

Spring 5-12-2016

# Speaking And Pronunciation Confidence Of Middle School ESL Students At Various Proficiency Levels

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SPEAKING AND PRONUNCIATION CONFIDENCE OF  
MIDDLE SCHOOL ESL STUDENTS AT VARIOUS PROFICIENCY LEVELS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment for the  
Degree of Masters of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

2015

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	7
The Importance of Understanding our Students .....	9
Confidence and Pronunciation – Defining Terms.....	13
Significance to the Student, Teacher, and Researcher .....	14
Guiding Questions .....	16
Summary .....	16
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	17
Overview of Chapter.....	17
Confidence in Middle School Students.....	17
The ESL Student’s Confidence in Middle School .....	19
The Link to Pronunciation .....	22
Connections to Proficiency .....	24
The Gap.....	24
Summary .....	26
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	27
Overview.....	28
Research Paradigm.....	29
Data Collection .....	30
Participants.....	30

Setting .....	31
Data tools .....	32
Procedure .....	34
Surveys.....	34
Data Analysis.....	35
Verification of Data .....	37
Ethics .....	38
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS .....	39
Middle School Confidence .....	40
Survey Statements.....	40
Open-ended Confidence Questions.....	44
Being Understood, Pronunciation, and Accent.....	47
Survey Statements.....	47
Open Ended Questions.....	50
The Connection to Proficiency Levels.....	51
Summary.....	53
CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTION .....	55
Major Findings.....	55
ESL Middle School Confidence .....	55
Being Understood, Pronunciation, and Accent.....	59

The Connection to Proficiency Levels..... 60

Limitations ..... 61

Implications ..... 61

Further Research ..... 63

Final Reflections ..... 64

    Links to Hamline’s Conceptual Framework ..... 64

    Personal Reflection ..... 66

REFERENCES ..... 67

APPENDIX A: STUDENT SURVEY..... 71

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Number of Participants at WIDA Overall Levels .....	31
Table 2 – Number of Participants at WIDA Speaking Levels .....	31
Table 3 - Confidence Statements and Responses Chosen #1.....	42
Table 4 - Confidence Statements and Responses Chosen #2.....	43
Table 5 - Categories from Open-Ended Survey Questions – Confidence.....	46
Table 6 - Speaking - Pronunciation Statements and Responses Chosen #1.....	48
Table 7 - Speaking - Pronunciation Statements and Responses Chosen #2.....	50
Table 8 - Categories from Open-Ended Survey Questions – Speaking.....	51

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Statement three Student Responses at Proficiency level.....52

Figure 2: Statement Four Student Responses at Proficiency level.....53

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Sophia<sup>1</sup> can you read us the directions?” the teacher says across the room while pointing to the board. Sophia stares at the board with a scared and reluctant look on her face. After waiting one full minute another teacher comes near her to help. She is given the words to repeat, but is only loud enough for the students within a five foot radius to hear. She is asked to repeat it louder, and again she looks shocked and frightened. The teacher prompts her again, and again she is just barely heard. Someone next to her is asked to repeat what was said and Sophia puts her head down, her long bangs covering her face.

This story is one that became a repeated pattern for my eighth grade English as a second language (ESL) student Sophia. For many teachers it would seem insignificant that even though she started at our school the year before, she still was at the same low speaking proficiency level. There are times when students do not show an increase in English proficiency from year to year on a standardized test, because they are not good test takers, or they were having a bad day. However, it was clear that every day was not just one bad test day. As an ESL teacher I could say that this lack of general English speaking was what happens to many ESL students; their growth slows during middle school. Other teachers might say that there needs to be more community and relationship-building with the class so the student feels that they are in a safe

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed for privacy.



environment for speaking out loud. For Sophia, it seemed more than all of this. It was already several months into the school year, and she did not speak, read, or write much in English; however, I would see her talking in the halls with friends in Spanish. Here she would be laughing, oblivious to the worries of the classroom. It was clear that her behavior in the classroom was very different than the way she acted with her friends. Inside the classroom I saw a shy student who tried her best to be as close to invisible as possible. It did not matter who I put her with; she mainly kept her head low, doing the minimal amount of work to pass. I could see her confidence was low. Speaking English in the classroom seemed to be extremely hard for her. Sophia would ask to go to the bathroom during group work time, or just sit at a table of students without speaking. Finally, I felt like she and I had built the beginnings of a relationship, and one day I asked her directly why she didn't like to speak in class. "My pronunciation is no good," she responded.

I had just taken a teacher education course on pronunciation, thus my first step I took was to really listen to her speech and assess what she needed to work on. After a brief assessment, it was clear that her perception of "everything" being difficult to pronounce was wrong. She had a hard time enunciating words, but specifically, she needed to practice the final /t/ and /d/ consonant sounds. After working with her for a few months I saw that her confidence in the classroom was slowly increasing. My teaching of pronunciation was not at the level of expert, thus I was curious to find out if this increase in confidence was just from helping her with pronunciation or if her engagement with her peers outside of class in her first language boosted her confidence, or if perhaps her English proficiency level was beginning to increase, or possibly she did not care as much

about her pronunciation. It could also have been the community she felt with her fellow classmates or the routines she was able to follow in class during group work. At this point there were far too many factors that were able to affect her language growth to know for sure.

These many factors only plagued me and only brought up more questions: What develops confidence in speaking? Does pronunciation class help students to have confidence in their other classes? Does pronunciation matter more to students who are at specific proficiency levels? These questions brought me to one focus questions for this study, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA Consortium (WIDA) overall proficiency levels?*

In this chapter I will share the importance of learning more about confidence and pronunciation in middle school students, and give definitions for the terms used in this paper. Following that I will further show the significance of the issue for me – as the researcher, the student, and the teacher, I will share guiding questions, and finally I will give an overview of the study.

