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## College Students' Perceptions of Instructors Whose Primary Language Is not English

Takiyah A. Clay

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College Students' Perceptions of Instructors Whose Primary Language Is not English

by

Takiyah Clay

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

December 2020



Approved by:

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is common to see instructors at universities in America who are foreign born and, as a result, have a foreign accent. Since foreign accents can influence the perceptions of people, the researcher designed this study to discover any perceptions that college students may have toward instructors with foreign accents. In addition, the researcher wanted to discover if those perceptions influenced the students' actions in class. In order to reveal these perceptions, the researcher surveyed 205 students both in-person and online. The researcher determined that although a majority of the participants had difficulty comprehending the lectures of instructors with foreign accents, most of the participants did not think of those instructors as less intelligent or as less effective compared to instructors with Mainstream American English (MAE) accents. Adding to that, the issues with comprehension did not lead most students to drop or skip the class of an instructor with a foreign accent. These results are essential to the field of Speech-Language Pathology because it will aid speech-language pathologists (SLP) who work with accent modification.

**Keywords:** accent, speech-language pathology, perception, foreign, instructor, college

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to take a moment to thank my thesis advisor, Mary Schaub, for her amazing guidance and support throughout the thesis process. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Biswas who guided me through analyzing my survey questions. This study would not have been possible without their assistance and advice along the way.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ASHA	American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
AAVE	African American Vernacular English
ESL	English as a Second Language
MAE	Mainstream American English
SLP	Speech-Language Pathologist

## CHAPTER I: **Introduction**

The purpose of this project is to determine the negative and positive perceptions that students may have toward instructors who speak with foreign accents and how those perceptions may influence the students' behaviors in class. The researcher believes that this topic is important because it can help Speech-Language Pathologists become more aware of how to help any clients with foreign accents who may approach them for accent modification. Adding to its importance, according to the Migration Policy Institute, as recently as 2018 there were "more than 44.7 million immigrants...in the United States" (para. 5). In addition, in 2018, 19.7% of foreign-born people either worked in educational services, health care, or social assistance. (Migration Policy Institute, Table 5, Row 12). Therefore, it is common to see instructors at universities in America who are foreign-born and as a result are more than likely to have a primary language other than English. These foreign-born instructors have accents that are different from Mainstream American English (MAE), which can impact the way that their students perceive them. These accents are referred to as "national origin accents" by The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), and they are commonly heard in "non-native individuals who learn English as a second language (L2) as adults" (Accent Modification, n.d., para. 2). ASHA stated that this type of accent is created when people learn a new language and "impose the phonology/sound system of their first language (L1)" on the new language (Accent Modification, n.d., para. 2).

Although all speakers develop an accent characteristic of their regional origin, national origin accents can be difficult to understand due to significant variations in speech patterns which can cause frustration to both the speaker and the listener. Due to

this fact, some speakers choose to go to a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) for problems with speech intelligibility. According to ASHA, there are three aspects of accents that determine the effectiveness of speech. These aspects include accentedness, comprehensibility, and intelligibility. ASHA defines accentedness as “the perceived degree of an accent by a listener,” comprehensibility as “the ease with which a listener understands the message,” and intelligibility as “the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance or message” (Accent Modification, n.d., para. 4).

## CHAPTER II: Literature Review

While foreign accents are becoming increasingly more common in America, the researcher has found limited research specifically addressing how students perceive instructors with non-native accents. In this literature review, the researcher will discuss journal articles that define the relationships among the three aspects that determine the effectiveness of speech which include accentedness, intelligibility, and comprehensibility, and articles that examine the effects of accents on how people are perceived.

### **Relationships Among Accentedness, Intelligibility, and Comprehensibility**

The purpose of Derwing and Munro's study (1997) was to further explore the relationships among accentedness, intelligibility, and comprehensibility. In this study, they clearly defined intelligibility as, "the extent to which the native speaker understands the intended message," and comprehensibility as how "easy an utterance is to understand" (p. 2).

