ESL student recognition of and attitudes towards American regional dialects

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University of Toledo
A Thesis
entitled
ESL Student Recognition of and Attitudes Towards American Regional Dialects
by
Brittany M. Widney
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in  English

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The University of Toledo
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An Abstract of

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This study looks at whether ESL students can recognize differences between American regional dialects. It also looks at whether they hold certain attitudes towards American regional dialects and whether the differences in dialects affect their listening comprehension. Interviews were conducted with five participants who were ESL students attending the University of Toledo at the time of the study. A variety of questions were asked about the participants experiences with American regional dialects, their attitudes towards these dialects, and any comprehension problems they may have understanding the different dialects. Three recordings of American regional dialects were also utilized. This study found that ESL students do indeed detect a difference between American regional dialects. It was also found that students do not hold common known attitudes towards American regional dialects, but that dialects do have an effect on student comprehension.
I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Eric Widney. He pushed me to be my very best, and without him, I could not have earned this achievement. I also dedicate this to my family. They shaped me into the woman I am today.
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Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

Every single person in the world speaks differently, and an unlimited number of factors influence the way a person speaks. An individual’s way of speaking not only defines this person as an individual, but also links them to several groups with which they belong. Additionally, Labov (1975) states, “There are no single style speakers. By this we mean that every speaker will show some variation in phonological and syntactic rules according to the immediate context in which he is speaking” (p. 19). It is with these simple facts that I became interested in the topic of accents and dialects, and it is with these facts that I began my research to figure out to what extent accents and dialects not only affect people’s opinions of one another but whether a learner of English can recognize differences in the way Americans speak. Also, I will investigate participants’ perceptions of whether they can understand speakers of various American regional dialects.

Considering that everyone has their own speech, it is safe to say that it would be impossible to identify every slight difference between the ways people speak. However, over the course of time, languages have been found to have discernible accents and dialects that have been categorized and labeled. An accent differs slightly from a dialect in that accents involve only differences in pronunciation while dialects also contain differences in language structure and lexicon (Alford & Strother, 1990, p. 479-480). One must keep in mind, however, that an accent is indeed a characteristic of a dialect. The focus of this research is the English language. English has become a global language in
modern times, and the extent to which English varies is vast. There have been Englishes labeled all over the world, but I wanted to look at English closer to my home. Therefore, this research will look at American regional dialects with a particular focus on accent. The specific dialects I am investigating include a Midwestern dialect (Findlay, OH), a Southern dialect (Atlanta, GA), and an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, NY). I am focusing particularly on accent because in my research I will be playing three recordings that are the same dialogue with different accents. There are no differences in lexicon within the recordings.

Through personal experience, I have found that accented English can be more difficult to understand than the Standard variety. When referring to accented English in this study, it means anything but the Standard American variety. Standard American English refers typically to English spoken in the Midwestern area of the United States, and it is the common variety of news casts and the classroom. Because I realized the difficulty I may have when listening to accents in my first language, it made me curious about learners of English as a second language. As a native English speaker, I can easily identify differences in the dialects of Americans speaking to me, particularly by means of their accent. So, I wanted to investigate whether this is the same for ESL speakers. In addition, through society and media, accents have come to contain specific connotations that may bring about particular feelings towards the individual. It is with this research that I will attempt to find whether ESL students can indeed recognize certain American regional dialects, and if it is so, whether they harbor certain attitudes towards speakers with these accents. Additionally, I would like to determine whether different English dialects affect ESL listeners’ linguistic comprehension.
Current Study

The information presented above gives way to the current study I have undertaken. Not only am I curious about whether ESL students can even hear a difference between American regional dialects, but I want to find out whether they hold common stereotypes towards these dialects as native speakers do. Additionally, I would like to discern whether ESL student comprehension is affected by a difference in the dialect of the speaker. This is why I will investigate ESL students’ ability to hear a difference between American regional dialects, whether they hold stereotypes towards these American dialects, and whether their comprehension is affected due to the difference in dialects. My investigation will consist of five separate interviews of ESL students attending the University of Toledo. The participants must be enrolled in English 1020 or 1110 at the University. No other criteria will be considered. I will begin my interviews with questions about the subjects’ experience with the English language. I will follow these questions with recordings of three American regional dialects. One dialect is the Standard Midwestern dialect (Findlay, OH), one a Southern dialect (Atlanta, GA), and one an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, NY). My interviews will conclude with questions pertaining to the subjects’ opinions about each speaker they heard and their ability to comprehend each speaker.

Literature Review

**English as a World Language** Before exploring American regional dialects that I will focus on in my study, it is important to understand that English is a global language, and there are many Englishes that are used and developing throughout the world. This concept is critical to understand in my study because there are attitudes
placed upon the different types of Englishe and “English users are often categorized into native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs)” (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011, p.392). The categorization of English speakers creates stereotyping in which native speakers are often considered to be “perfect” English speakers while non-native speakers are considered flawed or broken English speakers. This is also connected to the concept of regional dialects because just as native and non-native speakers are categorized, standard and nonstandard speakers are also divided. The standard speaker often holds prestige while the nonstandard speaker is considered subpar or lower in status.

Before going any further into Standard versus nonstandard, let’s continue to look at the Global aspects of English. In recent times, the learning of English has gained importance in the world. Due to globalization, the world is becoming more connected, and countries recognize the need of a common language for global interaction. Countries now interact more than ever before, and English is used for business, technology, social communication, and more. According to Tokumoto and Shibata (2011), “With the worldwide spread of English, the number of English speakers has been constantly increasing, and frequent contact with English has promoted English as an international language (EIL), as well as a pluralistic view of English, referred to as world Englishes” (p. 392). Because of the expanding use of English around the world, more forms of English are developing, and Kachru developed a way countries can be grouped according to the status of English in that country. Friedrich (2000) describes this way of identifying these countries explaining that according to Kachru, countries may be grouped as Inner Circle countries, Outer Circle countries, and Expanding Circle countries (p. 215). English is the native language within Inner Circle countries, and it is typically Inner Circle
countries that are looked upon by other countries for the ideal example of the English language. English is an official language of Outer Circle countries typically due to colonization hence English is considered a second language in this context. Last, within Expanding Circle countries, English is seen as a foreign language or may even be considered a lingua franca because in countries such as in Europe, English is used as a common means to communicate with those in surrounding countries that do not speak that same native language. There have been debates as to whether this is a good way to group countries because English’s role in different countries is always changing, therefore, there are no clear defining lines as to what group each country may belong.