### **The Importance of Understanding our Students**

Middle school students seem to be among the most complicated of students because of changes in their bodies and their need for individuality while still being accepted by their peers. There are so many physical and emotional changes occurring in their bodies as they become adults. Adolescents wish to be treated more adult-like and to be given more responsibilities, and accordingly ESL students are also learning a new language and a new culture, making it more difficult to fit in. Erickson's developmental stages put middle school students in the psychosocial crisis of Identity vs. Role confusion, where

they will be making more choices about what they believe in, and how it connects to themselves (Woolfolk, 2013). Each year I work with my middle school students, I see this battle within them as they struggle to become their own person, while still acting confident amongst their peers. For my ESL students I see some of them struggle to learn the language, to be a part of the mainstream classroom, and to be treated like adults even though they are still learning how to act polite and responsible. They struggle with organization, peer relationships, getting homework completed and not feeling left out. This last desire seems to be very important among all students. Getting singled out or sounding different can be embarrassing and humiliating. I want to help my ESL students be a part of class and feel confident when they participate in class, and not let their learning of another language hold them back in group discussions or partner work. This research is one step closer to finding out more about my students and how I can help them. What middle school students want is to feel independent and empowered, whether or not they speak English as their first language.

Although most middle school teachers may say that their students are emotional because of hormones and their efforts toward developing independence, there is little research about middle school ESL students' emotional states, self-perception and other factors that affect confidence levels to participate in school. In my experience, during the transition from standalone ESL classes to mainstream classes, ESL students lose these peer interactions due to the amount of teacher-directed lessons and teachers tendency to only prompt those students who are ready to participate. When ESL students enter a mainstream classroom, they are leaving the comfort and community of the ESL class. I have seen many teaching models move away from lecture and more into student

participation and communication in multiple ways: independent self-chosen projects, partner discussions, and small group presentations. When this happens, ESL students start to participate, but they may still be silenced by the daunting classroom. I have noticed many students remain silent because they are afraid of being laughed at by their peers because of sounding different and not knowing enough English. I have seen students become almost invisible to a teacher in fear of being shouted at or belittled when they get the answer wrong. And I have watched as students refuse to raise their hands because they think they do not speak English well enough. It is true that many ESL students can successfully adjust to the mainstream environment, can be independent, and can excel in their studies; however, some students may become silent without the multiple modes of communication, and thus lose the ability to interact with their peers (Diaz-Rico, 2008). Research has highlighted several tasks that benefit speaking proficiently. These include students participating in class using multiple types of communication, such as pre-speaking activities like researching a topic through listening or reading information, writing down thoughts before sharing, or using an outline, speaking in mixed-ability groups, informal discussions, or structured and modeled academic conversations, and finally after speaking, reflecting on feedback or self-assessment (Diaz-Rico, 2008). ESL students need as many occasions to talk as possible to create and maintain social relationships, to solve problems, discuss new ideas, learn new skills, and show what they know (Diaz-Rico, 2008). Jeff Zwiers and Mari Crawford (2011) write about having more academic conversations in classrooms to increase not only student understanding but also their confidence. Additionally, as WIDA is testing English proficiency in four domains, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, (WIDA

Consortium, 2012) ESL teachers have now begun teaching to all four domains in every, or close to every, lesson in order to improve ESL students' overall English proficiency. It is obvious that class discussion and talking are an important part of learning a language and being part of the classroom community.

The process of learning for an ESL student in middle school varies depending on their proficiency level, how much education they had prior to starting school, and the level of support they receive at home. All of these factors can change how fast students learn English and also how confident they feel about their English. I have seen how speaking can help students learn vocabulary, practice sentence structure, and help them understand how they can learn from others. For teachers, allowing students time to converse about a topic can help all students deepen their understanding of a topic thus, learning about any obstacles that may stand in the way of ESL students in regards to their speaking will help them understand their students better and help them boost student confidence. Finally, while Derwing (2003) and other researchers (Kang, 2011, Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006) produced several studies about the difficulties of adult and high school ESL students' pronunciation, the middle school perception has been little, if at all, addressed.

In my opinion, pronunciation and speaking is a major issue for middle school ESL students; moreover, something needs to be done to help the ESL students feel more comfortable and confident in the mainstream classroom so that they can communicate with non-ESL students and have academic discussions to further their language learning. I have had so many students who seem to be too shy to speak up so they are never able to have academic conversations with their peers. By questioning how many middle school ESL students are not confident speaking in class, and how many would benefit from both

pronunciation and confidence, I can help to understand the significance of this issue. Then, investigating the student's perspective will help uncover this complex issue of students speaking in the mainstream classroom, and also help answer the question, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?*

Finally, looking at student overall English proficiency level will provide increased information on how to help specific students. For mainstream classroom teachers there are many ESL students who go unidentified and unnoticed. Teachers may hear them speaking social language and assume they have become proficient, but do not realize the lower proficiency in their academic language. Every year I have a teacher who is surprised to know that several students are part of my ESL class because they do not appear to struggle like my low proficiency ESL students. It becomes more apparent that they are speaking English as a second, third, or fourth language when they are asked to read, write, or speak academically and they start to struggle. It is noticeable that in the content classrooms these students will need more support, and even encouragement, to be able to use the academic language that is considerably more linguistically challenging for them. Finding connections to ESL student proficiency level and students' confidence in speaking will deepen the understanding teachers have about their students at various English proficiency levels.

### **Confidence and Pronunciation – Defining Terms**

This research study surveys middle school ESL students about their confidence in speaking and pronunciation. To clarify, middle school students are students in grades six, seven, and eight. There are several terms used for students who do not speak English as their first language; I will be using English as a second language (ESL) students.

Additionally, in this study I will reference *mainstream classrooms*, which are the classrooms taught by content, non-ESL, teachers where ESL students interact with non-ESL students. Also, for the purposes of this study, I am going to define pronunciation using the writings of Foote, Holtby, and Derwing, (2011), who defines pronunciation as three parts: intelligibility, the ability to be understood by a listener; comprehensibility, how easy or hard it is to be understood by the listener; and accent, the difference between the way the speaker and listener pronounce letter sounds.

Pronunciation is just one factor that contributes to a student's proficiency, and the other is how students feel about their own confidence. When considering confidence there are many claims as to how to define it. Apter (2006) uses "capable" as a synonym for confidence, while Maclellan (2014) relates confidence as being measured by how sure you are about an answer. For the purpose of this study both definitions have been considered and illustrate how skilled a person feels about completing a task, including speaking out loud. According to WIDA (2014), language proficiency is what aids students in becoming academically proficient in English.

### **Significance to the Student, Teacher, and Researcher**

I hope this study can create a new awareness for ESL students' teachers and will help the ESL students feel more comfortable in class by helping them talk to their non-ESL peers. From my experience, when students feel comfortable talking together in class, the depth of learning will increase. I have seen ESL students learn and produce more English when they hear and practice academic language that is modeled in mainstream classrooms.

