

# Learners' attitudes toward second language dialectal variations and their effects on listening comprehension

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## Abstract

This study aims to find out whether the Southern dialect of American English affects native and NNES' listening comprehension. Additionally, its goal is to discover students' perceptions about speakers of the non-standard dialect. Using prerecorded excerpts from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I asked students a series of listening comprehension and discussion questions in order to determine whether dialectal variation affected their listening comprehension, and what opinions and perceptions they had about speakers of Standard American English and Southern American dialect.

## Introduction

Most listening textbooks and tests are limited to the standard dialects of British or American English and do not represent the range of English dialects students encounter in the U.S., much less the rest of the English speaking areas of the world. And yet, when international students arrive in the U.S., it is impossible for them not to encounter a dialect different from Standard American English. If there are listening comprehension difficulties for students with a new dialect in the target language, there are pedagogical concerns. It is important for teachers to understand the effects of dialect variation on listening comprehension. In this paper, I will focus on the southern American English dialect and explore how it is perceived and comprehended by native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES).

## Dialectal Variation and Listening Comprehension

Unfamiliar dialects are often the source of the majority of comprehension problems. In her study on the factors that influence listening comprehension, Goh (1999) found that “68% of students reported that their comprehension was affected by the speaker’s accent” as well as “features of speech they noticed as being different from the type of ‘standard’ English they were familiar with” (p. 29). She also notes that many students prefer the variety of English they have learned in their EFL classroom—standard American or British English (p. 30). According to Trudgill (as cited in Major et al., 2005), “the notion ‘standard’ may be understood as an accented variety of English that exhibits minimum variation in form, while serving a maximum number of communicative functions” (Major et al., 2005, p. 41). American regional varieties of English, such as the Southern dialect, differ from the standard in a range of features including vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (see below) (Major et al., 2005).

Several studies have found that ESL students understand the standard English varieties better than the nonstandard ones. Einstein and Berkowitz (1981) found that among adult ESL learners, Standard American English was more intelligible than either the New Yorkese accent or foreign accented English (Einstein & Berkowitz, 1981). In a later study, Einstein (1986) found that Standard American English was the most comprehensible compared to New Yorkese and Black English for adult ESL learners from a range of proficiency levels and backgrounds. She concluded, “dialect differences in a second-language



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present problems for learners including variable intelligibility and negative learner attitude towards some varieties and speakers which may crucially affect second-language input” (Einstein, 1986, p. 31). Learner attitudes toward specific dialects were also shown to play a significant role in listening comprehension among adult ESL learners (Einstein & Verdi, 1985). Black English was found to be the least intelligible and in general “learner judgments of the speakers on the tapes in terms of job status, friendliness, and appearance paralleled the relative comprehensibility of the speech samples” (Einstein & Verdi, 1985, p. 287). This research shows that learners not only have different comprehensibility levels with different dialects but also hold different attitudes toward the interlocutors.

### Southern American Dialect

The Southern Dialect of American English can be traced back to people who settled in the area originally. These men and women came from the south and southwest regions of England and brought with them what most refer to as southern twang (Vajda, n.d.). The southern twang or drawl is noticeable in the drawing out of words. There are many linguistic variations that characterize this dialect as being apart from Standard American English (SAE). These include the diphthongization and even triphthongization of short front vowels causing the sound to be drawn out. For example, diphthongization is seen in the pronunciation of *house*. In SAE the pronunciation is [haʊs] whereas in Southern dialect (SD) it becomes [ha:ws]. SAE's *eggs* [ɛgz] becomes [ai:gz]. The triphthongization is seen in *flowers* ['flaʊɜrz] becoming [fla:ierz] in SD. On the other hand, words such as *ride* and *lime* lose their SAE diphthong and become [ɹa:d] and [lɑ:m] (Dialect Guide, 2015).

Additionally, other features distinguish the SD from SAE. The loss of the final [t, d] sounds after a consonant is observed in southern speech. This loss occurs in words such as *and*, *told*, *hand*, and *went*. In SD speech, the words are pronounced without the final consonant resulting in *an*, *tol*, *han*, and *wen* respectively. Stress is also shifted on many words in SD English. The first syllable of words is often stressed, causing a noticeable difference in sound compared to the SAE pronunciation. This is seen in the pronunciation of *insurance*, *guitar*, *July*, and *police* (Dialect Guide, 2015).