The expansion of English throughout the world has brought about several attitudes towards these different Englishes, and as I will address attitudes pertaining to regional dialects in my study, it is first helpful to look at the attitudes towards English on a larger scale and then move into the more local scale. Many English language learners feel that only native varieties have value when learning English. According to Tokumoto and Shibata (2011), “The NNS [non-native speakers] tend to endorse a native variety of English and be reluctant to accept their own and other non-native varieties” which is described as the nativeness paradigm (p. 393). There have been several studies conducted concerning attitudes towards world Englishes as well as varieties and dialects (Alford & Strother 1990), Boucher, et, al. (2013), Friedrich (2000), and Tokumoto & Shibata (2011)). It is important to note, however, that not many studies have been conducted about American regional dialects and the effect they have on ESL students’ attitudes and comprehension which my study will address.
In accordance with the current study, a study by Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) sheds light on ESL students’ recognition of and attitudes toward different varieties of English. They investigated the attitudes that ESL speakers have towards maintaining their L1 accent when speaking English. This study found that Malaysian participants valued their L1 accent when speaking English while Japanese and Korean participants viewed their accents negatively. Additionally, the Japanese subjects believed that their accents took away from the comprehensibility of their English. It is important to be aware that these findings solidify the notion that attitudes are connected to language, and different cultures may attach different values on dialects and accents. Some may place prestige upon a native accent while other may find their non-native accent as an identifying feature of their culture and self. However, this study does not address whether American regional dialects or accents affect ESL speakers’ attitudes as my study will look at.

Another study conducted by Friedrich (2000), applies to my study as it looks at the attitudes that Brazilians have towards the importance the English language and learning it, and also attitudes they have towards different varieties of English. This study compares two different English varieties: American English and British English. The study found that fifty-four percent of subjects selected American English as having more prestige than British English; however, forty-one percent claimed that British English is easier to understand (Friedrich, 2000, p. 218). The author concludes that along with language learning comes stereotypes, attitudes, and cultural impacts. No English language learner is the same, and it is of utmost importance to realize how these factors impact the learning of different languages.
These two studies depict some of the different attitudes pertaining not only to others’ English around the world, but to English language learners’ attitudes towards their own English speaking abilities. My study will also look into whether nonnative speakers attach stereotypes to different English dialects. The studies by Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) and Friedrich (2000), however, focused on native accents versus nonnative accents and how different world accents are compared respectively. They did not address how regional differences are recognized and understood as I will do in my study.

**English Varieties, Dialects, and Accents** When it comes to the English language, not only are there different varieties such as British English and American English but also dialects and accents, the focus of my study. Because the topic of my study is ESL student recognition of and attitudes toward American regional dialects, it is important to discuss just what a dialect is and what causes the attitudes and stereotyping towards the different kinds. Dialects have been defined as, “varieties of a language, usually mutually comprehensible by a particular group of people” (Alford & Strother, 1990, p. 479). Additionally, Solano-Flores (2006) quotes Crystal (1997) explaining, “A dialect is a variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by its pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, discourse conventions, and other linguistic features” (p. 14). Furthermore, the term accent is used separate from dialect because an accent is considered only when the difference in language is pronunciation (Alford & Strother, 1990, p. 480). It is important to note, however, that dialects include accents. Because my research is going to focus on American regional dialects and accents, the differences between those dialects along with common stereotypes associated
with them must be considered. Boucher, et, al. state, “Accented speech reflects individuals’ characteristics such as race, biological sex, social class, and education” p. 27). Because of this, it is natural that stereotypes are connected to a person’s way of speaking. According to Alford and Strother (1990), “Pronunciation differences are probably the major factor in U.S. English regional varieties, with vowel differences being the most crucial distinguishing feature” (p. 480). This fact considered, although my study specifies the topic as American regional dialects, the dialects under investigation in the recordings I utilize hold their differences in pronunciation as the reading is exactly the same for each speaker other than pronunciation.

In addition to pronunciation differences, however, there is also vocabulary common to different regional dialects of the United States. This is where the beginning questions of my interviews come into play because along with questioning the subjects’ experience of the English language, I hope to find regional differences they have personally recognized. For example, in the Southern United States, the sweetened carbonated drink that many know as soda pop is called Coca-Cola or co-cola (Metcalf, 2000, p. 20). Or in the North, frosting is what a cake is decorated with, not icing (as they say in the South) (Metcalf, 2000, p. 61). There are so many differences in American regional dialects that it is quite impossible to list them all. However, my study will look deeper into three American regional dialects that I consider representative of a large part of the United States.

**American Regional Dialects** The three American regional dialects that are the focus of my study include a Standard Midwestern dialect (Findlay, OH), a Southern dialect (Atlanta, GA), and an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, NY). Here I begin with what
will be defined as Standard American. Every language typically has what is considered a Standard dialect. The Standard is what people associate with education and higher classes. The Standard is given prestige over all other dialects of a language. Metcalf (2000) calls Standard American “Generic American” (p. x). He defines it as “neutral speech, closest to that of parts of the North and much of the West, but without a sense of place. To say it has no accent isn’t fair; it has an accent, just one that doesn’t tell where you’re from. It’s what remains when we remove the local flavor, the language we use in order to sound educated and professional and businesslike (p. x). He continues stating, “It’s the language also of national broadcasts and publications and thus is familiar to almost all Americans” (p. x). The Standard dialect is typically the most clear and understandable because of the commonality of it in television, movies, and other types of media and also the careful pronunciations that are utilized due to the educated status it carries. Labov (1975) mentions that at one point, the eastern United States was merely separated into two dialectal regions being r-pronouncing areas and r-less areas (p. 20). Now, however, “the r-pronunciation of ‘general American’ has become accepted as the standard of broadcast networks and of careful middle class pronunciation everywhere. As a result, we find that the new “prestige” pronunciation of r in final and preconsonantal position has become a sociolinguistic variable in the other r-less areas” (p. 20). Hence, it could be posited that Standard American English is seen as the elite of all other American dialects by speakers and listeners alike. My study will investigate whether these notions of the Standard American dialect hold true for ESL speakers.

As my investigation will consider, because speech brings with it perceptions and attitudes, and dialects other than the Standard hold less prestige, many stereotypes are
attached to regional American dialects. Although this has been studied and deemed accurate for native speakers, my study will find if the same is true for second language speakers. A regional dialect in the United States considered one of the most known is the Southern dialect. According to Metcalf (2000), “The South is not only the most distinctive but also the largest of the distinctive areas of American speech” (p. 5). Speech associated with the South is typically slower and more drawn out. Also, some major characteristics of Southern speech include “the Southern pronunciation of I as “ah,” as well as the expressions “might could” and “fixin’ to” (Metcalf, 2000, p. 4). Although Southern speech carries the positive notion of “the Southern gentleman,” many more negative stereotypes are attached. In Boucher, et, al. (2013), the authors explain that because the South is more rural, people in the South are seen as poor and less educated than those in urban areas (p. 28). Boucher, et, al. also cite Hartigan (2003) mentioning the slurs that are used to describe “poor rural Whites (i.e., hillbilly, redneck, and white trash)” (p. 27). It is in Boucher et. al’s study that they actually investigate the effect of a Southern dialect on people’s opinions towards the speaker.

