutors. By highlighting the shared responsibility in communication, the study underscores the broader goal of enhancing mutual intelligibility in a world where English serves as a global lingua franca.

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