To discover the relationships among these 3 aspects of speech, they recorded 48 English as a second language (ESL) students telling a story based on a series of cartoons that were shown to them. Then the authors took speech samples of varying lengths from each recording and had 26 native English students listen to them. The authors randomly assigned each listener to either condition one or two. Listeners who were assigned to the first condition had to listen and transcribe each audio sample, then rate their accentedness on a scale from one to nine. They were provided a break of five minutes before they were asked to listen to the sample again, but this time the samples were presented in a different order. Instead of listening and then transcribing the speech sample, this time the listeners

were asked to rate the intelligibility of the speaker on a scale from one to nine. In addition, the listeners also had to decide if the speaker had a Cantonese, Japanese, Polish, or Spanish accent. Finally, the listeners were asked to explain why they thought certain speakers were more difficult to understand than others.

The listeners who were assigned to the second condition listened to the same language samples in a randomized order, were tasked with rating the comprehensibility after transcribing the sample, had to rate the speaker's accentedness and identify their accent, and answer what aspects of an accent they believed were the most prominent.

This study's results were important because they solidified the belief that the strength of a speaker's accent is not related to the intelligibility of the speaker's speech. Derwing and Munro (1997) found that in each case "accent ratings are harsher than...comprehensibility ratings, which...are harsher than...intelligibility scores" (p. 11). This means that although some speakers were rated as having a stronger accent, the strength of the accent did not necessarily affect the listener's ability to understand the speaker's intended statement. This is applicable because it means that even though some instructors may have a strong accent, it does not necessarily affect the students' abilities to understand the overall lesson.

### **Effect of Accents on How People Are Perceived**

There are many aspects of an accent that affect how the listener perceives the speaker. Carlson and McHenry (2006) asked three bidialectal women from different ethnic groups to pretend that they were applying for a job using different accents. These accents included Spanish-influenced-English, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Asian-influenced-English. They recorded each woman describing her skills

and had 60 human resource management employees judge the speakers on their employability and intelligibility on a scale of 1 to 7. Although the HR employees were told that each speaker was identically qualified for the job, it appeared that the strength of the accent and ethnic stereotypes determined how the speaker was perceived in terms of employability. When the speakers' accents were strong, "all speakers received a lower employability rating," but interestingly the "speaker of Asian-influenced English was rated the second highest for employability" even though her comprehensibility ratings were the lowest (Carlson & McHenry, 2006, p. 80). They determined that Asian-influenced English accents may be associated with positive stereotypes when compared to the stereotypes associated with AAVE or Spanish-influenced English.

A similar study conducted by Dragojevic, Giles, Beck, and Tatum (2017) found similar results. In order to test their hypothesis that speakers with heavy foreign accents are perceived more negatively than speakers with mild foreign accents, they created two studies. Both studies were nearly identical, except one study focused on Punjabi-accented English speech, while the other used Mandarin-accented English speech.

For the first study, the authors used 96 undergraduates from a university on the west coast of America and had them listen to one of two recordings of a man of Indian descent reading a short story in either a mild or heavy Punjabi accent. Next, the authors removed 12 words from the short story, and the listeners were instructed to fill in those missing words. Following that, the listeners were asked how much they felt negative or positive emotions after completing the task. The listeners then used a seven point scale to determine whether the speaker had five status traits, that included the following: successful, intelligent, smart, educated, and competent, and five solidarity traits, which

were pleasant, nice, sociable, honest, and friendly. Finally, the listeners had to rate the strength of the speaker's accent and how much they believed the speaker represented people from India on a scale of one to seven.

The second study, focusing on Mandarin-accented English speech, was similar to the previous study, except the participants included 197 undergraduate students from a university located in the southeastern United States. The authors found that that listeners perceived speakers with heavier accents more negatively than speakers with milder accents. In addition, they viewed these speakers as having less status and as "more prototypical of their respective group," which meant the listener believed that the speaker fit the stereotypes of their group (Dragojevic et al., 2017, p. 399).