From the perspective of teachers, the results of this study can help teachers increase students' confidence in the classroom. Diaz-Rico (2008) speaks of developing oral

language by encouraging a classroom climate that allows students to feel confident to make mistakes, as well as speak freely. In this way, ESL students will increase their English speaking proficiency by being comfortable engaging in complex academic discourse with native English speaking peers in the class. Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2009) push for promoting language learning in all classrooms. They instruct mainstream teachers to think like an ESL teacher, and to model academic language, as well as give all students a chance to speak, think about the type of language needed to complete the tasks, allow students to use their home language as support, and encourage students to use each other for help (Cloud et al., 2009). This means the mainstream teacher would be supporting all students including those who need greater language support. All teachers can incorporate academic language opportunities for their ESL students. Furthermore, they will be able to recognize more students for speaking up in the classroom.

As a researcher I hope to take away knowledge that will help me recognize when students need more confidence, and discover those who may need the greatest amount of support. Moreover, this study will further my understanding of middle school ESL students and help me to guide their proficiency growth. This study will lead me to inform ESL teachers about how to help their ESL students be more confident in their English speaking both in students' ESL classrooms and mainstream classrooms. Also, this will allow me to share this same information with mainstream teachers so they will gain a better understanding of the importance of implementing more speaking opportunities for the ESL students in their classrooms.



### **Guiding Questions**

Considering past and present research, as well as the theories that have been discussed, this study aims to discover how much pronunciation affects student confidence. My research question is *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?*

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the importance of the issue of confidence and pronunciation of middle school ESL students, and gave definitions of terms used in this research study. Also, the research has explained the importance of understanding students' perceptions of their speaking and pronunciation confidence in relation to me, as their ESL teacher, their classroom teachers, and their peers. In the next chapter, I present claims about the importance of understanding how speaking and pronunciation confidence affects middle school students, through a literature review. Following, in chapter three, I review the process of exploring this research question. In chapter four, the data will be presented to illustrate the information learned within this study, and then will be more thoroughly analyzed and discussed in chapter five. Finally, the implications of those results and next steps will be reviewed.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of Chapter

This study aims to explore the question *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* First, I will look into the research of middle school students' confidence. Then, I will narrow it down to middle school ESL students' confidence and share where the research fails to highlight middle school youth in terms of self-perceptions of their pronunciation and the relationship to proficiency levels. Finally, I will highlight the need for further research on pronunciation or speaking difficulties, the lack of research about connecting confidence and pronunciation to different English proficiency levels, and the lack of research about middle school students' confidence in their pronunciation.

### Confidence in Middle School Students

Confidence is like sand passing through our fingers; it is possible to have, but not everyone is good at holding on to it. For middle school students, confidence is even harder to keep in their hands. To understand middle school confidence in pronunciation and speaking, we need to first look at what we know about middle school students' confidence in general. Apter (2006) writes about adolescents as though they are in crisis with their confidence. He writes that some students have an "air of confidence" that escapes them when things turn difficult, or they "put forth an appearance of not caring"

when they really feel anxious (Apter, 2006, p.42-43). When this happens, he advises teachers to acknowledge the students' doubt and to give solutions and praise their effort (Apter, 2006, p. 45). In other words, students who are not confident and are experiencing self-doubt during an unexpected challenge, need teachers to model strategies to help them persist and overcome the challenge. While middle school students may have anxiety with difficult situations, they also crave new experiences and a desire to be independent. Wood (2007) wrote how 14-year-olds will participate more in group discussions and want to learn adult communication skills. He also stated that they will admit when they have made a mistake and are willing to try again to make it right (Wood, 2007). This shows that middle school students want to learn, from the teacher and each other, and are willing to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way. These two views, adolescents needing more confidence to overcome challenges and adolescents still wanting to engage and try new things, relates back to Erickson's identity vs. role confusion by showing that students can fluctuate within this developmental stage (Apter, 2006, Wood, 2007, Woolfolk, 2013). Some students may need more support and strategies to gain the confidence to overcome challenges, and others may be ready to try every new experience presented to them.

As middle school students desire to be treated more like adults and are learning to be independent of adults (Wood, 2007), it is important for them to have some confidence to be able to speak up for themselves. This can help them overcome the difficult situations they face and allow them to engage in new experiences. In regards to ESL students, it seems necessary that when they move on to high school, they are able to advocate for themselves and to speak directly with their mainstream teachers. When ESL students are

not anxious, they are more likely to be willing to communicate (Lightbown, & Spada, 2006). Having confidence could be one way to give students the power to speak up and to complete their work with assurance.

### **The ESL Student's Confidence in Middle School**

To build on the idea of confident middle school students, consider the students who are attending school and do not speak English as their first language. They have the added difficulty of reading, writing, listening and speaking in another language. Diaz-Rico claims the learning of a second language involves not just one aspect of a learner, but the whole learner, thus “when a word or phrase comes out exactly right, accurate and appropriate for the situation, the whole person benefits” (2008, p.35). In this sense, when one thing is challenging or disparaging, it may bring down the confidence and motivation of the students. Also, ESL students are often more self-conscious and have fewer people giving them strategies to boost their confidence (Duff, 2001; Pappamihiel, 2001). In a study of 178 Mexican-born students in sixth through eighth grade, Pappamihiel (2001) found that many of them felt more anxiety in their mainstream classes than in their ESL classes because they feared students would laugh at them. Similarly, in a study of 1,300 high school students, Duff (2001) found that the ESL students did not have the confidence or arrogance to talk about their life or their needs. Duff (2001) has highlighted the importance of confidence with ESL students, claiming that to succeed in class they need to have the confidence to participate. Thus teachers need to provide opportunities for students to have confidence speaking and participating in class while they are learning the language.

