



## Using Ideologically Loaded Concepts as a Tool for Reversing Folk-Notions of Linguistic & Cultural Diversity

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### Abstract

Many American students training to be ESL teachers learn teaching strategies as well as English language skills needed to develop second language learners' competency in English. However, rarely do they learn how to examine their own language and sociocultural ideologies when it comes to teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students (Metz, 2018). Therefore, this study explores the knowledge, affective responses, and perceptions that Midwestern American students training to be ESL teachers may demonstrate regarding language variation in the U.S. especially their interpretations of ideologically-loaded concepts such as Standard English, accent, and dialect. It also examines the implications of making these ideologies visible on their future teaching practices. Using a qualitative analysis of responses collected via pre and post course questionnaires from 27 students in a Linguistics class, the results show that while their descriptions of the linguistic concepts under question were once informed by misconceptions and dominant language ideologies, explicit instruction on these misconceptions increased students' awareness of and tolerance to linguistic diversity. Moreover, their early reports regarding insecurity and anxiety to hear foreign accents/dialects turned into curiosity and tolerance. Overall, our findings suggest that pedagogical practices challenging folk-notions of linguistic diversity are beneficial to students training as ESL teachers.

**Keywords:** Accent, Dialect, Diversity, Folk Linguistics, Language Ideology, Language variation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Studying language variation does not only focus on the linguistic features that underlie such variation, but also the ways language users and interlocutors understand and react to such variation. Woolard et al. (1998, p.4) write that individuals situate themselves in relationship to others; "the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others are all embedded in language". Language variation can be observed across many domains such as spoken, written and online domains. Since these domains are populated with individuals and speech communities that hold certain perceptions towards their own language varieties as well as the varieties spoken by others, it is essential to understand and examine the nature of such perceptions and the consequences that entail their presence in certain societies.

Sociolinguistic research on perceptions regarding language difference argues that evaluations of linguistic variation are devoid from linguistic evidence and are mostly filtered through people's attitudes and perceptions regarding certain speech communities (Preston, 1999; Purnell et. al. 1999). Since these perceptions/attitudes are not interpreted via linguistic means, Preston (2004) calls them folk notions. In folk Linguistics, Preston (2004, p.40) argues that language attitudes are entangled with people's perceptions of the groups that speak such varieties. He states that "attitudes towards languages and their varieties seem to be tied to attitudes towards groups of people" (Preston 2004, p.40). Therefore, this study examines the nature of perceptions that students training to be ESL teachers might have regarding certain ideologically-loaded concepts and the implications of these perceptions on their future teaching of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Moreover, since any educational space is not free of emotionally-informed responses and behaviors, this study sheds light on students' affective responses to foreign dialects as they may predict their future practices as ESL teachers.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Language Attitudes/Perceptions

Societies use languages not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool for indexing memberships within these societies. While such indexicality is a normal feature of many human communities, at times, it feeds the formation of some negative perceptions regarding who does not belong? Addressing these perceptions becomes a pressing endeavor especially when they jeopardize others' rights to education. Therefore, in diverse societies where



immigrants and minority speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds reside, it is important to examine how their linguistic and cultural repertoires are viewed by the host society's members. Tracking the onset of attitudes' development has been controversial among researchers. Research suggests that preferences for familiar languages emerge remarkably early in life (Mehler et al. 1988). It was found out that infants are able to recognize familiar dialects by the age of five month e (Nazzi, Jusczyk, & Johnson, 2000) and they look longer at the person who speaks a similar dialect (Kinzel et al., 2007). Giles & Billings (2004) and Giles et al. (1974) believe that in the absence of linguistic knowledge and familiarity with someone else's culture and language, some accents and/or dialects sound pleasing to the ears to the listener.

Wolfram and colleagues (1999, p.28) mention that "language attitudes are generally shared by the members of a speech community, leading to a common evaluation of certain language patterns and the people who use them". Therefore, the literature suggests that the relationship between understanding language difference and language assessment is far from being straightforward. For example, in a study that examined high schoolers' beliefs about language variation in San Francisco, Metz (2018) found that parents' ideologies shape students' perceptions regarding not only their own varieties but also those of their interlocutors. Hence, if parents believe that their children must learn the Standard variety of English, then their children will most likely hold similar ideologies and act accordingly (Metz 2018).

While Metz (2018) study showed the implications of parental ideologies on shaping their children's linguistic perceptions, Vakili (2019) takes an individualized stance where his personal experience with his cousin - one who has gained better English competence than the author- we get insights into the impacts of emotional perceptions on shaping one's decisions towards language. Using a narrative approach to analyzing his own language perceptions and their role in his acquisition of English, Vakili states that "due to a sense of jealousy and competition I had for him, I decided to learn English" (2019, p.120). This report shows that people's perceptions of their status compared to others may be reduced via learning language. Therefore, language was a means to gaining privilege and hence the study of perceptions and their implications for social interactions within and outside the classroom domain are essential especially to ESL teachers. This also suggests that any study of language perceptions should not focus on linguistic evidence alone but should also consider other sociocultural and affective factors that are embedded within such perceptions. This line of research was first established by Preston (1989) in what he termed as Perceptual Dialectology (PD).