The Southern dialect is one of the most recognizable variations for English speakers in the United States (Preston, 1995). Furthermore, according to Preston, the South “was the worst rated area of the country when respondents were asked to rate the fifty states” and “as far as Northerners were concerned, the South was the most dialectally different area of the country” (p. 310). In numerous studies, Preston found that Americans believe people in the South not only speak differently than the rest of the country but also speak the worst. To summarize, Preston (1995) remarked:

These findings and others led me to conclude that the overwhelming folk linguistic concern in such matters was not geographical distribution but the distribution of good and bad language: bad language is Southern, and good language is the white-bread, unmarked stuff of the mythical national newscaster variety, one supposed by the folk to have its origins and provenience somewhere in the upper Midwest. (p. 312)

This overwhelmingly negative perception of the Southern English dialect that other Americans have towards its speakers raises questions about what perceptions NNES may have towards this dialect. Furthermore, since the dialect differs from the Standard American English variety that is taught in the classrooms of many ESL and EFL settings, this study aims to investigate whether or not it has an effect on the language's listening comprehensibility for NNES.

### **Hypotheses**

My hypotheses are: (1) both native and NNES will have more negative perceptions and descriptions of a speaker of Southern dialect compared to a speaker of Standard dialect; and (2) NES and NNES will have more listening comprehension problems when listening to a passage read in Southern dialect compared to one read in Standard dialect, with NNES experiencing more interference with their comprehension. This study aims to find out whether NNES will have greater difficulty comprehending the Southern American English dialect speaker, resulting in a lower overall percentage of correct answers on listening comprehension questions compared to the Standard American English speaker. In contrast, NES will not suffer a listening comprehension deficit. The study also aims to verify whether both NES and NNES will rate the Southern dialect speaker lower in terms of friendliness, education level, appearance, economic level, and ease of listening.

### **Methodology**

#### **Instruments**

The students were asked to fill out a personal questionnaire soliciting information about age, gender, nationality, and any additional regions of the world or United States they had previously lived in or visited where English was spoken. After the participants completed the personal questionnaire, the listening comprehension test was administered. The test consisted of two passages from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. The first passage was chapter one of the book and was read in the Southern American English dialect. This was a pre-recorded audio available at the Department of State's "American English" website (American English, n.d.). The second passage was chapter two read in the Standard American English dialect. Both passages were read by male speakers and were approximately the same length and same readability. Each listening passage had comprehension questions: seven for the first chapter and seven for the second. The entire questionnaires the participants were given can be found in Appendices A, B, and C. The first (Appendix A) asked background questions of the participants. Next (Appendix B) was comprehension questions. All of the questions were short answer questions and required the listeners to identify specific details from the story. Additionally, the questions pinpointed specific words that were pronounced differently between the two dialects. Finally, after the participants answered the comprehension questions, they were asked to fill out a personal opinion survey (Appendix C). The students were given two minutes to read the questions before listening to each passage. Once the students were finished listening and answering the questions, they were asked to give their opinions on each speaker's understandability, friendliness, education level, socio-economic level, and appearance.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were undergraduate and graduate students at a university in the Pacific. Their ages ranged from early 20s to late 30s. There were 20 participants in total: 10 NES and 10 NNES. Both the NNES and NES groups were comprised of students from various countries or states. The NNES group consisted of six females and four male participants while the NES group consisted of seven female and three male participants. Gender was not considered to be a factor in this study. Among the NNES of English, there was a wide range of formal English language education. One participant had only two years of formal training while another had over twenty-six. Two of the NNES of English had been extensively exposed to the Southern dialect. One participant lived in Texas, Alabama, and Louisiana, while the other

lived in Kentucky. Like all of the other participants in their category, both of these speakers still answered that they had trouble understanding speakers whose dialect strayed from the norm of Standard American English. The former even mentioned the Southern dialect directly as a problematic dialect. Five of the ten were from Japan, while the others were from Germany, Thailand, the Philippines, Serbia, and Saudi Arabia. The NES of English represented a variety of states and had all been exposed first-hand to Southern dialect. Both the NES and NNES groups had five speakers that had travelled to other English speaking countries, giving them exposure to other distinct varieties of spoken English.

### Data Collection Procedure

First, the participants filled out the personal questionnaire. Then, the first set of listening comprehension questions was passed out, and participants were given two minutes to read the questions. Next, the first listening passage was played. When finished, the participants had five minutes to respond to the comprehension questions. This procedure was repeated for the second recording. The researcher graded the listening comprehension questions, using an answer key.