This study connects to my own as it compares attitudes toward American regional dialects. The researchers begin with an overview of the negative characteristics associated with a Southern accent such as “educational and intellectual inferiority” (Boucher, et. al., 2013, p. 27). The subjects were asked to rate several competency traits of a speaker on a one to five scale (five being the most positive). The traits included “reliable source of information, grammatically correct, unknowledgeable about the subject matter, effective instructor, persuasive presenter, unprofessional manner, articulate speaker, and unsophisticated demeanor” (Boucher, et, al., 2013, p. 29). Two
speakers were utilized, a Standard (Neutral) speaker and a Southern speaker. Even though both sets of instructions were identical in wording and grammar, subjects rated the Southern speaker less sophisticated in demeanor, less grammatically correct, and with a less professional manner than the Neutral speaker. Additionally, a surprising statistic presented is that “eighty-three percent of participants self-identified as Southern” (Boucher, et. al., 2013, p. 30). This study is a clear indicator of just how prominent popular stereotypes are in affecting people’s perceptions towards a Southern speaker. This study directly relates to my study because it is focusing on a Neutral American speaker and a Southern American speaker; however, this study only focuses on native speakers. In my study, I am going to find out just how these dialects are compared according to non-native speakers.

The last American regional dialect I will address is an Eastern dialect, specifically from New York. Metcalf (2000) explains that “In the Eastern New England way of speaking, the “r” sound follows the British pattern of disappearing after a vowel, sometimes to be replaced by an “uh” sound (p. 64). In addition, the New York dialect includes vocabulary such as hero in place of a submarine sandwich and waiting on line instead of waiting in line (Metcalf, 2000, p. 84). Not only does this dialect have defining characteristics, but people have also placed stereotypes alongside it. A popular stereotype of a New York speaker is that they are loud and offensive (Alford and Strother, 1990, p. 480). Not only that, but compared to a Southern speaker, because they speak a dialect that is not the Standard, those that speak New Yorke are also seen as less educated. My study will attempt to conclude whether these notions are also considered true by ESL speakers.
In their study, similarly as I will do in mine, Alford and Strother (1990) investigate the attitudes of not only native speakers, but nonnative speakers towards the Standard Midwestern accent of the U.S., the northern New York accent, and a southern accent. First, Alford and Strother (1990) wanted to find out whether ESL or EFL speakers can hear the differences between regional American dialects which I will also look at in my study. Additionally, as I would like to investigate, the researchers ask that if they can indeed hear the differences, do they also connect social stereotypes to those dialects much as native speakers do? The dialects compared were a Midwestern, a Southern, and a Northern (New York). Their study found that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of regional accents by all subjects. Therefore, the researchers deduce that ESL speakers can indeed hear the difference in regional American English accents. Additionally, the results showed that native speakers rated the Southern male the most favorable in his speaking while ESL speakers rated both the Midwestern male and the Southern male the highest. With this, the researchers conclude that ESL speakers may have cultural biases when it comes to judging a person by the way he or she speaks. This study does not address whether the listeners’ detect any difference in their comprehension of the speaker, however. This is where my research will fill the missing information from this study since I will test not only the recognition of the dialect and subjects’ attitudes towards them, but I will also investigate whether they believe their level of understanding changes according to dialect. Additionally, although my research questions are similar to those of this study, my methodology will be significantly different because Alford and Strother (1990) utilized quantitative evidence by means of Likert scales. My study will solely use qualitative evidence by means of one-on-one interviews. This will indeed add
to the body of knowledge on the topic of ESL students and American regional dialects because many of the studies I have come across do not investigate the participants’ attitudes towards the dialects they hear. I also discovered that many studies do not involve participants’ perceptions of their own understanding but utilize evidence in the form of written tests. Lastly, there are few studies focused on ESL students and American regional dialects. Many studies involving ESL students’ comprehension of or attitudes towards English have focused on World Englishes.

**Comprehension: Exposure to Accents and Dialects** Another stereotype that is placed upon dialects is that a Standard dialect can be understood better than a nonstandard dialect, and it is through my investigation that I will find whether this is true for ESL speakers. The negative connotations of being less educated and poor in terms nonstandard dialects is one reason for this. However, experience or familiarity with different dialects may also play a part. For example, a person from the Midwest who speaks and generally only hears the Standard American dialect may find another American dialect difficult to understand. This is why in my interviews I will inquire just how much and what kinds of experience my subjects have with English and American regional dialects. Over the years, many studies have been conducted on native English speakers and nonnative English speakers alike to find out if dialects and/or accents, whether international, ethnic, or regional, affect a listener’s comprehension (Adank, Evans, Stuart-Smith, & Scott, 2009; Adank & McQueen, 2007; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2005; Ortmeyer & Boyle, 1985; Schmidt, 2009; Sumner & Samuel, 2009, Tauroza & Luk, 1997; Weber, Broersma, & Aoyagi; 2011; and Witteman,
Weber, & McQueen, 2013). It is in my research that I will investigate whether or not this may be the case when it comes to ESL speakers and American regional dialects.

One study that attempts to answer the question of ESL speakers comprehension of English dialects that will similarly be addressed in my own study was carried out by Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian (2005). They wanted to determine whether ESL and native English speakers more easily understand English when it is spoken in the Standard American English versus when it is spoken in regional, ethnic, and international dialects. This study found that “both native and nonnative listeners are affected by a speaker’s dialect” (Major, Fitzmaurice, et. al, 2005, p. 55). The study also found no significant difference between subjects understanding Standard American English and Southern American English. My research will also try to find if this indeed is true of my subjects. The study above, however, does not address any stereotypes the participants may have towards the dialects in which they were tested or simply their recognition of the different dialects, as my study will.

While my study investigates whether familiarity with an American regional accent or dialect affects comprehension, another study conducted by Adank and McQueen (2007) investigated whether one processes words spoken in their L1 in a familiar regional accent differently than those spoken in an unfamiliar regional accent. The study also investigated whether experience with the unfamiliar regional accent will affect comprehension speed. The participants included thirty native Dutch speakers. The results of this study show that all participants were significantly slower in processing words spoken with the unfamiliar accent versus the familiar accent. Additionally, after being exposed to the unfamiliar accent, subjects were again tested but did not show an
increase in comprehension speed. My study will not only take into account the subjects’ familiarity with an accent and comprehension but will also address their personal feelings towards these accents. It is in my study I want to find whether attitudes may influence comprehension due to the idea that one may not want to listen to someone who they believe to be less educated or unpleasing.