Considering the future path of the middle school ESL student can guide the type of support required to assist in their current learning. In a study on the language patterns of high school ESL students' language use in mainstream classes versus ESL classes, Harklau (1994) observed ESL students interact less in mainstream classrooms than in ESL classrooms. When ESL teachers have their own ESL class, co-teach, or push into mainstream classrooms, the ESL students are called on more frequently and are less likely to tune out because the ESL teacher encourages and supports them in the domain of speaking. However, when ESL students are not aided by the ESL teacher, there is a lack of participation due to the teacher not requiring student participation, the intimidating sociolinguistic environment, and finally the students' tuning out (Harklau, 1994). In general, ESL students have a disadvantage from non-ESL students because they may have missed or not understood earlier content, or they lack cultural, linguistic, or geographic background knowledge (Duff, 2001). If an ESL teacher is not available in a mainstream class, the mainstream teacher can build a strong relationship with the student as a strategy to lead to more confidence. Research shows that to achieve academic success in high school, ESL students should have a relationship with their teachers, their peers, and be in tune with school climate (Dewing, DeCorby, & Ichikawa, 1999). If these relationships can be built in middle school, then it may lead to an increase in confidence and thus participation in high school. Even a book that gives strategies for working with ESL students says it's possible as ESL students transition to mainstream classrooms they need support in every environment; otherwise they may become silent (Diaz-Rico, 2008). To keep ESL students speaking, Cloud et al. (2009) purports that mainstream teachers will need to assume the role of the ESL teacher as

these students transition by promoting language learning in the classroom. Their suggestions are to model the language that is expected, modify language to meet the student's level, don't let the ESL students sit silently, plan for language to be practiced, and promote peer interactions (Cloud et al., 2009). The ESL teacher can assist mainstream teachers in helping these ESL students by sharing the students' language strengths, giving teachers strategies to elicit more academic conversations, or checking in with the student. Thus, when a mainstream teacher is promoting participation, language learning, and classroom relationships in high school or middle school for ESL students, the ESL students can gain confidence in their mainstream classrooms.

Although this seems like an overabundance of obstacles working against ESL students; Duff (2001) presents the following solutions to increase ESL student confidence in order to lead to participation in class: multiple modes of presentations; peers providing scaffolding; study guides; and a teacher requirement of ESL student participation. However, even with this abundance of solutions problems have still persisted. Duff (2001) claims that- "ESL students on the whole seemed to lack such confidence and the accompanying sense of entitlement or license to speak about their concerns, backgrounds, issues, and views" (p. 120). Some middle school ESL students do not have the same motivation to add to conversations because they do not have the same backgrounds and concerns as non-ESL students. When a teacher makes a lesson relevant to students' lives, it does not always include all students. When the cultural background of ESL students is very diverse and different from non-ESL students, that makes it hard for them to want to speak up confidently about an issue or topic. For example, a teacher may connect a science lesson on layers of the atmosphere to a layer cake; however, some ESL students

may have never eaten a cake, or a cake with layers. The findings of this study, the need for students to participate in all class reading, writing and discussion, as well as have background knowledge of current cultural topics, pose one problem: How will students gain the confidence they need to participate in discussions and speak up in class (Duff, 2001)?

### **The Link to Pronunciation**

Understanding the needs of ESL students' communication becomes increasingly important, as teachers refine their practice and individualize student learning. Native-like pronunciation can be easily acquired by some and difficult for others. Some believe that the "degree of difference between the learner's native language and the target language can lead to greater difficulty," meaning if the student's first language is very different from English then it can be harder for them to develop perfect pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p.105). The effects of this are apparent within adult learners who had limited exposure to all of the English language phonemes. Several studies have been conducted to show that adults want help in pronunciation and want to sound like native speakers (Derwing, 2003, Derwing & Rossiter, 2002, Kang, 2011, Scales et al., 2006); however, fewer studies have been conducted with high school students, and there have been few, if any, with middle school students. If pronunciation is an issue of concern for ESL adults (Derwing, 2003), and sometimes concerns ESL students in high school (Derwing, DeCorby, & Ichikawa, 1999), then it may also be an issue in middle school. The lack of research only shows that there is still a lot that is unknown about this topic.

One thing we do know is youth are able to adapt and learn correct English pronunciation with less difficulty than adults and teens (Rothenberg & Fisher, 2007).

With this in mind, there are still middle school ESL students who have a non-native English accent and struggle with their English pronunciation. The question remains then, how do middle school ESL students perceive their own pronunciation, and does this affect their confidence? Again, little research has been done about pronunciation perceptions or confidence in pronunciation of middle school ESL students. Most research studies have focused on the view of the teacher, or the perceptions of adult ESL students, rather than on young teen or pre-teen ESL students (Derwing, 2003, Derwing & Rossiter, 2002, Foote et al., 2011, Kang, 2011, Scales, 2006). One of these studies is Foote et al. (2011), who writes that from the view point of a teacher of adult ESL students, adult ESL students could benefit from stand-alone pronunciation classes. Derwing and Munro (2005) suggest we focus on matching instruction with the ESL students' goals and pronunciation needs. But the generalization of Derwing and Munro's call to action does not directly link to students' confidence; it only links to the perception that natively-like pronunciation is important to some ESL students. There is a large amount of research on adult students' perceptions that has shown a high level of concern surrounding their own accent (Derwing, 2003, Derwing & Rossiter, 2002, Kang, 2011, Scales et al., 2006). In interviews of 100 intermediate adult ESL learners, 42% of the group thought that pronunciation was a main cause for their miscommunications (Derwing, 2003). In another study, 62% of ESL adult learners had a goal to sound like a native speaker (Scales et al., 2006). These studies have shown that adult ESL learners have a clear focus on speaking like a native speaker, being understood, and learning English pronunciation. What these studies neglect to consider is the increasing number of incoming ESL youth into our schools, and if any miscommunications or pronunciation



goals correlate to student confidence. The difference between adults and children, more specifically teens and pre-teens, is considerable. These studies have emphasized the teacher and adult ESL student viewpoint, which leaves considerable room for further research on young adults.

### **Connections to Proficiency**

In kindergarten through twelfth grade, ESL students are measured on a six-point proficiency scale through the WIDA group, where the sixth level is considered *reaching* or proficient in English (WIDA Consortium, 2012). Additionally, students are tested within the four domains of speaking, reading, writing, and listening, and within each of these domains are further components such as discourse level, sentence level, and word phrases (WIDA Consortium, 2012). Note that both pronunciation and confidence are not considered in speaking, nor are they tested. WIDA Consortium gives teachers descriptions of what different proficiency levels look like. For example, in an English Language Arts class an ESL student who is at a level one would be expected to repeat words and use gestures, while an ESL student who is at a level three could produce statements using sentence starters or models (WIDA Consortium, 2012). There is no mention of what they can do if their pronunciation is hindering their speaking. Furthermore, there is little, if any research that explores the role of confidence or pronunciation at these different English proficiency levels.