## 2.2. Perceptual Dialectology and Dialect Mapping

Perceptual Dialectology (PD) examines how non linguists (folks) perceive language and linguistic variations. It examines how folks' perceptions of language difference engage sociocultural and other factors in constructing their mental maps of language varieties (Preston, 2004). Preston (1989) was a pioneer in adopting empirical approaches towards the examination of language attitudes and perceptions using Dialect Mapping. Dialect mapping has traditionally been based on production data while perceptions of and attitudes toward language varieties should also be taken into consideration. In their discussion of four linguistic experiments used to detect speech-informed discrimination, Purnell and colleagues (1999, p.11) found that "(a) dialect-based discrimination takes place, (b) ethnic group affiliation is recoverable from speech, (c) very little speech is needed to discriminate between dialects, and (d) some phonetics correlates or markers of dialects are recoverable from a very small amount of speech". This suggests that as people engage in conversations, they also engage in a process of evaluation and assessment of not only what they hear but also who the person they hear it from might be according to their mental and perceptual stratifications. This means any examination of folk attitudes "resides at the core of interaction analysis" (Giles and Billings, 2004). Since teachers and students are participants in classroom interactions, then current teachers and students training as future teachers should consider the perceptions-linguistic, cultural, social, etc.- they have regarding the types of students they might work with. This pre-consideration and understanding might increase their awareness regarding linguistic and cultural diversity (Metz, 2018) and help them adopt pedagogical approaches that ensure a full integration of diverse students into their classrooms. Moreover, while there is an array of research on attitudes towards language variation in various domains, studies that do similar investigations within a classroom domain populated by future ESL teachers are still limited.

Examining future ESL teachers' perceptions towards linguistic and cultural variation in the U.S. is essential to not only to their development as teachers, but also to the development of their students' identities. Perceptions might create linguistic divisions that place some speakers in a lower position than that of the speaker and hence may entail



linguistic discrimination (Purnell et. al., 1999).

Some sociolinguists (such as Mase, 1964; Lance, 1999) show that folks (non-linguists) attempt to draw some dialect boundaries in the region/area in which they reside based on their own perceptions of dialect, while others (e.g. Preston, 1989; Inoue, 1996, Lance, 1999) indicate that factors such as political power, civil differences, economical, and educational situations are influential in determining these boundaries. Similarly, Yule (2017, p.284) believes that dialect mapping is a useful method to draw boundaries and establish broad views of regional dialects. This perceptual linguistic division is not only about linguistic differences but also the separation of identities as insiders/outside. Where the insiders speak a more favorable/correct form of English and those outside it speak the least correct forms. In other words, it allows and conditions membership within a specific geographical location where language is the pass to enrollment. Cramer (2011, p.38) believes that regional identity is one of the topics which hasn't been studied enough in the United States. This field needs to be studied more in order to increase people's awareness about linguistic diversity and language variation and also gives ESL/EFL teachers some insights about designing their courses to increase their students' awareness about linguistic diversity and language variation. It is also essential for teachers of English as a second language in the U.S. given the dominance of using a standard form of English as the norm in these classrooms.

## 2.3 Dialectology and the American Identity

The absence of an official language in the United States does not mean that people do not use language as a marker of their American identity. In 1920, Americans wanted to establish their own identity; and Webster's spelling dictionary was used as a tool to differentiate between Americans' use of English and the British use of English (Smith & Kim, 2018). Moreover, emphasizing pronunciation differences was another marker of establishing the American identity such as pronouncing the postvocalic [r] (Smith & Kim, 2018). This pronunciation was marked as the pronunciation of the majority as Bonfiglio (2002, p.2) describes it as "the standard was simply the pronunciation of the majority". For historical reasons, "the period of standardization of American pronunciation coincided with the growth of radio, and these developments also occurred during and in the aftermath of 12 million immigrants through Ellis Island, New York (1892-1924)" (Bonfiglio, 2002, p.2). This tool helped the spread of new perceptions regarding standard English in the newly independent nation of America. Therefore, on the social level, TV and the radio were used as tools for depicting favorable cultural and linguistic models (Giles and Billings, 2004). Nowadays, the introduction of the internet and the vast venues of online communications among people have created additional tools for language and perceptual contacts. Thus, one should be analytical of the types of input transmitted via these different tools and domains as well as to its impact on shaping perceptions and practices.

One of the most common ideologies that researchers observed regarding linguistic homogeneity is what Lippi-Green (2012, p.57) observed where "non-linguists are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, so much so that the average person is very willing to describe and define it". Similarly, Bonfiglio (2002, p.5) argues that "it was the prejudices of non-linguists that created the idea of standard American pronunciation". These notions led sociolinguists (e.g. Lippi-Green, 2012; Baugh et. al., 2000; Preston, 1989, 1999) to examine the consequences of these linguistic prejudices on people who speak minority varieties such as African American English; and to challenge perceptions of linguistic homogeneity and the ideologies surrounding the presence of one standard variety as the norm of spoken English.