The study by Witteman, Weber, and McQueen (2013) also looked at familiarity with an accent; however, their study utilized a foreign accent in the subjects’ L1. The test subjects included native Dutch speakers with limited experience with German-accented Dutch and Dutch speakers with extensive experience with German-accented Dutch. This study found that those with little previous experience with German-Dutch had difficulties interpreting words with a strong German-Dutch accent but had no problem with the weak and medium accented words. Those with prior experience had no difficulty distinguishing all words despite the strength of accent. Additionally, all of the participants with little previous experience improved after hearing the short story by the same speaker. This short term exposure to the previously unfamiliar accent improved those with little experience performance so that their scores were equal to those with extensive previous experience. This finding contradicts that of Adank and McQueen (2007) where their subjects’ comprehension, once exposed to the unfamiliar accent, did not improve. My study will address accent familiarity, but I will not be looking at short-term exposure effects. In my study, I am interested in exposure through living arrangements and popular media throughout their English language experience.

A study carried out by Schmidt (2009) also focused on familiarity; however, Schmidt’s study tested people in their L2’s as I will in my study while Adank and
McQueen (2007) tested subjects in their L1’s. Schmidt begins her study by questioning whether exposure to a specific dialect of an L2 language through a three week study abroad program affects listening comprehension of L2 learners. The subjects included eleven Spanish students who had never been exposed to Dominican Spanish. The subjects spent three weeks in Santo Domingo, and were exposed to Dominican Spanish through lecturers, television, radio, tour guides, and personal interactions. Several listening comprehension tests were given to the subjects prior to leaving for Santo Domingo, and the same tests were utilized two days after their return. The study found that after the experience abroad, students indeed improved in their comprehension of Dominican Spanish. This study confirms the idea of a familiarity effect as Witteman, Weber, and McQueen’s (2013) study did. Although these studies were focused on accent familiarity and comprehension, I do not believe this is the only factor that affects comprehension. My study will attempt to fill the gap not addressed which is the subjects’ personal attitudes towards what they are hearing.

**Comprehension: Local Accent Advantage** The last idea that researchers posit is that any person listening to a speaker whether in their first or second language maintains a local accent advantage which must be noted during my research because if the idea of a local accent advantage is confirmed, I must consider that this may affect my results due to the fact that all of the input for my study will be in American accents and not the subjects’ local accent. I found three studies that focus on the theory of local accent advantage (Adank, Evans, Stuart-Smith, & Scott, 2009; Ortmeyer & Boyle, 1985; and Tauroza & Luk, 1997). The theory of a local accent advantage hypothesizes that when a listener hears a language, it is in their local native accent that they will be able to
better comprehend what is being said. The study conducted by Tauroza and Luk (1997) tested Chinese ESL students’ comprehension of English in their local native accent and in an RP accent. RP stands for “received pronunciation,” and it is considered the Standard English dialect within the United Kingdom. The study found no support that there is an accent advantage because their results showed that subjects better understood RP accented English. Ortmeyer and Boyle’s (1985) overview of a study conducted by Smith and Bisazza (1982) agreed with this. As in Tauroza and Luk’s (1997) study, Chinese ESL students were tested with listening to English in their native accent and in an RP accent, as well as an American accent. The study found that the native English speakers were more easily understood by Chinese students than the Chinese speakers of English. In contradiction to the study by Tauroza and Luk (1997) and Ortmeyer and Boyle’s (1985) overview of a study conducted by Smith and Bisazza (1982), the study conducted by Adank, Evans, Stuart-Smith, and Scott (2009) agrees with an accent advantage; however, their research more so tested familiarity of an accent and found that their subjects understood their language in their own local accent versus another unfamiliar native accent. After comparing these studies, I have concluded a local accent advantage may or may not affect comprehension, but these studies are still important to note when dealing with different accents and a person’s comprehension because of the innumerable variables that affect it. Compared to my research, however, these studies do not address whether the subjects’ attitudes play a role in any of their findings as I will do in my study.

The Focus

Through this review of literature, it is indeed clear that there are attitudes attached to the ways people speak. It is also clear that comprehension is affected by different
accents and dialects. It is not clear, however, whether a person can better understand an accent or dialect they are more familiar with versus one they are not familiar with or whether comprehension may be affected by attitudes towards different dialects or accents. My study consists of interviews with ESL students at the University of Toledo. I will investigate how long they have been studying English with the dialects and accents they are familiar and how they feel about these different dialects and accents. I will also look at whether they believe they can better understand one dialect over the other. My study will utilize three American regional dialects that the students will listen to and evaluate. My main point in this research is to find whether the Standard is the most preferable and most comprehensible for the subjects. In the following chapter, I will discuss the methodology of my study in much more detail along with the subjects, the data gathering process, and how I analyzed my data.
Chapter Two

Methodology

The Study

The purpose of this study is to find out if ESL students can recognize any differences between specific American regional dialects including a Standard dialect (Midwestern from Findlay, Ohio), a Southern dialect (from Atlanta, Georgia), and an Eastern dialect (from Staten Island, New York). This study will also investigate whether these students hold any stereotypes towards these different dialects and whether they believe that a difference in the dialects affects their listening comprehension.

Research Context

This study was conducted with ESL students at the University of Toledo. Participants were selected using the following criteria: 1.) Student is currently attending the University of Toledo. 2.) He or she is currently enrolled in English 1020 (Writing and Grammar for ESL Students) or English 1110-ESL (College Composition I for ESL students). 3.) He or she is a volunteer (no incentives were utilized). No other criterion was used.

Research Questions

This study includes the following research questions:

1. Can ESL students hear the differences between American regional dialects including a Standard Midwestern dialect (Findlay, Ohio), a Southern dialect (Atlanta, Georgia), and an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, New York)?

2. If students do note a difference, which dialect do they favor?
3. What experiences do students report having with various American dialects and accents?

4. What difficulties, if any, do ESL students report having with understanding various American dialects?

5. Do ESL students have different attitudes towards American regional dialects?

**Role of Researcher**

I am a female student attending the University of Toledo where I am currently working on my masters degree in English with a concentration in ESL. I am a native speaker of English. I lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin much of my life and now reside in Toledo, Ohio. Out of the three dialects addressed in my study (a Midwestern dialect, a Southern dialect, and an Eastern dialect), the Midwestern dialect is closest to what I speak. My role as the researcher was to take a qualitative approach to understanding ESL student recognition of and attitudes toward American regional dialects, and also to investigate whether ESL students report having difficulties understanding one dialect over another. After the collection of data, I analyzed my field notes by making connections between the participants’ answers and my interpretation of what can be concluded based on these answers.