## Findings

### Participants' Attitudes

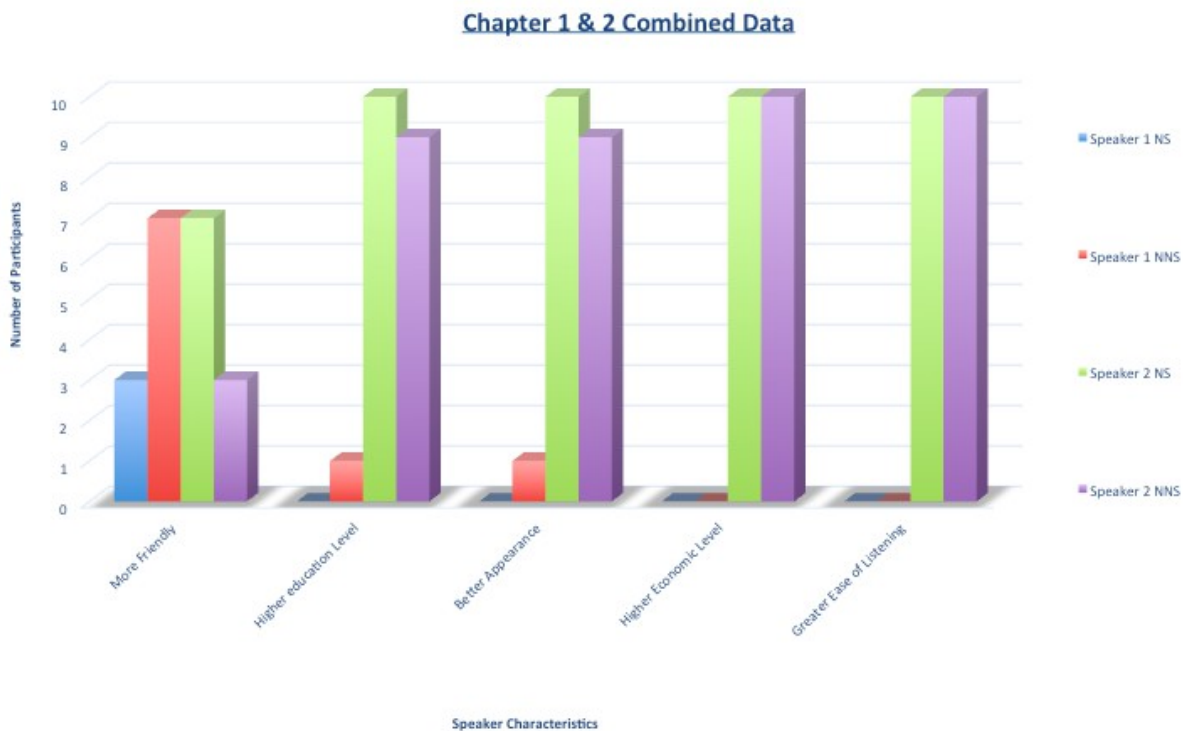


Figure 1. Participants' ratings of speakers based on perceptions of their voices

Figure 1 shows the attitudes of the participants towards both speakers (more detailed results are presented in Appendix D). The hypothesis that both NES and NNES of English will have more negative perceptions and descriptions of a speaker of Southern dialect compared to a speaker of Standard dialect was supported. All participants agreed that Standard American English (SAE) Speaker was easier to understand and was of a higher socio-economic status than Southern Dialect (SD) Speaker. One NNES participant was an outlier in the evaluation of education level and appearance. This participant was the only

one in both groups who rated Speaker 1 as being both more attractive and more educated. This seemed to contradict that the participant chose SAE Speaker as coming from a higher socio-economic background. Perhaps the participant simply made a mistake or perhaps the participant did not equate a better appearance or more education with greater affluence.

Another point of interest was the results from both groups regarding their evaluation of the speakers' friendliness. Seven of the NNES participants and three of the NES participants rated SD Speaker higher. Several participants also commented on their choice stating their reasons as he "seemed more interesting and funny," "more unique and different," and one participant chose SD Speaker but said, "I will not trust him." The result that a majority of the NNES participants wanted to befriend SD Speaker was different from Phillips' (2010) findings among NES: "given only a sound sample of individuals' voices, participants rate Southern accented individuals as (. . .) marginally more friendly than Standard accented individuals" (p. 53). Perhaps the lack of cultural knowledge of these participants resulted in them lacking any negative stereotypes associated with the variety.