## 2.4. Standard American English

Ideologies regarding the adoption of a certain language code do not only prevail in public discourse and public domains but may be transferred to classroom domains. Some language teachers may hold the perception that teaching Standard English is the best way to develop learners' competence in English; but what is Standard English? Many dictionaries have offered definitions of Standard English in terms of its source, appropriateness, as well as its being the norm against which other language varieties should be measured. For example, MacMillan English Dictionary defines Standard English as "a language generally used or accepted as normal" (Rundell & Fox, 2002). Similarly, the presence of an accepted/approved language form is mentioned on Dictionary.com which describes Standard English as "an approved mode" of language. Merriam-Webster's dictionary (2009) as quoted by Lippi-Green (2012, p.57) states that standard English is "the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever



English is spoken and understood". While such a definition might show that there is a room for admitting regional variations, it is "it is quite definite about the social construction of the hypothetical standard: it is the language of the educated" (*Ibid*). Therefore, according to Lippi-Green's (2012) criticism of Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the idea of Standard English is not only perceived as a tool for education but as coming from educated folks. Perceiving educated people as the source of Standard English limits the opportunities of other varieties of American English to be accepted as legitimate varieties and hence speakers of these varieties may be pressured to lose their ways of using language.

Unlike the dictionaries' definitions of Standard English, Jespersen (1925) looks at standard language as "regionally neutral". Trudgill and Chambers (1980) and Milroy (1987) argue that all speakers speak at least one dialect, and that Standard English is as much a dialect as any other form of English. They also add that some might not have any other variety than Standard English, while others might have their own regional dialect. Crystal (1995) and Trudgill (1999) argue that Standard English is not a matter of spoken English or the pronunciation features and thus it is not tied to accent, rather Standard English should be looked at as a matter of written English. Crystal's (1991, p.286) dictionary of linguistics and phonetics used various approaches and referred to it as a "prestige variety" that cuts across regional differences and provides a "unified means of communication" and an "institutionalized norm". Yule (2017, p.280) believes that "Standard language" is an idealized variety of language because it has no region. Hence, what is common across these definitions is the presence of some type of ideology(ies) that is tied to how languages, language varieties, and language features (i.e. accent, dialect) may involve judgements, linguistic and/or otherwise.

## 2.5. Linguistic Profiling, Accent, and Dialect

Perceptions regarding a dominant form of language are prevalent on other levels of language description such as people's evaluations of what constitutes accents and what they perceive as dialect or language variety. Since these concepts originally emerged through folk notions of listening to certain speech that does not sound similar to their own language varieties, many linguists describe these terms as fluid and always changing. This act of making judgements is called linguistic profiling, a term coined by Baugh (2000, p.363), and defined as "discrimination based solely upon auditory cues...used to identify an individual as belonging to a linguistic subgroup...or racial subgroup". In fact, these judgements are not solely based on linguistic features, but they imply other group features such as race, social status, class, among other traits. Nevertheless, they are most often highlighted on people's evaluations of others' speech/pronunciation. These perceptions shape their beliefs about the speakers of other languages or dialects. A study by Wortham (2008) showed that ideologies about the dominant language root from what ordinary people assert about their own language. They describe the speakers of other varieties of English as lazy, uneducated and intellectually and morally deficient.

Linguistic concepts such as accent and dialect are the two main components of this linguistic profiling. Baugh (2005, pp.155-156) differentiates between accents and dialects and writes that "accents vary substantially in terms of prosody, phonetics, and phonology, while distinctive dialects exhibit unique grammatical properties that are shared by other speakers of the same dialect, but which may be unfamiliar to, unused by, or unknown to speakers of other dialects of the same language". Additionally, Lippi-Green (2012, p.44) believes that "accent has no technical or specific meaning. It is widely used by the public, however, in interesting ways". She adds that "more generally, *accent* is a loose reference to a specific way of speaking" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p.44). Yule (2017, p.280) indicates that everyone has an accent whether they think they speak a standard variety of their language or not. In his point of view, "the term 'accent' is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that identify where an individual speaker is from regionally and socially". As Matsuda (1991, p.1329) puts it "your accent carries the story of who you are – who first held you and talked to you ... where you have lived ... the language you know, your ethnicity ... your class position: traces of your life and identity are woven into your pronunciation". Thus, accents are a way of inclusion in a particular group with certain advantages or exclusion and disadvantages. Accents are also heavily laden with social information. They can tell us where a speaker is from, their social class, social identity, and whether they are native or non-native to one specific region. While accents are confined to the spoken domain, dialects are realized in a broader and more inclusive way. In the meantime, *General American* is considered an accent which is spoken by a large number of Americans who do not have a recognizably local accent (Brown, 1991, p.34). However, some scholars have shed doubts over this claim and questioned its validity (Preston, 2005). They maintain that it is almost impossible to believe some accent-less native speakers. In a study, where American adults from diverse geographic origins were asked to draw a map of linguistic variation in the United States, they draw