**Participants**

Five participants agreed to take part in this study. As it was difficult to find volunteers, recruiting criteria was kept to a minimum. This can be referred to in the “Research Context” section. I think it was difficult to recruit participants because with me being a full-time student and working a full-time job at the time of this study, my availability was minimal. This was inconvenient for participants who were receiving no
incentive to take part in this research. Participants were recruited using in-class announcements by their instructors and through email. They were briefly informed about the nature of the research and that participant identity would be confidential. Pseudonyms have been used to keep the participants’ identities confidential.

There were a total of five participants (four male and one female) from four different countries interviewed in this study. Lee was a 23 year old Chinese native. He had been studying English for approximately 10 years and had been living in the United States for about four months. Ajeet was a 22 year old from India. He had been studying English in school since the age of four and had been living in the United States for approximately six months. Saad was 20 years old and was from Saudi Arabia. He had studied English from the age of 11 or 12 and had been living in the U.S. for almost two years. He also lived in the U.K. for two months where he studied English. Adela was a 32 year old from Romania. She had studied English since she was eight years old and had lived in the United States for four years. Since being in the United States, she had lived in Boston, Massachusetts for one month and Colorado for eight months before moving to Toledo, Ohio. Malik was from Saudi Arabia and was 25 years old. He had experience with the English language since high school but studied only on and off. He had been seriously studying English for approximately five years and had been living in the U.S. for nine months. At the time of this study, four of the five participants were enrolled in the ESL version of ENGL 1110; only Malik was enrolled in ENGL 1020. The demographics of the participants can be found in Table 1.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics. See below.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Lee</th>
<th>Ajeet</th>
<th>Saad</th>
<th>Adela</th>
<th>Malik</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Romania</td>
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</tr>
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<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places English studied</td>
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<td>India; Ohio</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia; United Kingdom; Ohio; Michigan</td>
<td>Romania; Ohio</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia; Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months spent in U.S.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places lived in U.S.</td>
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<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Michigan; Ohio</td>
<td>Massachusetts; Colorado; Ohio</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms used

The Instrument

The data was collected by way of personal interviews consisting of 17 questions. The questions were developed based on the research questions of this study, what the researcher believed would link recognition, attitudes, and comprehension of the three dialects in question, and also previous research carried out in the field. Halfway through the interviews, the researcher utilized three recordings of American regional dialects. All three recordings consisted of the same text; only the accent was different. The transcript for these recordings can be found in Appendix B. The interview questions covered many topics including participants’ experience with the English language, how long they have been studying English, their attitudes towards the recorded speakers, and their knowledge of American regional stereotypes. All three of the recordings were the same except for accent. All speakers were male. One speaker was from Findlay, OH (Midwest), one from...
Staten Island, NY (East), and one from Atlanta, GA (South). For the complete list of interview questions utilized in this study, see Appendix A.

**Data Collection**

One-on-one interviews with ESL students attending the University of Toledo were conducted for this study. Subjects were contacted through email and in-class announcements for participation in this study in which they were briefly informed about the nature of the research and that participant identity would remain anonymous. After participation agreement, the researcher met with the subjects in a private study room at the University of Toledo library where, preceding the interview, they signed a consent form. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews began with background questions including the participant’s native country, age, how long they had studied English, how long they had lived in the United States, and where they had lived in the United States. Following these, four questions regarding participants’ experience with American regional dialects and accents were asked. After this, three recordings consisting of the same excerpt were played (Weinberger, 2014). The speaker of each recording was from a different part of the United States (South- Atlanta, Georgia, East- Staten Island, New York, and Midwest- Findlay, Ohio.). All three recordings were played twice, followed by four questions regarding the participant’s feelings towards the speaker. These are included in Appendix A questions 11 through 14. After all three recordings were played in the order listed above and the questions pertaining to the participant’s feelings towards the recordings were asked, two more general questions relating to all of the recordings were asked. The first of these pertained to whether the subjects noticed a difference in the way each
person spoke; the other about whom the participants felt was the most and least understandable speaker. The interviews concluded with a question about the participants’ knowledge of American stereotypes. Handwritten field notes were utilized during data collection and more detailed handwritten notes were added shortly following the interviews. The researcher later typed transcripts of the interviews. In addition, aliases were utilized to protect the privacy of all participants.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data and keep track of the questions, I numbered each answer as I typed the transcripts. Because questions 1-6 relate to the background of the participant, I did not code for this; however, answers to these questions were considered during the analysis. I used the information from these questions to compare whether the participants’ background influenced the results in any way. For analysis purposes, the questions pertaining to the recordings participants listened to were coded for each speaker in the following way: (M) for Midwestern, (S) for Southern, and (E) for Eastern. This was done in order to answer my research questions. I then carefully read through the transcripts looking for any themes in the participants’ answers that went beyond answering my original research questions. I was looking for any noticeable similarities or differences within the participants’ answers and also for why the participants may have responded the way they did. I then created coded categories and sorted the data according to these categories. The categories I created based on themes that emerged from my reading of the interview transcripts include the following: Student dialect/accent experience, recognition of differences in dialect/accent, dialect/accent favoring, sociocultural grouping, understanding of stereotypes, attitudes towards stereotyping, and
self proficiency critiquing. “Sociocultural grouping” refers to participants placing speakers into categories based on social factors rather than regional speech differences. For example, some participants spoke about “cowboy” and “gangster” speech.

“Understanding of stereotypes” refers to the participants’ ability to understand what is meant by the term “stereotype.” An example would be after attempting to explain “stereotype”, a participant remained unsure of the term and had no feelings about it.

“Attitudes towards stereotyping” refers to participants’ feelings about placing stereotypes upon people. For example, a participant was uneasy about making a judgment about a speaker based on their speech. Last, “self-proficiency critiquing” refers to participants’ feelings about their English language ability when making judgments about English speakers’ speech. An example would be a participant mentioning that they could not guess where a person is from based on the speaker’s dialect because their own English listening ability may be lacking.

After labeling my categories, I once again read through my transcripts and assigned participant answers to appropriate categories. I did this by looking for any answers pertaining to the categories I discovered. For example, after I noticed the trend of sociocultural grouping, I looked for all answers that mentioned a social group and highlighted them in the same color. The coding helped me organize my data in a way that I could draw conclusions from the information I had gathered which are reported in the next chapter.