### Listening Comprehension

As mentioned above, Chapter 1 was read in the Southern dialect. The NES group answered 97.14% of the questions correctly, while the NNES group answered 34.29% of the questions correctly. Thus, there was a difference of 64.7% between the two groups. The second Chapter, read in Standard American English, received higher scores, as expected. There was only a 46.37% disparity between NES and NNES (98.57% and 52.86% accuracy rate, respectively). As shown in Figures 2 and 3, while the increase was minimal for the NES group, the NNES group performed considerably better on their listening comprehension when the dialect was one they were familiar with, scoring 24 out of 70 points on the first Chapter and increasing to 37 out of 70 points on the second Chapter (more detailed results are presented in Appendix E).

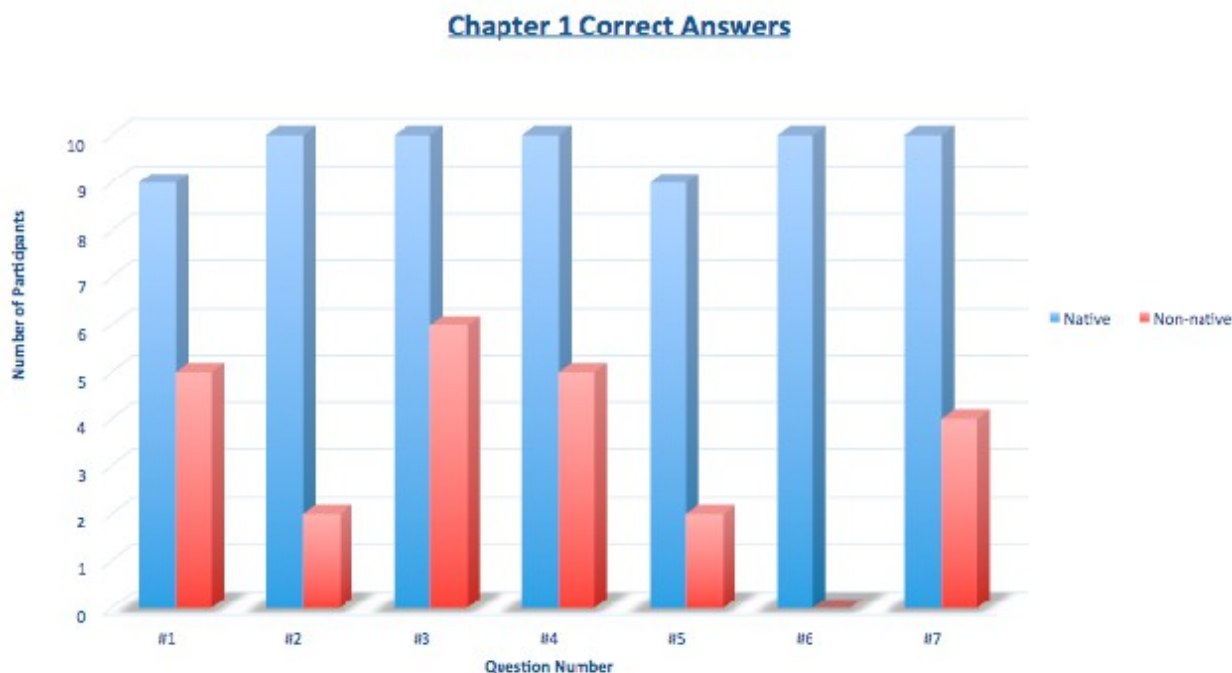


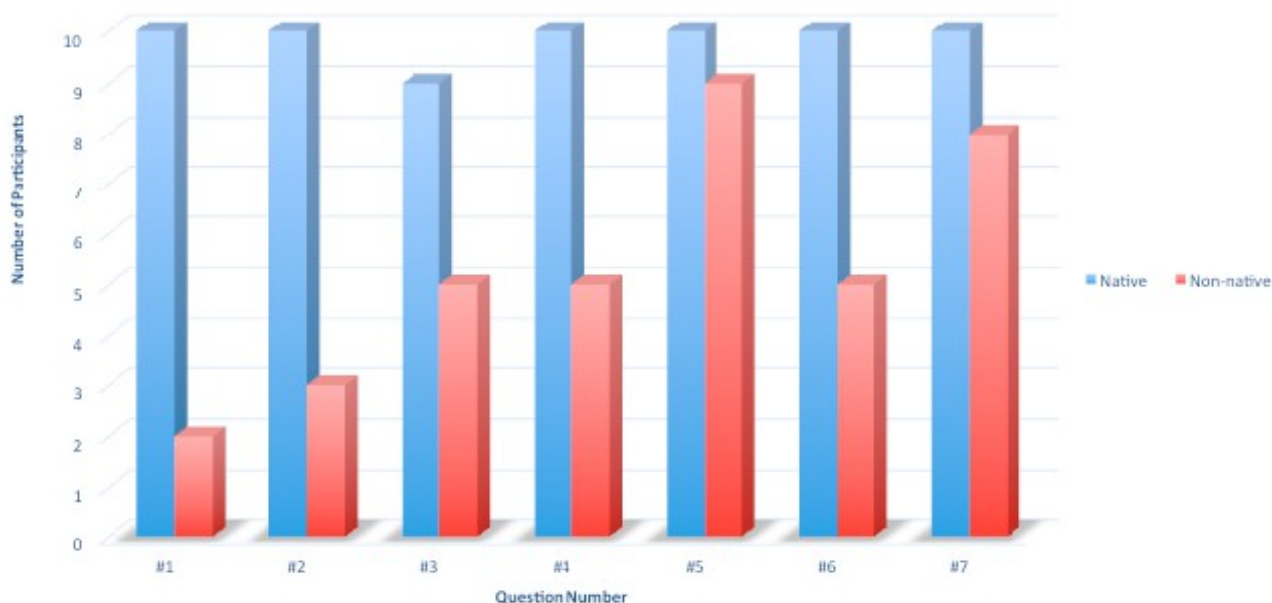
Figure 2. Number of students answering correctly for Chapter 1

The results were in support of the hypothesis that NES and NNES will have more listening comprehension problems when listening to a passage read in Southern dialect compared to one read in

Standard dialect, with the NNES experiencing a higher interference to their comprehension. These findings also correspond with those of Einstein's (1981) that Standard English produces the most comprehensibility.

The highest scorer in the NNES group answered six of the seven questions correctly during both listening passages. This participant was also one of the two who had lived in the American South and had extensive exposure to the dialect variation. This participant had spent nine months studying abroad during undergraduate coursework in Kentucky when she attended college in Japan. The other participant who had previous dialect of exposure had lived in Florida for two years and travelled throughout the Southern coastal states. This participant answered three questions correctly in the first chapter and four in the second, not a significant increase between the two. It is possible that even some exposure to the dialect variation provided these participants with an advantage and aided in listening comprehension.