### **The Gap**

The primary objective in this study is to obtain information on middle school ESL students' perceptions of their speaking in mainstream classrooms to see if it relates to their English proficiency level. If pronunciation is a factor that contributes to low

confidence and less oral communication in classrooms, then it is surprising that there are not more studies surrounding this issue. As far as specifically linking the idea of pronunciation to confidence, a few studies have come close, for example discussing motivation (Smit, 2002, Smit, & Dalton, 2000). Smit and Dalton (2000) conducted a study of Australian university students and found that students have several degrees of motivation to learn pronunciation; however anxiety was present and students questioned their self-image which affected their motivation. Diaz-Rico (2008) alludes to motivation when discussing the necessity to reduce student anxiety and to be aware of attitudes of ESL students towards the language, the classroom, and the teacher. Diaz-Rico (2008) also claims; “High self-esteem can cause language success or result from language success. Students who feel proud of their success and abilities, self-knowledge, and self-expression and who have enhanced images of self, family and culture, are better language learners” (p. 51). This strong claim connects confidence with language output; however, there is still a gap of research that has been found to support this. Additionally, the question of ESL students’ speaking proficiency level is overlooked in many of these studies. When adding the element of grade level, there is little, if any, research about middle school ESL students’ own perceptions on their confidence in speaking or their confidence in general. Foote et al. (2011) found that adult ESL students’ pronunciation was important for all levels of students. These numbers only account for adult students and not teen or pre-teen students. So the question remains: *How confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?*

## Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the importance of the issue of increasing ESL student confidence in order to allow them to feel confident in their mainstream classrooms, and thus be able to participate in classroom discussions to help them learn more about the class topics. I discussed the research in middle school ESL student confidence, the perception that adult ESL learners have about their pronunciation and how self-conscious they feel when speaking in English, as well as the preoccupations of high school students when they get nervous in their mainstream classrooms. Finally, I discussed the literature that highlights the lack of research that specifically explores the topic of middle school ESL student confidence. In the next chapter, I will talk about the methods I will use to answer my research question, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?*

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

When teachers ask students what they think about a topic, they get a window into who the student is and what they really understand. This study is designed to uncover information on middle school ESL students' perceptions of their confidence in speaking and pronunciation of English both inside and outside of the classroom. Also, this study looks closely at student English proficiency levels to see if there is any relationship between their overall and speaking WIDA proficiency levels and how a student feels about their confidence in speaking and pronunciation. The guiding research question is *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* To answer this, I studied the confidence and perception of speaking confidence, of a pool of middle school ESL students, at various proficiency levels. In order to accurately capture this I organized the survey questions into three themes: confidence, being understood, and pronunciation and accent, which builds supporting evidence of my focus question. Students wrote their opinions about their own pronunciation and their confidence on a paper survey. The data collected provides details on whether or not there is a relationship between how students perceive their pronunciation and how they report their confidence at various proficiency levels.

The data collection method I used is a survey of middle school ESL students. This survey is two pages, with the first page asking for the student's overall and speaking

proficiency levels and then several statements for them to rate how they feel on a scale of how much they agree or disagree. The second page includes short answer open-ended questions designed to elicit more data on how and when students feel good or bad about their confidence and speaking.

This research is designed to obtain data that is both quantitative and qualitative, creating a well-rounded study that can depict trends and connections through measureable controls, and unanticipated insights into the students' feelings (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The statements are similar to close-ended questions, which are objective because there is measurable data, while the open-ended questions are subjective because there is more interpretation and insights into students' thoughts. The benefit of using both types of survey questions is students are able to give reliable data that can help show trends, while still revealing additional information that may not have been considered and can lead to further studies (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

### **Overview**

This chapter outlines the primary elements of the data collection of this research study. First, the rationale for the type of research is presented here as well as the definitions of the types of research approaches. Second, the data collection section includes the participants, the setting, and the data tools. Third, the procedure includes how students were grouped to take the survey, the materials provided, and the survey distribution along with detailed information of the procedure used. Finally, the data analysis describes the procedures that categorize and analyze the data, followed by the verification of data and ethics.

### Research Paradigm

This research is designed to obtain data on students' opinions using both statements and open-ended questions, creating a comprehensive study that will depict trends and connections between students' proficiency level and their confidence in speaking and pronunciation, while including students' opinions to further support the topic. This type of research is called mixed method because it includes more than one approach to the data collection (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The first approach is quantitative, meaning research includes data that can be numerically and objectively analyzed (Mackey & Gass, 2005). One example that illustrates this approach is asked by the statement from page one, *I am confident at school*, and the response range is *never, a little, sometimes, a lot, always*. Students only were able to pick one response, allowing the answers of all tests to be counted to see which response is chosen the most by which students. This helps me investigate the trends and connections of pronunciation confidence in middle school ESL students. The advantage to using this quantitative approach is that it uses "uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability" to show relationships that arise with students at various English proficiency levels (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 93). The second approach to this data collection is qualitative, meaning the research data is subjective in order to produce independent and diverse information from many students at once (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This is seen in the second page of the survey, comprised of open-ended questions. This type of questioning allows the students to "express their own thoughts and ideas in their own manner, and thus may result in more unexpected and insightful data" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.93). Using this approach leaves the opportunity for factors that had not been considered to be introduced or eliminated. The overarching question is *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their*

*speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* The data collected provides three bases for results. First, the data will discuss how confident middle school ESL students feel. Secondly, the data will discuss how middle school ESL students feel about being understood by their teachers and by their peers, their pronunciation and accent, and third, what their proficiency levels are and how confidence in speaking and pronunciation connects to proficiency levels. This helps me determine if there is a relationship between two variables, student confidence in their pronunciation and speaking, and the students' overall and speaking proficiency levels.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study are middle school students in grades six, seven, and eight. The diversity of the students is a wide range: Vietnamese, Somali, Hmong, Spanish, Tamil, Filipino, Telugu, and Chinese. Similar to other middle schools in the state, ESL students move from classroom to classroom, including the mainstream classes and their ESL class. All participants see their ESL teacher in one or more classes, either a mainstream co-taught class or an ESL specific class. The students were given the WIDA-ACCESS test the prior spring, or, if they just arrived to the country, they were given a WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) (WIDA Consortium, 2014) to find their proficiency level at the time of their arrival to the school district. Of the surveys used, the scores show that the twenty-three participants are at a variety of proficiency levels (see tables 1 and 2). To participate in this study, students were asked to have permission from their parent or legal guardian, by returning a signed consent form to their ESL teacher prior to the survey.