This chapter has described in detail my methodology for collecting and analyzing data for this study. The third and final chapter of this study will explain my results and
conclusions. It will also cover the limitations of this study and what may be done to add
to this research in the future.
Chapter Three

Results and Discussion

Introduction

In this Chapter, I first present my findings in relation to my original five research questions. My original research questions were as follows: 1.) Can ESL students hear the differences between American regional dialects including a Standard Midwestern dialect (Findlay, Ohio), a Southern dialect (Atlanta, Georgia), and an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, New York)? 2.) If students do note a difference, which dialect do they favor? 3.) What experiences do students report having with various American dialects and accents? 4.) What difficulties, if any, do ESL students report having with understanding various American dialects? and 5.) Do ESL students have different attitudes towards American regional dialects? I discuss trends and similarities or differences in responses. Next, a more in depth discussion of the data and what it means to the study follows. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the limitations of this study and what may be done for future research.

Findings

Research Question One: Can ESL students hear the differences between American regional dialects including a Standard Midwestern dialect (Findlay, Ohio), a Southern dialect (Atlanta, Georgia), and an Eastern dialect (Staten Island, New York)? From this research, I found out that ESL students can indeed hear the differences between the dialects utilized in this study. When the participants were asked if they noticed a difference in the way each person spoke after listening to the three recordings, all five answered in the affirmative. Ajeet reported that he could tell a
difference in the speed of speech, the different accent of each speaker, and the different
tones of their speech. He reported that the speaker from the Standard Midwest spoke
slower than the speakers from the South and the East, and was therefore, more
understandable. Saad also reported hearing a difference in the speed of speech and the
accent. He also noted a difference in the clarity of speech stating that the speaker from
the Standard Midwest spoke the most clearly. Lee stated he could hear a difference in the
speed of speech and also how each speaker utilized punctuation differently. He noted that
the speaker from the South did not stop while speaking but the speaker from the Standard
Midwest stopped at punctuation clearly defining each sentence. Malik also reported
hearing a difference in the speed of speech. He stated that the speaker from the East
spoke fast and unclearly while the person from the Standard Midwest spoke very clearly.
While Adela reported hearing a noted difference in the way each person spoke, she did
not offer further details.

I did not find it surprising that the participants noticed a difference in the way
each person spoke. Every person has a different way of speaking based on where they are
from. Also, even though the recordings were of the same excerpt, I chose each recording
not only based on where the speaker was from, but on my own idea of what a person with
a heavier accent from each area would sound like. This may be a reason for the
participants’ ability to note a difference. It would be interesting to utilize more recordings
from the same areas with less noticeable differences in their accents and to bring in more
accents from various parts of the country and world.

Research Question Two: If students do note a difference, which dialect do
they favor? As stated above, all five participants noted a difference in the way each
person spoke. All five participants also reported that the speaker from the Standard Midwest was the most understandable. Adela noted that she may have thought this speaker was the most understandable to her because it was the last of the recordings she heard. I was surprised at Adela’s report because this was something I did not consider when deciding the order in which to play the recordings. It was not surprising to me, however, that the speaker from the Standard Midwest would seem to be the most understandable because of the common idea that a speaker of a Standard dialect speaks more clearly. A Standard dialect is typically the one utilized in reporting such as in newscasts and in the classroom, and it is the type of speech one learning another language is typically exposed to. Additionally, in accordance to the research claiming accent familiarity, all of the participants were residing in Toledo, Ohio at the time of the study where the Standard Midwestern dialect is spoken so this could have affected their comprehension skills.

All the participants also agreed that the person from the South was the most difficult to understand except for Malik. He stated that the person from the East was very difficult to understand and could not decipher much of what he said. Adela reported that the person from the East had a lighter accent than the person from the South. However, Adela also lived in Boston for a month prior to this research so she may have been exposed to similar Eastern accents and therefore may have already developed a type of dialect familiarity as was tested in Schmidt’s (2009) study. Ajeet expanded on his answer saying that the speaker from the South could not pronounce “properly.” I found it surprising that most of the participants agreed that the Southern speaker was least understandable. I thought the results would be mixed between the Southern speaker and
the Eastern speaker because they are both nonstandard dialects, and I felt they both had qualities that could have affected participant understanding.

**Research Question Three: What experiences do students report having with various American dialects and accents?** All of the participants reported having heard of Americans having regional dialects or accents except Saad. Although he had never heard of this, he did report knowing about different vocabulary being used in different areas such as people in Toledo calling soda pop “soda” and those in Michigan calling it “pop.” He knew about this because he had lived in Michigan for a short time preceding this study. Besides this distinction, Saad only claimed to know about World English accents such as British English versus American English versus Australian English and so on. Malik also reported knowing only about World Englishes but then went on to explain that he could hear a difference between white and black American speech. He had experienced these different dialects in movies, television, and from real life communication. Lee reported that although he had heard of American regional dialects and accents, he could not give any further information about any. He did however mention “cowboy” speech, which he had noticed while watching movies. Ajeet reported that he had heard of American dialects and accents and has experienced them in movies. He went on to mention that he knew of “gangster” speech from the movie “The Godfather.” He also said that he had spoken to many English speakers of different dialects; however, he was most familiar with British English because that is the English he had been studying since childhood. Adela reported that she was familiar with a Boston accent because she had lived there for a short period of time. She stated, “I thought every American spoke that way because it was the first experience I had with American
speech.” She also mentioned that she believed people in Los Angeles, California spoke more descriptively and with more emphasis like movie stars and that she knew people in the South said “y’all” because of movies she had seen. She added that she needs more experience with American speech to truly notice many of the different dialects and accents.

I believe that the more experience a person has with different dialects and accents, the more they will understand them. This ties into the current study because if a participant does not report having experience with certain American regional dialects or accents, this will influence the results in that they may understand one dialect over the other. For example, because Adela reported that she lived in Boston for a short period of time, it was not surprising that she could understand the speaker from the East fairly well. Also, because the participants were all residing in Toledo, Ohio, at the time of the study and had the most experience with speakers there, it was also not surprising that they find the Standard Midwestern dialect easy to understand.

**Research Question Four: What difficulties, if any, do ESL students report having with understanding various American dialects?** All of the participants reported having difficulties understanding some of the speakers in the recordings as reported above. Overall, the participants agreed that fast and unclear speech was the most difficult to understand. However, they did not report any real life experiences that made it difficult for them to understand a speaker based on their dialect except for Malik. He mentioned that I was very understandable to him because I spoke slowly and clearly. This may have, however, been due to the fact that I was speaking clearly on purpose in order for him to understand me. If I had been in a different setting, this may not have been the case. He
also reported that he sometimes had difficulties understanding his English professor at times. I found out that his professor was not a native English speaker and not from the same country as him, however, so she was speaking English with a nonnative accent unfamiliar to him. Therefore, his difficulties were not surprising because it is understandable that a nonnative speaker may not be as understandable as a native speaker when he or she is not from the same country as the listener. This is in accordance to studies previously carried out about local accent advantage.