Both articles are important to this study because they demonstrate the effect that the strength of an accent has on the listener's perception of the speaker. For example, in Carlson and McHenry's (2006) article, all speakers who had heavier accents were considered less employable, while in the article by Dragojevic et al. (2017), the listeners rated the speakers with heavier accents more negatively. In the latter study, they discovered that the heavier the accent, the more the listener associated the speaker with their group's stereotypes.

### **Adapting to Accented Speech**

Bradlow and Bent (2008) found that over multiple exposures, listeners could adapt to the speaker's accent and therefore understand the message the speaker was conveying. They discovered this phenomenon by conducting two experiments. In the first experiment, the authors wanted to investigate listener adaptation to speakers with foreign accents whose intelligibility scores varied. The authors selected three native Chinese



speakers and one native Slovakian speaker from the Northwestern University Foreign-Accented English Speech Database (NUFAESD) and had the participants listen to the speech recordings of those speakers. The participants were instructed to listen to the sentence recordings and to write down what the speaker said. Experiment 2 involved a training phase and a testing phase that focused on the participants' abilities to recognize sentences in recorded audio samples that mixed the speech with white noise. The authors held two training sessions over two days in which the participants listened to one set of sentence recordings five times and wrote down what was said each time. After the second training session, the authors tested the participants by instructing them to listen to one sentence recording from a speaker with a Chinese accent and another sentence recording from a speaker with a Slovakian accent. Afterwards, the participants were instructed to write down what was said. Both experiments revealed that the "intelligibility of foreign-accented English improved with exposure to each..." talker (Bradlow & Bent, 2008, p. 8).

## **CHAPTER III: Methodology**

### **Sample**

The participants were university students who had been taught by an instructor whose primary language was not English. In order to find these participants, the survey was included in weekly emails to students from the Honors College and The University of Southern Mississippi. In addition, the researcher surveyed one classroom with the instructor's permission.

### **Procedure**

The researcher conducted online and in person surveys. In order to conduct the online survey, the researcher used Survey Monkey which allowed data to be collected anonymously from the participants. For in-person surveys, the researcher supplied all participants with a copy of the survey. In addition, the researcher required all in-person participants and online participants to either sign the consent forms in person or agree to an online version of the consent form. In order to keep all information anonymous, the online survey required no identifying information. The researcher included an optional form for the participants to provide their email to win one of five gift cards, but this form was not attached to the participants' answers in order to conceal their identities.

### **Design**

The survey was designed to determine college students' perceptions towards instructors with foreign accents and to determine if those perceptions affected the students' behavior in class. The survey consisted of 10 questions.

## Survey Questions

1. Have you ever had a professor who spoke with a foreign accent? If so, how many?
2. Have you ever had trouble comprehending a professor's lecture who had a foreign accent?
3. Have you ever found yourself adapting to the professor's accent after multiple classes?
4. Do you find that you pay less attention to lectures given by professors who have foreign accents?
5. Do you ask more questions in classes where the professor has a foreign accent?
6. Do you go to the office hours of professors with foreign accents more than professors who have a Standard American English accent?
7. Do you find yourself skipping classes with a professor who has a foreign accent more than classes with a professor who speaks with a Standard American English accent?
8. Have you ever dropped a class because the professor had a foreign accent?
9. Do you believe that professors with foreign accents are less intelligent than professors with a Standard American English accent? Explain your answer.
10. Do you believe that professors with foreign accents are as effective as professors with Standard American English accents? Explain your answer.

