Non-native English Speakers and Nonstandard English: An In-depth Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Given the rising prominence of nonstandard varieties of English around the world (Jenkins 2007), learners of English as a second language are increasingly called on to communicate with speakers of both native and non-native nonstandard English varieties. In many classrooms around the world, however, learners continue to be exposed only to so-called standard varieties of English, leaving them unprepared for real-world encounters with non-standard speakers. This study investigates the ability of five non-native English speakers (NNS) to understand the speakers of one variety of nonstandard English, Southern American English. Following the model of Deterding's (2005) examination of Singaporeans' comprehension of Estuary English, the paper first considers the degree to which high-proficiency NNSs were able to comprehend a Southern dialect and their comments on the speech data. These results are compared to the findings of Deterding (2005) and Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, and Balasubramanian (2005), and possible explanations for the findings are considered. The paper concludes with implications for teaching English listening comprehension, particularly by preparing learners in both ESL and EFL contexts to deal with nonstandard varieties.

Keywords: Nonstandard varieties, dialects listening comprehension, world Englishes, language attitudes

Although ESL and EFL specialists around the world have long acknowledged that many nonstandard native and non-native varieties of English exist, only recently has it become apparent that these varieties could or should find a place in the English language classroom (Jenkins 2000). Students learning English in outer or expanding circle contexts may never need to interact with native speakers of a "standard" accent, and non-native English speakers in ESL settings may interact mainly with other non-native speakers (as in some university departments or