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

**ISSN: 2456-8104**

**Vol. 5 | Issue 25 | May 2021**

**Impact Factor: 4.928 (SJIF)**

[www.jrspelt.com](http://www.jrspelt.com)

remarkably similar, stratified maps of accent variation, with the “South” as the most consistently drawn area. In choosing states where people speak either “correctly” or “incorrectly”, adults from the Northern United States (e.g., Michigan) reliably rank the South as an area in which people speak the “worst English” (Preston, 1993, 1998). Adults from the Southern United States (e.g., Mississippi) show a similar, though attenuated pattern of responses. Southerners rate their own region as relatively low in correctness, revealing what is termed “linguistic insecurity” (Labov, 2006; Preston, 1999), but they also rate speech from the South as high in pleasantness (Preston, 1998). Though these stereotypes have potential consequences for employment and self-evaluation in the US (Lippi-Green, 1997), the developmental trajectory by which accent attitudes are acquired is unclear, and it is unknown whether these attitudes emerge similarly or differentially among children living in the Northern and Southern areas of the United States. The important issue is that finding ways to help teachers of ESL to increase not only their awareness of the unique linguistic performance of diverse students but also help other students develop tolerance and familiarity towards listening to accented speech.

Yule (2017, p.280) defines dialect in terms of “features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation”. In fact, dialects include variations in grammar, morphology, vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation. This means that, sometimes, accents might be perceived as embedded in dialects. Yule adds that geographical location, social class and educational backgrounds or occupations are the main parameters to affect dialect variations. Wolfram and colleagues (1999, p.28) write that regional lexical differences would not receive judgments as being connected to lack of education or incompetence; “the dialects spoken by members of particular class and ethnic groups are, in fact, subject to stereotypes related to intellectual capability and morality that are equally unjustified”. One explanation is that “the set of attitudes about what is good and what is bad in language usage that children acquire with their native language develops into a set of opinions used to judge people by the way they speak”(Wolfram et. al. 1999, p.28). Wolfram and colleagues (1999) suggest two solutions for dealing with such inequities, one is to eliminate dialect differences which are not a practical solution and the other is to change people’s attitudes towards linguistic variation.

Changing attitudes via instructional means has been reported to be useful in certain linguistic contexts. In a study examining American students’ perceptions and attitudes towards grammar learning and the role of explicit instruction in shifting negative attitudes, Vakili and Mohammed (2020) found that “students have gained some metalinguistic awareness about not only the English grammar, but also the grammar of some other languages”(p,130). Hence, when explicit teaching is carried out as the instructional method, students may show positive attitudes towards grammar and/or linguistic variation. In a study conducted by Hecula (2018) where she used different varieties of American English (i.e., African American English, Chicano English, etc.), she found that linguistic-based instruction had positive effects on developing students’ awareness of how language works, and more importantly increased students’ tolerance to accept differences.

Therefore, one of the goals of this study is to examine the feasibility of changing people’s attitudes regarding linguistic diversity and increasing their awareness of language variation. In general, in this study we examine students’ perceptions regarding certain linguistic concepts and try to investigate the relationships, if any, existing between their perceptions and their future teaching practices with ESL students.

1. What perceptions/views are encoded in students' interpretations/definitions of certain ideologically-loaded linguistic concepts?
2. What reactions do students have regarding exposure to foreign dialects and what implications do these reactions have on their future teaching of linguistically and culturally diverse students?
3. What role(s) does teaching about linguistic variation play in changing/maintaining students' perceptions about linguistic diversity and language variation?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Participants

Twenty seven undergraduate students participated in this students training as ESL teachers. The educational background of these participants shows that none of them had any previous training in Linguistics. Hence, they were required to enroll in an introduction to linguistics class as part of their ESL endorsement.



## 3.2 Instruments

Pre and post course questionnaires were used to compare students' views regarding certain linguistic concepts and attitudes before and after learning about these concepts/issues from a linguistic perspective. The questionnaires consisted of ten questions, five of which addressed demographic and educational backgrounds of the participants and the other five tackled the linguistic concepts under study as well as their reactions to hearing foreign dialects. This structure was meant to understand their perceptions and how they translate into their reactions/practices when encountering linguistically and culturally diverse groups.

## 3.3 Procedure

On the first day of class and before being introduced to any linguistic input from the course, students filled a consent form and then they were given the pre course questionnaire. On the last day of class, students were asked to complete a post course questionnaire, which had the same questions they answered at the beginning of the course. Their responses were transcribed and coded. Then, qualitative analysis was adopted to highlight thematic patterns that will be reported in the results section.

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## 4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Students' Perceptions Regarding Accent

From a descriptive linguistic standpoint, accent is a fluid term that linguists treat as an identity marker. However, in folk notions, accent is mostly perceived as a stigmatizing feature. It is used comparatively to the dominant way of speaking a certain language/variety. Within such a comparative framework, the deviation of the speech of a minority/foreign speaker from the variety spoken by a majority group speaker may suggest the presence of accent. Furthermore, perceptions regarding accented speech may correlate with discourse regarding membership in certain groups. To further examine accent-based perceptions empirically, we asked students training to be ESL teachers to describe and define such a term. Before providing them with any linguistic knowledge, our pre questionnaire results show that most students perceived accent as located in speech and especially that produced by foreigners and minority speakers. While perceiving accent in terms of spoken codes does not completely contradict with the definitions of accent, we addressed in the literature review, it still conveys a set of misconceptions that places some speakers of minority languages/variety at a disadvantaged position. In this set of examples from the participants' responses, we observe that the perception of understanding accent as something external to oneself, something that is projected onto others, and something that is strongly connected to being foreign or speaking English as a foreign language are reported frequently by the students.