**Research Question Five: Do ESL students have different attitudes towards American regional dialects?** In this study, participants did not report having any specific attitudes towards American regional dialects. When I asked about any stereotypes they may know of, I had to first try to explain the meaning of “stereotype” to all of the participants. After the explanation, Lee reported only knowing stereotypes from friends. He said he heard that people from Georgia are unfriendly, but then said this may be because they are busier because it is warmer there and they have many things to do. He also reported having heard people from the East, such as in New York, are also less friendly because it is “fast paced and busy” in big cities and people there are under more pressure. He said through his own experience, he believes people from the Midwest are friendlier because they speak politely saying, “May I,” and “Could I?” He concluded with the idea that people in small towns get to enjoy life because there is not as much pressure as in big cities, and therefore, people are friendlier. Ajeet reported that he can only try to tell where some people are from by the way they speak but he does not form stereotypes. He said, “There is a mixed population everywhere so you can find different types of people everywhere. Not everyone from one place is a certain way.” Adela also
reported that she does not personally form stereotypes and was hesitant to tell me of any she knew of. She did, however, report that she knew people who are on television speak with a “trained speech” so people in Louisiana talking on the news would not be speaking in their natural dialect while reporting. She also reported that educated people typically have trained speech, and through personal experience, reported that teenagers are “hard to understand and have jumbled speech” and utilize words that adults do not (such as slang). During the interview, when asked about what she thought the person’s education was after listening to the person from the South, Adela stated, “He sounds country. I don’t have an opinion on his education. I don’t know him.” Saad could not understand the concept of “stereotypes” at all so he had no opinion about American stereotypes and did not have any more to say. Malik also did not have any attitudes or known stereotypes to report.

During the interviews, the participants were asked to report whether the speaker they heard sounded “friendly or unfriendly” and also if the person sounded “educated, a little educated, or not educated at all.” The responses during these questions were very mixed. I believe this is in fact due to the participants not understanding the concept of stereotypes and also not wanting to place a judgment upon someone who they do not know based on how they speak alone. It could also be that dialects are not a good way to decipher stereotypes. Additionally, because stereotypes are culturally specific, and since these students are just being acculturated to American society, they may not link dialects or accents to pre-conceived notions of character. The question based on the friendliness of the person received unsure responses such as “maybe he is friendly” or “he might be unfriendly” but there were not absolute answers. The question about education received
mixed answers also except that Lee, Ajeet, and Saad were adamant that the person from the Standard Midwest was very educated.

Discussion

Through the analysis of the data collected during the interviews, certain themes appeared. The themes that were evident included: dialect/accent experience, recognition of differences in dialect/accent, dialect/accent favoring, sociocultural grouping, understanding of stereotypes, attitudes towards stereotyping, and self proficiency critiquing. I will discuss each theme in turn.

**Dialect/accent experience** It was clear from the data that many of the participants had more real life experience with different types of World Englishes rather than with American English dialects/accents. This is not surprising because English has made a great impact on the world and many places have English listed as one of their official languages. Also, it is common that when English is taught in schools, the Standard dialect is utilized instead of nonstandard dialects. Therefore, if the participants were exposed to any American dialects in the classroom, it was most likely the Standard. It was also clear that the participants had little real life experience with American regional dialects because they had not yet visited many places in the United States and were all residing in Toledo, Ohio at the time of the study. What was the most surprising to me was that Adela, having been living in the United States for four years, did not have more experience with dialects/accents. She did indeed however have the most experience out of the participants and knew the most about common stereotyping in America. Most of the participants reported having noted differences in the way people spoke in movies and television.
Recognition of differences in dialect/accent During the interviews, the students could hear there was a difference in the accent of the speaker in each recording. However, when asked if they could guess where the speaker was from (even a general region: North, East, South, West), many of the participants could not answer or answered incorrectly for the two nonstandard dialects. Saad and Adela did correctly guess that the person from Atlanta, Georgia was from the South, but Adela was the only one positive that she heard a Southern accent. Adela could have felt more confident in her answer considering she had the most experience with American regional dialects than all of the participants. Lee and Ajeet were the only participants that guessed the speaker from Staten Island, New York was from the East. Ajeet did mention he liked to watch “gangster” movies like the “Godfather” in which heavy New York accents are utilized. This could be a reason he recognized an Eastern accent. The most significant point of data I recognized was that every participant except for Ajeet said the speaker from Findlay, Ohio was from the Midwest/Ohio or Adela said, “He could be from anywhere. He sounds like a trained person.” This was very interesting because this recording was meant to be used as the “Standard” dialect and Adela definitely recognized this. Again, this is most likely because she had the most real life experiences with American regional dialects and accents out of all the other participants. Additionally, the participants probably recognized that the speaker was from the Midwest or Ohio because they were living in Toledo, Ohio at the time of the study, and therefore, had a lot of experience with the dialect of the area.

Dialect/accent favoring The data from this study showed that there was a clear favoring of the Standard dialect. All of the participants agreed that the person from the
Standard Midwest was the easiest to understand and spoke the most clearly. All of the participants also agreed that this person sounded friendly except Adela. She said, “I don’t think he sounded friendly or unfriendly. It sounded like an actor reading lines.” This answer, however, exemplifies that what people consider the Standard seems rehearsed or fake because of the way the speech is clear and understandable. Besides clearly favoring the Standard dialect, the Southern dialect received the least favoring. All of the participants said the speaker from the South sounded like he has little to no education. This follows American stereotypes that speakers from the South are “slow” or uneducated.

**Sociocultural grouping** During this research, stereotyping based on regional dialect or accent differences did not fully present itself. However, during the data analysis, I noted that when talking about accents, the participants grouped the way people spoke according to the person’s sociocultural label. For example, Lee mentioned that he could identify “cowboy” accents. As this is not a region, it would not be based on a regional accent per say. However, in movies, cowboys typically speak a Southern dialect so Lee was indeed noticing Southern American dialects, but was placing the speakers in a social group, not a dialect group. In addition to this, Ajeet talked about “gangster” speech. During his interview, he also mentioned watching movies like “The Godfather” which would indeed influence the way he labeled the Eastern dialects typically utilized in movies such as these as “gangster.” Another label mentioned by Adela was “cold lawyer” speech. After listening to the dialect from the East, she said, “He did not sound friendly, He sounded cold. Maybe he is educated. He sounded like a cold lawyer.” I found this to be interesting because if someone asked me personally what kind of American dialect I
think of a lawyer speaking, I would probably say an Eastern dialect like somewhere from New York. This is based on my own experience with movies and television shows in which lawyers are presented. I also believe this is because when I think of a “big shot” lawyer, I think of a big city like New York. Adela also referred to “teenager” speech during the interview and said that they “are hard to understand. They jumble their speech and talk fast and make up words.” Last, Malik talked about having experience with “white” and “black” speech. Malik had only lived in Toledo, Ohio and therefore, did not have any real life experience with American regional dialects besides the one spoken in Toledo where he lived. However, in Toledo, of course there are dialects and accents also associated with cultural groups that he had personally experienced such as with the African American vernacular.