Table 1

Number of Participants at Various WIDA Overall Levels

<u>Grade</u>	<u>level 1</u>	<u>level 2</u>	<u>level 3</u>	<u>level 4</u>	<u>level 5</u>	<u>level 6</u>
6	0	1	3	1	1	0
7	0	1	2	2	5	0
8	0	0	2	5	0	0

Table 2

Participants' WIDA Speaking Proficiency Level

<u>Grade</u>	<u>level 1</u>	<u>level 2</u>	<u>level 3</u>	<u>level 4</u>	<u>level 5</u>	<u>level 6</u>
6	0	1	3	2	0	0
7	0	0	1	3	4	2
8	0	0	1	3	2	1

### Setting

The setting is the school the students are currently enrolled in. The school is a suburban middle school within Minnesota that offers many academic, liberal arts, and athletic programs for their middle school students. Of the total middle school students, 2.5% are ESL students, who have a full time ESL teacher. The ESL teacher teaches a variety of classes based on student proficiency levels and needs. Depending on student needs these classes may include a co-taught math class where the ESL teacher teaches alongside the math teacher, an alternative English class in the form of literacy workshop, a low level English proficiency class, and a flex class that supports homework and a morning advisory (the latter are all ESL student-only classes taught in an ESL classroom). The teacher works with all ESL students in grades six, seven, and eight, and the students are able to build a relationship with this ESL teacher as they move through the grades.



## Data tools

The scaled statements in the survey were categorized into three themes: confidence, being understood, and pronunciation and accent, to build supporting evidence of my focus question, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* An example of each of these themed statements is as follows; for confidence, *I am confident at school*, for being understood, *other students understand what I am saying*, and for pronunciation and accent –*I pronounce words differently than my classmates*. On the survey, these themed questions were randomized so the students would not answer all the questions in the same way, which can happen when all questions have the same multiple choice answer throughout a survey (Saris, 2014). The randomizing of the three main themes kept reliability and helped sort data until it needed to be broken down statement by statement. Often reliability is tested by having someone take the survey on more than one occasion, but this survey was administered only once, thus questions were repeated in a slight variation to ensure reliability (Fink, 2009). I also repeated questions in the first part of the survey. An example is the first statement; *I am confident at school*, which corresponds to statement seven, *I feel confident saying long words in English*. Both are asking about general confidence at school; however, the first statement is the most general, while statement seven dives a little deeper and asks about speaking confidence, specifically when the student would say a long word. Another example is statement five, *I pronounce words differently than my classmates* and statement twelve, *I have an accent in my first language*. Both of these statements are asking about pronunciation. If a student was picking answers randomly or all the same answer for each

question, it would become apparent that they had contradicting feelings and thus may not have been honest while taking the survey.

The WIDA's ACCESS and Alternate ACCESS have become the standard assessment in Minnesota, among other states, for leveling students who speak a first language other than English (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). Teachers use the WIDA tests to assess ESL students on language proficiency in the domains of speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The focus of this study is ESL student speaking proficiency and so as a result, both the overall proficiency levels and the speaking proficiency levels were considered. In this research, I used 2015 WIDA test scores to group students into their proficiency levels.

WIDA defines the levels of language proficiency as:

Division of the second language acquisition continuum into stages descriptive of the process of language development; the WIDA ELD Standards have six levels of language proficiency: 1-Entering, 2-Emerging, 3-Developing, 4-Expanding, 5-Bridging, and 6-Reaching (2012, p.114).

To show a relationship between student confidence with their speaking and pronunciation, and proficiency level, the survey required the 2015 WIDA composite and speaking scores.

To accurately capture the opinions of middle school students, a survey was given to students, which included circling an answer from a scale, and several open-ended questions to give students a chance to share their experiences on the subject of confidence, speaking in the classroom, and their own pronunciation. The statements at the beginning of the survey, (see Appendix A) allowed data to be measured on a scale based on five options, from *never* to *always*. These fixed answers aided in making connections and

seeing the patterns of student responses (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Additionally, there are several questions that are similar in nature in order to ensure reliability within the data.

One example is *teachers do not understand what I am saying*, and *teachers ask me to repeat myself*. Both of these questions help to understand the students' own perceptions of their speaking and pronunciation.

The open-ended questions allowed for a more inclusive elicitation of data because the information can lead to causes and characteristics that have not been otherwise analyzed (Mackey & Gass, 2005). An example of this is the open-ended question number three which asks students to write about a time they felt the most confident speaking out loud in class. This leads to situations or circumstances that help students be confident in their speaking and would otherwise have been unknown. Additionally, this gave students the opportunity to express their opinions through unstructured question format allowed them to have a chance to use their own words, which would otherwise feel superficial.

## **Procedure**

### **Surveys**

Before surveys were given, all students received consent forms, to be signed by their parents or guardians, and brought back on or before the day the surveys were given.

Consent forms were given to parents during spring parent teacher conferences.

Afterward, a few forms were sent home to families who did not receive one previously.

Most consent forms were returned and the survey was given during a study time so all students were working; however only students who returned signed consent forms were given the survey to take at that time. Before they took the survey, students brainstormed as a class some of their own definitions of confidence in order to have a clear understanding of the word. Students took the survey as their teacher read the questions

aloud. The teacher wrote in each students' 2015 WIDA overall proficiency scores and WIDA speaking scores on the top of the page (before the students received their surveys, or as they were being surveyed). Then, the students wrote their grade level, as opposed to their names, on the top of the survey. At the beginning of the survey, students were reminded that they should include their names in order to keep their privacy and that this was an anonymous survey, so they could be as honest as possible. The teacher read each question and all the possible answer choices out loud, starting with number one. For the last four questions, which are located on the back side, the teacher gave a longer pause between questions to allow students time to write their answers. In addition, the teacher was encouraged to give example words that students could use to describe how they speak in English (question three), such as deep, loud, or mumbled. As this was not an assessment of how well students read, if there were questions about the survey that students did not understand, the teacher was available to help students by re-reading the question or explaining what the question was asking. Also upon student request, dictionaries, or online translation tools, were provided. Additionally, for students who had a lower proficiency, such as WIDA overall level 1-2, the teacher gave them the option to write their answers in their first language. Students were given ten to fifteen minutes to complete the survey. Once the survey was complete, the teacher checked to ensure the survey's scaled statements and open-ended questions were completely answered. The surveys were then placed, along with the parent and guardian consent forms, in a sealed envelope to be brought back to me, the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the statement answers were collected, responses were given a value for each option; 1-never, 2-a little, 3-sometimes, 4-a lot, 5-always, and charted how many students