Examples 1-5 illustrate this perception:

- (1) The changes in a person's pronunciation of certain words. My Hispanic friend would pronounce "three" as "tree" because of the way she uses her tongue to speak.
- (2) Accent is the way a person sounds when they speak a language that is not their first language.
- (3) A way of speaking a secondary language as influenced by your primary language. Ex. Spaniards couldn't say my friend's name "Nathaniel" because they couldn't produce the "th" sound well.
- (4) A difference in the pronunciation of words. Ex: My English teacher that had a Polish accent in high school.
- (5) Accent is the way a foreign language is spoken by non-native speakers.

In this set of examples, we are introduced to two sets of information. The first one provides insights regarding students' perceptions and the second one describes students' limited venues of exposure to linguistic variation in the U.S. Regarding students' perceptions, we observe that using racial features such as, 'Hispanic', 'Spaniards', and 'Polish' and foreign-based descriptions such as 'first /second/ foreign language', and 'non-native speakers' suggest that individuals with such ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are performers of accented speech. These perceptions are problematic as they encode certain linguistic judgements that stigmatize others in a diverse society such as the U.S. As for exposure to language variations, the results show that students' environments of exposure were limited to formal school settings and informal friends' circles. On one hand, by considering the relationship between



students and teachers in a school setting, we learn that students' perception of their teachers' accented speech may be reported in their teachers' evaluations as something that hindered the learning process. On the other, it may be used as a positive factor that helped them appreciate linguistic diversity. Therefore, further empirical research is needed to examine the implications of such linguistic perceptions on teacher-student relationships.

Regarding the friends' circle exposure environment, example 3 conveys the message that the participant's Spanish friend was perceived as incapable of pronouncing the /θ/or [θ] sound to match with the pronunciation of the participant. Such comparative perception also passes judgement regarding their communication flow, which is implicitly described as lacking. This is evident in the use of the word 'couldn't', which suggests a lack of ability. This is further confirmed via the use of the word 'well', which suggests a form of assessment/evaluation is at play in the student's response to this question. Examples 2, 3 and 5 include references to foreign languages as a measure of describing accented speech. This is clarified via the use of phrases such as 'not their first language', 'secondary...primary language', and 'foreign...non-native speakers' respectively. These responses suggest a denial of the presence of accented speech in the linguistic performances of those who speak the same majority language. Therefore, these examples illustrate that some students come to the linguistics classroom not only with limited exposure to linguistic variation but also with language variation encounters in limited settings. They also suggest that students have been misinformed regarding descriptions of accent and their perceptions are mostly built on folk notions that are devoid from linguistic evidence.

However, this does not mean that all the participating students came to class with misinformed notions regarding accents. Examples 6 and 7 provide culture and identity-based perspectives in the participants' descriptions of accent that provide a more inclusive understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity.

**(6) Everyone has an accent based off of the culture they learned to speak in.**

**(7) They are the spices that add flavor to our character.** Unfortunately, they can be perceived as a deficit. I see them as an access to prior knowledge. Accents are culture and English is an evolving entity.

In example 6, the participant provides a more inclusive perception of accent as something that is not limited to certain groups of speakers but as something that everyone might have. It also suggests that accent is more connected to culture than linguistic background. Example 7 considers accent as an identity marker that is favorable. This is evident in their use of the metaphor of 'spices...flavors' which suggests a positive perception. Moreover, while this participant shows a positive personal perception regarding accent, (s)he understands that not everyone may share the same perspective and hence refers to such difference in perception via the use of words such as 'unfortunately...deficit', which show that they appreciate linguistic diversity and feel sad that some people may understand it negatively. The participant also has a clear understanding of the possibility of language change (i.e. evolving) and that there are variations of English and that one static and uniform pronunciation is not absolute. This set of examples show that some students have been better prepared to understand and appreciate linguistic diversity and they do not perceive accent as something negative.

Overall, our pre questionnaire results regarding accent show that some students have been misinformed regarding linguistic diversity and its relation to accent perception. It also suggests that while some students have limited understanding of linguistic concepts such as accent, others have more positive perceptions which can be used in class discussion to help students negotiate their understanding as well as build new and more-linguistically informed ones.

Unlike our pre questionnaire results that showed variations in students' reports regarding their understanding of accent, our post questionnaire results show that when students are given a chance to examine concepts such as accent within a linguistic-based framework, they become better equipped to teach ESL classes populated with diverse learners. Here are some of their responses in the post questionnaire:

**(8) When you pronounce words in different ways/tones. People say that I have a Chicago accent.**

**(9) I would say I have a Midwest accent.**

**(10) Like Green, I think accent focuses on pronunciation of words.**

**(11) An aspect of pronunciation that identifies where a speaker is from. It is a loose reference to a specific way of speaking.**



Examples 8 and 9 show a change in the respondents' perceptions from perceiving accent as something that is reflected onto others to self-reflection and perceiving accent as something that they have as well. This is important as it suggests an increase in the students' awareness of accent as a feature that is not negative and can be thought of as an identity marker that they can be proud of and tolerant to hearing in others' speech. Examples, 10 and 11 show that some students developed a linguistic understanding of accent. This is evident in their use of the scholars' definitions which were part of their course such as 'Lippi-Green'. Example 10 suggests that the student aligned him/herself with the linguist they studied in providing a definition of accent. Similarly, example 11 shows that the student used the linguistic terminology they have learned in their definition of accent. This is evident in the use of the phrase "loose reference", which suggests that there is no strict and well-rounded way of defining such terms. Overall, our post questionnaire results show that when students are given the right tools to re-learn certain concepts, it will help them become more aware of their own perceptions and become more prepared to tolerate linguistic differences whenever they encounter it.