**Understanding of stereotypes** During this study, I found it interesting how little my subjects knew about stereotypes. Not only did three out of five participants claim not knowing any American stereotypes, all of the participants needed further explanation of the word before they could answer my question about stereotypes. I think this could be due to the word itself. It is possible that “stereotype” is not a typical word ESL students come across, and if there is a concept similar in their own countries, it was simply lost in translation. When I explained what it meant, I associated it to regional dialects within their own countries and whether they had common ideas associated with the people who speak those different dialects. The participants answered in the affirmative and after that, they understood what I meant, but knew little about stereotypes associated with American regional dialects simply because of their lack of experience with American culture. If the participants would have resided in the United States longer than at the time of the study
and had more travel experience within the United States, it is possible they would have known more about stereotypes associated with American regional dialects.

**Attitudes towards stereotyping** Another theme I noticed during this research was that after explaining to the participants what stereotype meant, some were very adamant about telling me they do not place stereotypes on people. Ajeet said, “I do not have any stereotypes. It is a mixed population. You can find different types of people everywhere.” Additionally, throughout the interview, Adela did not want to make judgments about any of the recordings played for her saying such things as, “I don’t have an opinion on his education. I don’t know him.” I did not find it surprising that the participants did not want to group people based on the way they spoke. First, I was an American interviewing them, and they may have felt uncomfortable mentioning anything they knew or heard about American stereotypes because stereotypes typically have negative connotations. Also, I think the lack of judgment is because they were not from America. I feel that stereotypes develop within a community and because the participants were new to the American community, they lacked the cultural knowledge to form stereotypes for Americans. Some of the participants did mention that they knew stereotypes held in their countries based on the region a person was from also. Another reason the participants may have been reluctant to stereotype is because it is possible they have been subject to stereotyping themselves, as nonnative speakers in the United States.

**Self-proficiency critiquing** The last theme I came across during this research was self-proficiency critiquing. When asked about experiences with different American regional dialects, several of the participants said they may not be proficient enough in English to notice dialect or accent differences just yet. For example, Lee said, “I think I
have heard a few accents, but I am unsure if my listening skills are good enough to detect any.” Also, Adela mentioned, “I can hear a Boston accent because I lived there, but I don’t have a trained American ear.” This was interesting but not surprising. Because the Standard dialect is typically the dialect learners of English are exposed to in the classroom, it would indeed take personal experience to hear and label nonstandard dialects. Sometimes it is difficult even for an American to detect a specific regional accent let alone know where the person is from based on that accent. The ways in which people speak are vast and these differences begin at the individual level.

Implications

The results of this research support the widely-recognized idea that speakers of a Standard dialect are the most favored among listeners. However, it also suggests that accent familiarity is a factor. All of the participants were living in Toledo, Ohio and had the most exposure to the Standard Midwestern dialect spoken there. Additionally, the students probably had exposure to this dialect of English in English class in their home countries, since it is considered the closest to standard American English and is thus often the target variety of English in EFL contexts. If the participants were living in a different region of the United States, they may have favored the local dialect of where they were living, but that would need further investigation. The results also lead to a new way of looking at speakers in the field of sociolinguistics. Based on observations, ESL students are more likely to recognize speech differences as a sociocultural factor and not as a regional difference.

Limitations
There are several limitations within this study. First, there was a limited number of participants, and all of the participants were living in Toledo, Ohio at the time of the study. A larger, more diverse sample would have benefitted this study so as to distinguish whether the data collected was a result of where participants lived or if results would be comparable. Also, all of the data collected was based on self-reporting and there was no measurement of actual comprehension of the recordings.

Another limitation is based on the recordings themselves. Because the recordings were the same excerpt and only differed in accent, the participants’ reporting of their comprehension could have been effected due to hearing the same reading several times. In addition, the recordings being played in the same order for every participant may have also affected the data because the last recording may have seemed the most understandable due to it being played last.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Much can be done in terms of future research for this topic. First, the same type of research can be done with a larger sample of participants. During the research of the topic of this study, I only found one other study similar which was that of Alford and Strother (1990). I think it is beneficial to understand how dialects affect the listening comprehension of ESL students because learning a new language is about communicating. If ESL students are only exposed to a Standard dialect in the classroom, it may hinder their ability to use the language in real life situations. Additionally, a larger sample of recordings could be used in future research because the recordings utilized in this study were merely a tiny sample of American regional dialects. Lastly, future studies
could build on the current study in terms of the relation of race and other social factors that influence ESL students’ attitudes towards English speakers.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the findings that the ESL students had more experience with World Englishes than with American regional dialects. Additionally, the ESL students could indeed detect different American regional dialects when listening to a speaker, and the Standard dialect was favored among the participants. There was not, however, a clear indication that participants’ experiences affected their attitudes towards American regional dialects. There was an indication that with more experience comes more knowledge about common American regional stereotypes; however, these attitudes were not commonly held by the ESL listeners. The ESL listeners were particularly against placing commonly known stereotypes upon Americans based on the way they speak. Although the ESL students did not want to stereotype based on how people spoke, they did place speakers into sociocultural groups based on the way they spoke. This shows that no matter what feelings a person has about grouping people based on their characteristics, it still happens whether on the conscious or subconscious level.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

These are the original interview questions in the order they were asked:

1. Where are you from?

2. What is your age?

3. How long have you studied English?

4. Where have you studied English?

5. How long have you lived in the United States?

6. Where have you lived in the United States?

7. Have you ever heard of Americans having regional dialects or accents?


9. Have you had any experience with people who speak with these accents? Which ones? Tell me about them.

10. Have you heard American accents on television, in movies, or in music? Which ones? Tell me about them.

I will now play a recording of an American speaker. I am going to ask you a few questions about what you thought afterwards. (I will play the Southern, Eastern, and then Standard accent recordings separately with the same questions following). Please pay attention to how well you feel you understand the speaker.

11. Could you understand this speaker? Was it difficult to understand? Easy?

12. Does this person sound friendly or unfriendly to you?

13. Would you say this person is very educated, a little educated, or not educated at all?

14. Can you guess where this speaker is from?
After all of the recordings have been gone through…

15. Did you notice a difference in the way each person spoke?

16. Was there a speaker that you felt was the most understandable? The least understandable?

17. Do you know any stereotypes associated with Southern Americans? New Yorkers from Staten Island or Brooklyn? Midwesterner? Others?
Appendix B

Transcript of Recordings

This is the transcript of the three recordings utilized in this study:

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.