## **Variables**

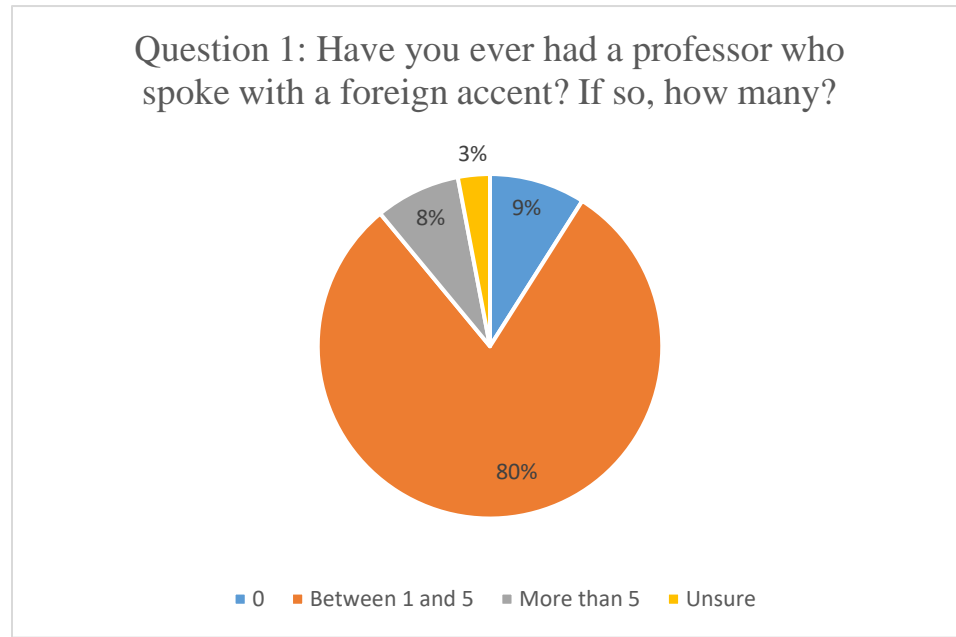
The independent variable was the students' perceptions of instructors with foreign accents. The dependent variable was students' behaviors in classes where the instructor had a foreign accent.

## **Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, the researcher examined the results both quantitatively and qualitatively. The researcher quantitatively analyzed the data by calculating the percentages for each question. The researcher qualitatively analyzed the last two questions in which the participants were instructed to explain their answers. After analyzing all questions, the researcher attempted to discover if there was any correlation between how students think about instructors who speak with foreign accents and how students conduct themselves in the classroom.

## CHAPTER IV: Results

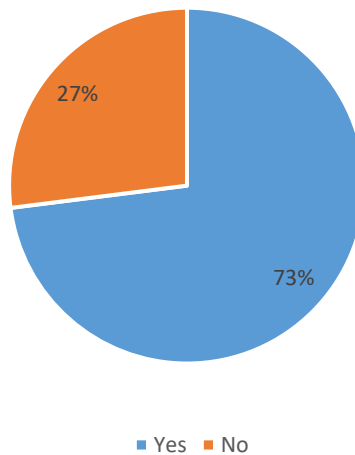
### Quantitative Analysis



**Table 1**

The first question revealed that 80% of the participants have had between one to five classes with an instructor who spoke with a foreign accent. Following that, 9% of participants did not have any experience, 8% had more than five classes with an instructor who spoke with a foreign accent, and 3% were unsure of the number of classes they had taken.

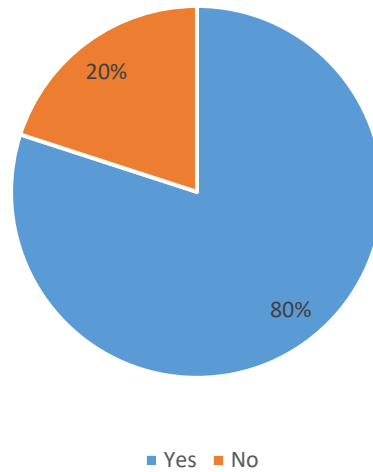
Question 2: Have you ever had trouble comprehending a professor's lecture who had a foreign accent?



**Table 2**

The second question revealed that 73% of the participants have had trouble comprehending the lectures of instructors who spoke with a foreign accent, while 27% have not.