## 4.2. Students' Perceptions Regarding Dialect

Baugh (2005) relates dialect to grammatical properties shared by the speakers of the same dialect. That includes features of vocabulary, grammar, as well as pronunciation. Given the limited exposure opportunities that the participants had to language variation in the U.S. as described in the previous section, this part shows similar findings. In their responses to describing dialect, the results of the pre questionnaire showed that while many students responded with 'not sure' or 'I don't know', others conflated dialect with accent. This confusion stems from the fact that both dialect and accent share the feature of pronunciation. Therefore, most students defined dialect as something that is limited to the spoken domain as shown in example 12. Similarly, example 13 shows that dialect is realized as a two-way concept between interlocutors and the participants use 'area/culture' as additional features of dialect realization. While these features are important to understanding dialect, the student does not have the linguistic tools to explain his/her understanding fully.

(12) **The way we speak.**

(13) **Using certain words/phrases that are commonly heard+said in a certain area/culture.**

Similar to students' descriptions of accent as something that is perceived in others' linguistic performance, their descriptions of dialect also bring the ideology of non-majority speakers as holders of dialect as shown in example 14 below.

(14) **A form of language not used by the majority.**

(15) **Dialect is like a whole language of slang words.**

In example 15, we see that dialect is used synonymously with "whole language of slang words". This definition is so restrictive on the one hand and so broad on the other. Restrictive in that the student sees dialect as a set of slang words which might be used in one area, region, or even a specific neighborhood. On the other hand, this student has used a very broad definition of a "whole new language" which can indicate that the student might see dialect as a new language which is not perceivable by the people outside that region. Max Weinreich (1945, p.13) states that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy [te<sup>wl</sup> ɻdʐq̯~ψ̯` q̯` tʃfj̯q̯ tɛw<sup>W</sup> fʒdʐq̯?tsfj̯q̯ls̯' q̯? / A shprakhiz a dialect mit an armey un flot]". Hence, it is not completely wrong to equate dialect with a language, but it is problematic to limit it to slang words. Similar to our results across the pre and post questionnaires regarding students' perceptions about accent, the post questionnaire shows a shift of their perceptions of dialect that is shaped by the new knowledge they formed. It also shows that instead of perceiving dialect as something external to the United States or something performed only by foreigners, students learned that dialects can also be realized within monolingual speaker groups. This is evident in their descriptions of dialects which were illustrated by additional examples such as "African American English, Chicano English, Midwestern English, Southern English, among others". Examples 16-18 show this shift.

(16) **Like accent, dialect also deals with pronunciation but also includes different phonological, morphological, and syntactic features than standard English.** Chicano English, AAE, Southern English.

(17) **A form of language that is peculiar to a specific region or social group.** In the Midwest we say 'ope'.

(18) **Aspects of the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation of language variety.**



In example 16, we observe that students expanded their definitions and started employing the linguistic concepts they have learned. We can see that in example 16, dialect has been defined in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of a language variety. This definition is more in line with how Yule (2018), Purnell and colleagues (1999) and other linguists have defined dialect. In addition, example 17 shows that understanding dialects and language variation is extended to include not only linguistic knowledge, but also social and regional features. This is evident in students' self-reflection on their own varieties of English in the use of "ope" used oftentimes in the Midwest instead of oops- to show the dialect difference in the Midwest. The reference to a geographic location in example 17 shows that the student has some understanding of regional variation as a feature of understanding dialect. Finally, example 18 shows the essential features of dialect that students have learned as well. Overall, the use of the linguistic terms shows that when the folks have appropriate training, they will find the suitable vocabulary to transfer their meaning and have a proper definition. In this way, their folk notions shift from being misinformed to being grounded in linguistic description.

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### 4.3. Students' Perceptions Regarding Standard English

In our discussion of how literature addressed Standard English, we found some commonalities that feature this variety as the one connected with the most prestige, used by the educated, and as a variety that depends on dictionaries as a source for their validation (e.g. Lippi-Green, 2012). Others described such a variety as an idealized form that has no native speakers (Yule, 2018). Despite these features, Lippi-Green (2012) mentions that there are some people who might define it as framed by their own nonlinguistic perceptions. To check this claim, we asked students in the pre questionnaire to define and describe what they perceive as Standard English. Their responses reflect many ideologies as those that align with linguistic description of Standard English as the language of the educated, the language that comes from the dictionary, and the language they learn in formal settings. While these responses carry some form of truth to what scholars have described, they exclude language varieties and support privileged views of what language should be. Examples 19-22 show how some of the participating students defined Standard English as the language that has not only a unified source "dictionaries", but also a limited setting of being used such as schools.