answered each of these values for each statement. Afterward, all statements were listed with the percentage of students who picked those responses to see the frequencies. Frequency shows how many people fit into the category thus I focused on the highest frequency of students or the highest percentages of students in order to see the trends (Fink, 2009). In order to not detract from the generalizations and relationships that are key to this study, only at the highest frequencies were looked at in order to see the generalities. Then, the high frequency responses of each statement were compared within the three themes: confidence, being understood, and pronunciation and accent to see if there were any trends or relationships. Also, the WIDA overall and speaking proficiency levels were analyzed to see if there was a relationship to how students felt about their speaking and pronunciation. To analyze the open-ended questions, they were categorized based on a review of the responses as precisely as possible. This was first done by creating many specific categories, based on what the students wrote, to see what answers could be brought together based on any similarities among responses (Fink, 2009). Then the responses were organized by similarities into categories based on a code name that summarized the responses (Fink, 2009). Question two asked students to write three words to describe their speaking in English. From the words listed by each student, they were categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. Last, the number of responses were counted, in each of these categories. There were a few answers that were vague, in order to eliminate assumptions about what the student was saying, they were put into an “other” category. In this way, the responses were analyzed and reflected on using the categories in relation to students’ WIDA overall and speaking proficiency levels. Finally, students wrote three words in response to the open-ended question; *write three words to describe*

*your speaking in English.* These words were sorted into three categories. These categories were; positive, neutral, and negative. Based on the connotation in regards to confidence of the words each student gave, the three words would put the students' overall response into one of the three categories. For example, one student wrote good, bad, maybe sad. Good was categorized as positive; however, the other two words have negative connotations, thus the overall response was categorized as negative. Another example is the word reading, which was considered neutral because it has not feelings around it.

### **Verification of Data**

The survey was piloted twice to see if there was clarity in the formatting, clear questioning, and meaningful responses given in the short answer section. The first pilot test was useful in learning about the execution of the test, students' ability to understand the scaled statements, and the improvements that needed to be made to the open-ended question. For example, the first set of open-ended questions were too general to elicit good information. I changed the questions to be more specific in what they were asking for so that the answers could be as specific as well. An example of this is the first open-ended question asked *if you could do one thing to boost your confidence at school what would you do?* This question was thought to be too complex and the word *boost* was not clear enough for some students. The question was eventually changed to *what one thing would improve your confidence at school?* The second pilot test clarified the finite details of the survey before it was finalized. The students who piloted this test gave good feedback and a variety of answers. The three themes of the survey statements helped ensure accurate data to the topic. Also, the open-ended questions provided enhanced validity and reduced any preconception of what I thought the answers should be. This

way if there was something that was unaccounted for it could appear in the open-ended question section of the survey.

### **Ethics**

All students were voluntary participants for this study. A letter of consent was sent home to guardians, and was returned as a signed document before the survey was administered. This consent letter was written in simple English to ensure that it was understood by all families, and also translated into the families' first language unless they accepted it in English. Students were also protected within the guidelines of Hamline University's Human Subjects Committee Protocol. In addition, the survey did not collect student names, only their WIDA overall scores, WIDA speaking scores, grade level, and personal opinions. Any identifying comments made by the students during the short answer section of the survey had any identifying characteristics omitted or changed to protect the participant.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to learn about middle school students' speaking and pronunciation confidence at WIDA overall and speaking proficiency levels. This chapter contains the results of the middle school ESL student survey. The data was collected from six sixth grade, ten seventh grade, and seven eighth grade ESL students in a suburban middle school. Of the twenty-five returned surveys only twenty-three of them were used for analysis. The two surveys and participants were disqualified because their proficiency levels were decided to be inaccurate. Both of these students took the W-APT at the beginning of the school year as opposed to the yearly WIDA proficiency test that is given in February. They were both turned into me, however the students' ESL teacher told me, she had concluded that at that point in the school year, the W-APT test was not an accurate reflection of the students' proficiency levels. Through the teacher's own observations and assessments it was clear that there was a discrepancy in the W-APT results from the fall and current, late winter, assessments. With this anomaly it was concluded that their surveys would simply be removed from the group, none of their answers used, to preserve concrete results and to avoid any future disputes.

To make sure I had accurate results, each question was asked in a different way to provide a variety of answers to slightly different questions, to show the correctness of their answers, and slowly add to the depth of each theme. One example is statement five, *I pronounce words differently than my classmates* and statement twelve, *I have an accent*



*in my first language*. As a whole there was good relationship between results, showing that participants understood what was being asked and responded to all the questions in a way that was not random (Sarlis, 2014).

In this chapter, the survey data is presented in three stages in order to focus the data by theme, which, in turn, follows the main question. The first stage shows data from the statements and open-ended survey questions about how confident middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation. The second stage analyzes how middle school ESL students feel about being understood, their pronunciation, and their a non-native English accent by looking at the statements that relate to pronunciation and being understood and the one open-ended question that is specific to the students' own feelings of their speaking. The third stage analyzes the difference in proficiency levels, both overall WIDA level and speaking WIDA level, by comparing the averages of the answers to show what connections there are, if any, to student confidence in speaking and pronunciation.

## **Middle School Confidence**

### **Survey Statements**

Each of the survey statements related to one of the three pre-constructed themes. These themes, confidence, being understood, and pronunciation and accent, all tie into my main questions, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* In this first stage I focus on the survey statements and questions related to confidence. The two trends analyzed below show that all participants had some confidence, and that as students increased in grade level, they appeared to have more confidence.

The first trend illustrates that all participants reported having at least a minimal level of confidence. Evidence of the first trend is that no student had zero confidence, which can be seen where responses were absent, such as no one picked *never* for feeling confident in school, speaking in small groups, or feeling confident saying long words. Similarly, no one picked *always* for when they speak quietly when they share out loud. This absence of students' response at the beginning and the end of the scale shows where the students' opinions were: slightly to highly confident. To further support this trend, the data in Table 3 shows the middle school students having minimal to high confidence with their speaking. It includes the six responses from sixth grade, ten from seventh grade, and seven from eighth grade to the survey statements. Students were able to pick from a scale of never (N), a little (L), sometimes (S), a lot (AL), and always (A). The percentages represent the number of students who picked specific answers out of the total number of students in the grade level. Evidence of student confidence is seen with over half of eighth grade students choosing *a lot* in response to the statement, *I am confident at school*. Also, the majority of students in every grade level chose *sometimes* for, *I speak quietly in class*, showing students have confidence some of the time.