**Chapter 2 Correct Answers**



Another interesting observation was that years of formal study did not seem to affect the results. None of the participants who had over twenty years of formal English education in an academic setting answered more than two questions correctly in the Southern dialect portion. On the other hand, those with ten years or less training did significantly better on both the Southern and Standard dialect portions. This could be explained by the lack of dialect exposure or due to the fact that these participants were younger, giving them an advantage with language learning. The participants with the most EFL education all stated that they had never been anywhere in the South, and several had not been outside of their home country until coming to the U.S. to study. Therefore, the lack of exposure to any additional English dialects could account for weaker listening comprehension ability when the spoken dialect is non-standard.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study verified the hypotheses and provided further verification of findings found in previous studies. Dialects did indeed have an effect not only on the listeners' attitudes towards a speaker for both NES and NNES audiences, but also on the NNES' ability to comprehend the speaker's message. Overall, both NES and NNES tended to rate a non-standard dialect speaker more negatively than one of the Standard American English dialect. The native speakers in this study were able to answer more listening comprehension questions correctly for the Southern dialect than the NNES; therefore, it was concluded that the dialect affected only the NNESS.

One of the most important limitations of the study was that the NES may have had an advantage over the NNES if they had previously read the story *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This could have given these participants an unfair advantage if they knew the answers to the questions without having to listen to the passages being read. However, every effort was made to ask specific questions about specific details that would not necessarily be recalled to the extent that general plot knowledge or character knowledge would. Also, the participants may have become more familiar with the story after hearing Chapter 1, resulting in better performance as well. There was also the possibility that the questions for Chapter 2 were easier than those for Chapter 1 or that the passage itself was easier. Another limitation was that there were only twenty participants, and if there had been a larger group, perhaps the study would be more valid.