- (19) **Speaking each word how it is spelled out in the English standard dictionary.** Knowing how to **write proper sentences. English Standard Dictionary**
- (20) Very **professional** like straight from the **dictionary English.**
- (21) The English we learned **in schools.**
- (22) **Grammatically correct English.**

In example 19, we observe that the use of words such as "proper" and "dictionary" suggest that students evaluate this variety as something that should be free from errors since it comes from a credible source like dictionaries. Furthermore, it suggests that written genres should reflect the ways English is written in dictionaries. This evaluative definition is repeated in example 20 which uses terms such as "professional" to describe such a variety. Despite the perception that dictionaries are credible sources, one should also consider who wrote those dictionaries and what variety was used to register the linguistic items in these dictionaries. In example 21, they limit standard English as a variety that is learned in academic spaces such as schools. This is further emphasized in example 22 when they assess this variety in terms of its correct grammars. All these perceptions that limit the standard as a variety that is used in formal academic settings contradict with how they define it using terms such as "speaking" as in example 19. People do not speak like the dictionary and if they do, it will sound artificial and won't flow naturally. Moreover, while we might observe grammatical correctness in written genres, people will not pay that much attention when they speak English. Examples 23-27 illustrate this contradiction further.

- (23) **What I speak every day.**
- (24) The English that the **majority of English speakers speak.**
- (25) English **understood by all English speakers.**
- (26) **Basic forms** of English that **doesn't involve slang or variations to standard English words.**
- (27) **Proper English with no slang.**



These examples suggest that Standard English is the form of English that people speak. Then, this description is limited to be a property of English speakers only which suggests that unless you are a native speaker of English, the English you speak will not be Standard English. These are problematic perceptions as they move on to claim that unless this variety is free from slang and variation, it won't level up to be called standard or proper. These are further complicated when one of the participants described Standard English as shown in example 28.

(28) **The old English from England** because that is where the “new” forms of English that we **speak** come from.

(29) The English that **my parents and I speak**.

Example 28 conveys the perception that Old English is a form that some perceive as standard and as the source of modern spoken English. While historically speaking, it is true that English has historically developed from the old English but this is not how people get new words or pronounce words in modern times. Example 29 shows a privileged and limiting description that suggests that the participant and his/her family are owners of the standard English (e.g. my parents and I speak). All these perceptions need to be addressed when discussing linguistic variation in modern-day America and especially when the participants are training to be future ESL teachers and educators.

Overall, our pre questionnaire results suggest that students showed a consistent inclination to define the standard English in terms of their own ownership, their education, the one in dictionaries, or a variety that is slang-free. These responses exclude other speakers of stigmatized dialects in the U.S. and claim that the level of education is a criterion for inclusion in the English speakers' group.

Our post questionnaire results propose a promising change in students' perceptions regarding Standard English. When they are exposed to such concepts from a linguistic-based approach, they become better informed to re-examine their own perceptions and eventually change them. Our results show that 17 out of 27 responded that there is no standard and those who used 'I' in the pre questionnaire did never use it again in their responses. Their responses show a change and development in their use of sociolinguistic terminology such as social construct, idealized variety and myth. They also show that students understood that there are stereotypes and misconceptions that surround their understanding of what may be perceived as Standard English. Examples, 30-33 report on this change in perceptions.

(30) **There is no Standard English.**

(31) **I would describe Standard English as a social construct that assumes that there is a standard that is the most proper or correct dialect.**

(32) Is an **idealized variety of English** that has **no speakers**?

(33) There is **no specific American language**. English is ever changing and we have **dictionaries** that act as scaffolds **our navigation** through the broad language.

Examples, 30-33 show an interesting shift in students' perceptions regarding Standard English. This new knowledge is important as it shows that some folk-notions can be reversed. This does not mean that over the course of one semester students were able to completely shift their perceptions, but it shows that reversing misconceptions is possible and essential. There are few students who did not shift their perceptions which does not mean that their perceptions are completely untrue but they are incomplete. Examples 34 and 35 show this.

(34) **Grammar, vocab, pronunciation Standard English is a focus on English syntactic features.**

(35) Standard English is what is **used mainly in the educational system of the U.S. and workplace**.

Overall, our results for the first research question suggest that students come to the linguistic classroom with some prior knowledge which may sometimes facilitate their learning and at other times may hinder their development of new knowledge. Teachers should examine the types of knowledge students bring with them to class and work on helping them to become more aware of such knowledge so that they can make informed decisions on what they need to change, develop, or even relearn. Additionally, explicit instruction of the linguistic concepts under study helped students become more tolerant to linguistic diversity and expand their understanding of linguistic diversity as something that is not limited to bi- or multi-lingual groups but can be extended to monolingual groups as well. This



helped them appreciate the linguistic and cultural diversity present within their own cultural, geographic, social, and other spaces. It should be noted that between the pre and post course questionnaires, students were exposed to a variety of teaching tools, materials, and invited guest minority guest speakers who also contributed to the changes in their perceptions. Our use of the ideologically-loaded concepts helped reveal their misconceptions and motivated students to learn more.