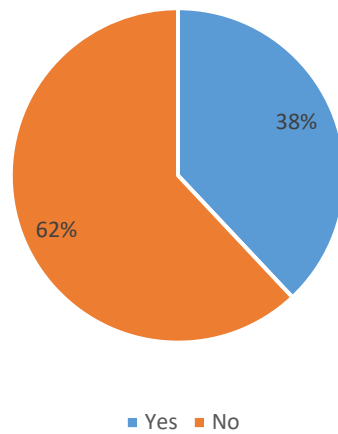
Question 3: Have you ever found yourself adapting to the professor's accent after multiple classes?



**Table 3**

The third question revealed that 80% of the participants adapted to the instructors' accents, but 20% of the participants did not.

Question 4: Do you find that you pay less attention to lectures given by professors who have foreign accents?

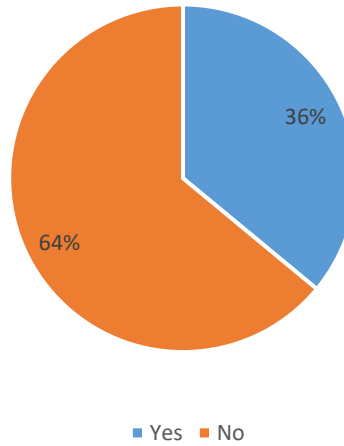


**Table 4**

The fourth question revealed that 62% of the participants did not pay less attention to the lectures of instructors who spoke with foreign accents, while 38% did pay less attention.



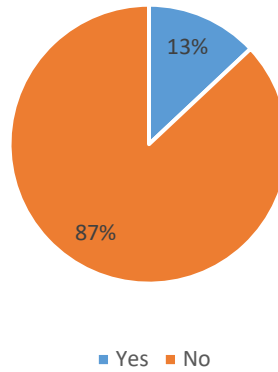
Question 5: Do you ask more questions in classes where the professor has a foreign accent?



**Table 5**

The fifth question revealed that 64% of the participants did not ask more questions in the classes of instructors who spoke with foreign accents, while 36% did.

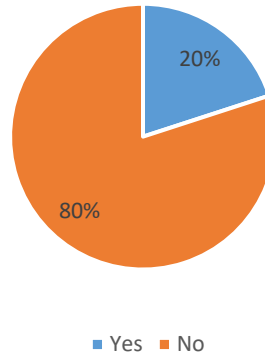
Question 6: Do you go to the office hours of professors with foreign accents more than professors who have a Standard American English accent?



**Table 6**

The sixth question revealed that 87% of the participants did not go to the office hours of instructors who spoke with foreign accents more than instructors who spoke with a MAE accent, while 13% did go more often.

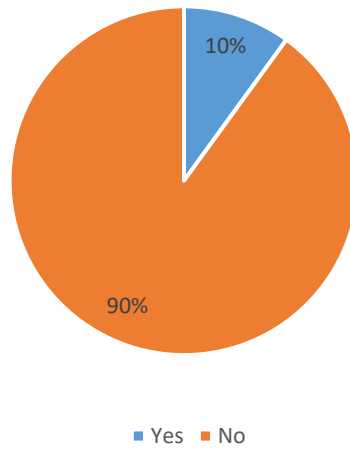
Question 7: Do you find yourself skipping classes with a professor who has a foreign accent more than classes with a professor who speaks with a Standard American English accent?



**Table 7**

The seventh question revealed that 80% of the participants did not skip the classes of instructors who spoke with foreign accents more than the classes of instructors who spoke with MAE accents, while 20% of participants did skip classes more frequently.