The findings nonetheless suggest that it is important for ESL and EFL teachers to expose their students to multiple dialect variations. In doing so, they are helping set students up for success in the future. English dialect variations are seen throughout the United States, with Southern being one of the most popular and recognizable, as well as throughout the world wherever English is spoken. Additionally, many larger urban centers in the U.S. are culturally and linguistically diverse, with many of its residents speaking multiple languages and dialects of English. The exposure to the dialects and accents that a newcomer is forced into upon arrival can be intimidating at first. However, all participants—both NES and NNES—reported growing accustomed to the local dialect and felt they were able to comprehend local speakers much better due to the exposure. Therefore, it is assumed that the same can be said for Southern dialect or any other non-standard variation. Teachers can use authentic materials such as the recording that was used in this experiment or audio visual aids such as film clips that contain a variety of dialects. This will not only help students with listening comprehension but will also expose them to more cultural diversity than that of the particular teacher's geographic background or the geographic area in which the students are studying.

Furthermore, since students wishing to study in the United States are often required to take standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, these tests could offer dialect variations as part of their listening comprehension sections. While these tests do cater to either American English or British English variations, they do not stray from the standard varieties. Offering greater dialectal variations could provide a more realistic assessment of listening abilities in real-world situations.

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## Appendix A

### Personal Questionnaire

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you a native English speaker? \_\_\_\_\_  
If not, how long have you been formally studying English?
4. What English speaking places have you visited? (Be specific, for example if you have visited the United States, please provide the state and if possible the city).
5. Do you feel like you have any difficulty in understanding English speakers who have an accent or speak a dialect other than Standard American English?
6. Before coming to Hawai'i, had you been exposed to Pidgin or Hawai'i Creole English? Was it hard for you to understand at first? Can you understand it now?

## Appendix B

### Ch. 1 Listening Comprehension Questions

1. How does Huckleberry Finn say the last book ended?
2. Who does Huckleberry Finn live with?
3. Who is Miss Watson? Does Huckleberry Finn like her? Why or why not?
4. According to Miss Watson, where do bad people go when they die?
5. What does Huckleberry Finn believe is a bad sign that will bring him bad luck?
6. In order to try to change his bad luck, what does Huckleberry Finn tie a thread around?
7. What is outside of Huckleberry Finn's window?

### Chapter 2 Listening Comprehension Questions

1. Who is Jim?
2. Where did Huckleberry Finn and Tom hide from Jim?
3. How did Huckleberry Finn and Tom know that Jim was asleep?
4. Where did Huckleberry Finn, Tom, and the other boys go? How did they get there?
5. In the club, what happens if you tell someone's secret?
6. According to the club rules, who makes up Huckleberry Finn's family?
7. What will the boys do in their club?

## Appendix C

### Follow-up Opinions

1. Which reader (first or second) did you prefer listening to? Why?
2. Which speaker was easier to understand?
3. What do you think the education level is of each speaker?
  - a) Speaker 1 \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Speaker 2 \_\_\_\_\_
4. Which speaker would you rather be friends with?
5. Which speaker do you think is better looking (more attractive)?
6. Which speaker do you think has a better job/ makes more money?

## Appendix D

Table 1  
*Combined Data for Both Chapters*

	Speaker 1		Speaker 2	
	NES	NNES	NES	NNES
More Friendly	3	7	7	3
Higher education Level	0	1	10	9
Better Appearance	0	1	10	9
Higher Economic Level	0	0	10	10
Greater Ease of Listening	0	0	10	10

## Appendix E

Table 2  
*Number of Participants Answering Each Question Correctly*

		<u>#1</u>	<u>#2</u>	<u>#3</u>	<u>#4</u>	<u>#5</u>	<u>#6</u>	<u>#7</u>	<u>Total</u>		<u>Difference Between NNE and NES</u>
Ch. 1	NES	9	10	10	10	9	10	10	68/70	97.14%	46.37%
	NNE S	5	2	6	5	2	0	4	24/70	34.29%	
Ch. 2	NES	10	10	9	10	10	10	10	69/70	98.57%	64.7%
	NNE S	2	3	5	5	9	5	8	37/70	52.87%	