#### **4.4. Students' Perceptions Regarding Exposure to Language Variation in the U.S.**

Affective factors play an integral role in language acquisition (Yule, 2020). Emotional factors do not only facilitate or constitute barriers to learners but sometimes they may affect the teachers as well. That being said, in this section we explored the relation between students' perceptions regarding linguistic variation and minority and foreign languages speakers and their emotional responses. This is important because affective factors may inform teachers' verbal and written feedback when working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. It may also shape their decisions on what teaching methods, language codes, and other pedagogical practices within the classroom. Therefore, our goal was to help students examine their emotional responses to foreign languages and then use these responses as a way to help increase their awareness on the importance of examining and their perceptions before teaching/working with such diverse groups.

The second research question is associated with students' reactions towards hearing a foreign language/dialect. Since the U.S. is a diverse country and the participants of this study are training to be teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse students, it was important to understand their perceptions/reactions to language variation in the U.S. Our pre questionnaire indicates that while most of the students showed some level of interest in and curiosity about foreign languages as illustrated in examples 36 and 37, others felt appalled, uncomfortable, and nervous as shown in examples 38-41.

- (36) I am **intrigued** by people who speak another language.
- (37) I feel curious and **intrigued** by it. I listen closely and observe what I can
- (38) **Uncomfortable**. I feel like they are talking bad about me.
- (39) I get nervous because I don't know what they are saying.
- (40) I kind of panic if they are speaking to me since I can't understand them.
- (41) I almost feel inferior because I am not as in control of the situation.

These feelings of interest and curiosity can indicate that students would like to know the language and the opposite feelings are the results of the unknown. When students are directed and the unknown changes to known, they will change their attitudes towards a new language. In the meantime, we could observe that a small proportion of students indicated that they would search about the new language and they wished that they could understand that foreign language. These responses are definitely promising in that they show students' willingness to learn.

Our post questionnaire results show that a greater number of students were interested in foreign languages and the number of students who felt 'anxious' or 'uncomfortable' with a foreign language slightly decreased. This suggests that when students are introduced to the essence of linguistics, they broaden their perspectives about foreign languages. It was interesting to read that the students, who said they were hurt or had a bad feeling in the pre questionnaire, changed their views about foreign languages. Examples 42-45 show this change.

- (42) I feel curious because I wonder what language they are speaking.
- (43) I will try to hear what they are saying and I will ask them. I am blunt like that.
- (44) I feel intrigued to know what the language is and want to know more about the background of the speaker.
- (45) Sometimes it's uncomfortable because I don't know what they are saying but I also feel understanding because I know sometimes people may feel uncomfortable when I speak a different language.

However, there were a couple of students who hadn't changed their views in the pre and post questionnaires as shown in examples 46 and 47.



(46) **Uncomfortable- don't know what they are saying or need or want or how to help.**

(47) I am always interested but I feel isolated. For this reason, I understand how important it is to be actually responsive.

In the interim, these unchanged responses were expanded to show reasons for their discomfort or feelings of isolation. Their justifications show that they would offer help and be responsive if they were given the knowledge to navigate or comprehend what they have heard. It is a discomfort resulting from feeling helpless. This means that they need more training in linguistics to be able to make connections with other languages as well. Overall, the pre and post questionnaires about students' feelings about foreign languages could prove that at the beginning students didn't have much information about language variation so that they showed some negative feelings or some sense of indifference and/or anxiety. However, the post questionnaire showed that when the folks are trained appropriately, these negative feelings can be replaced by interest and curiosity in that students would love to search about that foreign language and learn more. It increased their tolerance and understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our study focused on understanding the pre existing knowledge that students training to be ESL teachers might have regarding linguistic and cultural diversity in the U.S. Since most of these students could have limited exposure to linguistic knowledge that might inform their perceptions, we used pre and post course questionnaires to examine any potential misconceptions they might have regarding linguistic and cultural diversity. Then, we used our course as a teaching space to increase their awareness about cultural and linguistic diversity and help them understand how to use linguistic knowledge to filter, change, and re-learn some of the most ideologically-loaded concepts such as Standard English, accent, dialect, and reexamine their ideologies regarding language evaluations in the U.S. as framed through the minority-majority perspectives. We also investigated their perceptions regarding their level of exposure to linguistic variation and the emotional reactions that entail such exposure. Our results show that, in the pre course questionnaires, students' perceptions regarding the concepts and ideologies under question were mostly based on folk notions. However, with an intervention-based course, the post questionnaire shows that students became more aware of their own biases and developed a better understanding of the value of linguistic and cultural diversity in the U.S. Moreover, they became more confident in their knowledge and started using their new linguistic knowledge in re-defining the concepts and issues under study. In the meantime, this intervention-based course helped students increase their understanding of differences among themselves and to accept them. We believe that such courses are extremely important in this socio-political condition. The results of this study are beneficial not only to students training as ESL teachers but also to other teachers as they examine the types of knowledge students bring to class and the tools needed to expand, develop, or change such knowledge.

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INTERNATIONAL  
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**ISSN: 2456-8104**

**Vol. 5 | Issue 25 | May 2021**

**Impact Factor: 4.928 (SJIF)**

[www.jrspelt.com](http://www.jrspelt.com)

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