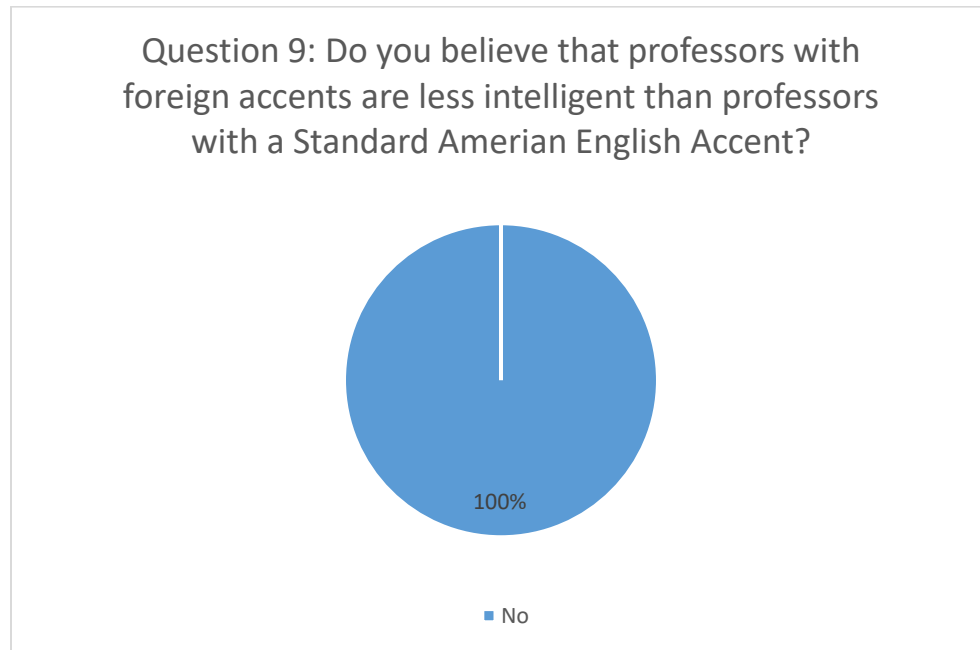
Question 8: Have you ever dropped a class because the professor had a foreign accent?



**Table 8**

The eighth question revealed that 90% of the participants have never dropped a class because the instructor spoke with a foreign accent, but 10% of the participants did.

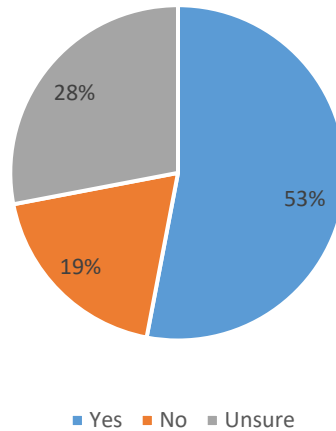
## Qualitative Analysis



**Table 9**

In question nine, the participants were instructed to explain their answers. Even though all participants answered, “No” to this question, they provided a few different explanations. For example, some participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were more likely to be more intelligent than instructors who spoke with an MAE accent since they were teaching in their second language. Similarly, some participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were equally intelligent as instructors who spoke with an MAE accent because they earned their degree and they have to be held to the same standards as any other instructor. Meanwhile, some participants believed that there was no correlation between accents and intelligence.

Question 10: Do you believe that professors with foreign accents are as effective as professors with Standard American English accents?



**Table 10**

In question 10, the participants were instructed to explain their answers. Fifty-three percent of the participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were as effective as instructors who spoke with MAE accents. Some participants believed that instructors' effectiveness depended primarily on their skill and was not related to their accent. Other participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents and used aids, such as slowing down or writing on the board, were just as effective as instructors with MAE accents. Similarly, some participants believed that the effectiveness of instructors who spoke with foreign accents depended on whether they engaged their students in the lecture. Other participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were just as effective as instructors who spoke with MAE accents once students adapted to the instructors' accents.

Nineteen percent of the participants did not believe that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were as effective as instructors who spoke with MAE accents. Most of the participants in this category answered, “No” because it was harder for them to comprehend the lectures of instructors who spoke with a foreign accent. As a result, they stopped paying attention to the lectures. In addition, some participants believed that classes with instructors who spoke with a foreign accent required them to teach themselves. Other participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were ineffective because students did not make an effort to understand them.

Twenty-eight percent of the participants were undecided. Some of the participants have had positive and negative experiences in classes of instructors who spoke with foreign accents. Other participants recognized that even though they eventually adapted to the instructors’ accents, it took a long time to understand their lectures as compared to the lectures of instructors who spoke with MAE accents. In addition, some participants believed that students who had problems comprehending the lectures of instructors who spoke with foreign accents were either motivated to study more or to give up completely.

## CHAPTER V: Discussion and Conclusion

### Discussion

The researcher created ten questions designed to determine the students' perceptions toward instructors who spoke with foreign accents and how those perceptions influenced the students' behaviors in class. The last two questions were specifically focused on discovering the students' perceptions toward instructors who spoke with foreign accents. Question 10 revealed that none of the participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were less intelligent than instructors who spoke with MAE accents. This is important to the field of Speech-Language Pathology because the researcher found that even though the participants had trouble understanding instructors who spoke with foreign accents, they did not believe that those instructors were unqualified to teach. Similarly, Question 11 revealed that most of the participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were as effective as instructors who spoke with with MAE accents. The primary reason some participants believed that instructors who spoke with foreign accents were not as effective as instructors who spoke with MAE accents was related to the students' inability to comprehend the lectures. This finding was important because while comprehension can be an obstacle to learning, there are ways that an instructor can compensate for it. For example, one of the participants mentioned that some of the instructors knew that students might have problems understanding their lectures, but they compensated for that problem by ensuring that all students understood the information before they moved to the next topic. In addition, these instructors used visual aids, such as PowerPoints and writing on the board to supplement their lectures.



Since 73% of the participants revealed that they had trouble comprehending the lectures of instructors who spoke with foreign accents, the researcher wanted to determine if this affected the participants' behaviors in class. Questions four through eight were written to answer this question. Although many of the participants had issues understanding the lectures of instructors who spoke with foreign accents, only 38% of the participants paid less attention to those lectures. This could be because in Question 3, 80% of the participants answered that they adapted to the instructor's accent after exposure to it. Adding to that, in Question 7, only 20% of the participants skipped classes with instructors who spoke with a foreign accent, and in Question 8, only 10% of the participants dropped a course because the instructor spoke with a foreign accent. Questions 4 and 5 aimed to discover if the participants either asked more questions or went to the instructors' office hours more frequently as compared to instructors who spoke with MAE accents, but only 36% of participants asked more questions, and a mere 13% of participants went to the instructors' office hours more frequently.

### **Study Limitations**

One of the study limitations had to do with the delicate nature of the topic. While the researcher informed all participants that the study results were anonymous, the results may be illegitimate because some participants were reluctant to admit that they discriminate against others due to their accents. So, in future research, the questions could be designed better to reveal the participants' actual perceptions. For example, there could be a larger qualitative survey created in which the participants would have to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with certain statements on a rating scale. In addition, the researcher should have designed the first question to limit the participants of the

survey to only those who have had experience with instructors who spoke with foreign accents. Finally, the researcher should have excluded students who did not speak English as their native language because their participation may have skewed the study results.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to discover any positive or negative beliefs that students may have toward instructors who speak with foreign accents and how those beliefs can influence the students' behaviors in the classroom. The researcher determined that although most participants had issues comprehending the lectures of instructors with foreign accents, this did not cause them to believe that those instructors were less intelligent than native born instructors. Adding to that, most of the participants did not believe that instructors with foreign accents were less effective than instructors with MAE accents. The issues with language comprehension did not cause most participants to pay less attention in class, skip class, or drop the class of an instructor who spoke with a foreign accent.

This study is important to the field of Speech-Language Pathology because it provides evidence to help ease the fears of clients who may be afraid that they are viewed negatively at work due to their accents. In addition, it revealed that by supplementing a lecture with visual aids like PowerPoint, writing on the board, or making certain that students understand a topic before moving on to the next one, instructors who speak with a foreign accent can improve their effectiveness when giving a lecture.

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of  
Research Integrity



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### NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-19-208

PROJECT TITLE: College Student's Perceptions of Instructors whose Primary Language is not English

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Speech & Hearing Sciences

RESEARCHER(S): Takiyah Clay, mary schaub

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: July 2, 2019 to July 1, 2020

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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