Table 3

*Confidence Statements and Responses Chosen #1*

	N	L	S	AL	A <sup>2</sup>
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I am confident at school.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	16%	50%	16%	16%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	10%	50%	20%	20%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	29%	57%	14%
2. I feel good speaking out loud in English in small groups.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	50%	16%	33%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	30%	20%	10%	40%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	29%	14%	57%
7. I feel confident saying long words in English.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	50%	16%	16%	16%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	30%	10%	40%	20%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	71%	29%	0%
9. I speak quietly when I share out loud in class.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	33%	66%	0%	0%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	10%	0%	80%	10%	0%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	14%	14%	71%	0%	0%

\*\*These results reflect all participants in each grade and percentages are rounded.

<sup>2</sup> never (N), a little (L), sometimes (S), a lot (AL), and always (A)

The second trend is that the higher the grade level the more confident the students reflected being. This is seen in statements one, two, four, and eleven, when eighth grade students had the highest percentages of confidence. Table 3 shows that in response to the first statement, about confidence at school, both sixth and seventh grade students had the highest answer of *sometimes*, while the highest percentage, of eighth graders picked *a lot*. This illustrates how the eighth grade students surveyed had more confidence at school than their peers in lower grades. Similarly, how seventh graders answered statements seven, and nine with overall higher percentages than sixth graders. The statement about speaking in small groups is where all students had the most confidence, by having the highest percentage of students answer at the highest end of the scale. Here, forty-nine percent of sixth graders picked *a lot* or *always*. The responses increased in seventh grade to fifty percent for the *a lot* and *always*, and increased again in eighth grade to seventy-one percent in eighth grade. In response to confidence when saying long words, sixth grade mostly picked *a little*, seventh grade was split with fifty percent of students picking *a little* or *sometimes*, and fifty percent of students picking *a lot* or *always* and eighth grade picked *sometimes* showing a slight variation in this trend.

Table 4

*Confidence Statements and Responses Chosen #2*

	N	L	S	AL	A <sup>3</sup>
	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel good speaking out loud in English to the whole class in all of my classes.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	16%	33%	33%	0%	16%

<sup>3</sup> never (N), a little (L), sometimes (S), a lot (AL), and always (A)

7 <sup>th</sup> -	10%	30%	40%	0%	20%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	14%	43%	29%	14%
11. How often do you volunteer to speak out in class?					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	33%	50%	0%	16%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	10%	40%	20%	30%	0%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	14%	71%	14%	0%

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\*\*These results reflect all participants in each grade and percentages are rounded.

### **Open-ended Confidence Questions**

The three main trends that appeared are students want to improve their speaking confidence, that they seem more confident in a strong classroom community, and how students become less scared and more concerned about the classroom community as they increase in grade level. The subsequent results were summarized individually, grouped according to any commonalities, and finally re-grouped according to the commonalities across all three grade levels. Some students' answers fell under two categories because they gave a more detailed explanation and they were counted for both. Of these groups two to three categories were defined and labeled numerically. Number one represents the greatest number of students who wrote about that category, number two represents the second greatest and number three is the least. Note that question four has two number ones because there were an equal number of student responses for both categories; (see table 5).

The results of the first open-ended survey question show that some students do want to expand their speaking to improve their confidence. When asked what they can do to improve their confidence at school, one student wrote, "I would like to talk without fear

that I will mess up.” One student wrote about both classroom community and speaking, “I could get to know the students more. Speak in class more. Raise my hand more,” creating an equal desire for both.

The trend of improving the classroom community was prevalent in many responses. In the first question, the greatest amount of students wrote about various elements that make up classroom community. This included students having more friends in class, not being judged by other students, being able to stay focused on the classroom topic, and having the teacher say positive things to them. This trend is found in question three’s final category, having friends available. One student wrote about having their friends in class with them and the comfort it gave them, “I feel most confident speaking out loud is when I’m with a bunch of friends I know.” This idea of being comfortable with the people in the class directly relates to building a strong classroom community.

The trend of having students at higher grade levels talk more about classroom community is seen in both question three and four. For question three, students gave brief one sentence answers about when they felt most confident in class. Of their answers sixth grade students wrote more about having speaking confidence in small groups or in specific classes, while seventh and eighth graders wrote about giving a presentation more often. This relates to the comfort that both seventh and eighth graders have with other students in class because they are confident speaking in front of large groups. In the final question, students were asked to write about a time they felt the least confident speaking out loud in class. The two main categories reported the lack of classroom community and support, and that the student was too scared to speak out loud. These responses were very evenly matched. Sixth grade students wrote more about being scared, seventh grade

was evenly split, while eighth grade had more students write about the need for classroom community. Again this supports the trend of students more concerned about the classroom community as they increase in grade level.

Table 5

<i>Categories from Open-Ended Survey Questions – Confidence</i>		
Question	Number of Students	Categories
1. What one thing would improve your confidence at school?	12	Improved classroom community
	4	Speaking
	4	Grades
	3	Other
3. Write about a time you felt the most confident speaking out loud in class.	11	Giving a presentation
	8	Speaking in small groups or specific classes
	3	Had friends present
	2	Other
4. Write about a time you felt the least confident speaking out loud in class.	11	The classroom community was not supportive to the student
	11	Students were scared to give an answer
	1	Other

There were a few instances of outliers. Outlier answers were ones that made no sense to the context of the question (Salant & Dillman, 1994). I later learned that one outlier answer had to do with a specific activity in an ESL class, but it was still unclear what the students intended without making assumptions. I excluded their answers from the categories, analyzed above, because it was unclear the point that was being made.

### **Being Understood, Pronunciation, and Accent**

#### **Survey Statements**

This stage of analysis looks at the survey's statements that relate to a particular theme, in this case being understood and pronunciation. This theme is tied to the middle of the question, *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency levels?* The common trends shown here are that the majority of middle school students report being understood most of the time in their classes, by both teachers and classmates. They may have an accent from their first language; however, only sometimes are they thinking that they pronounce words differently than their peers. Additionally, it is rare for them to have to repeat what they have said. Overall, there does not seem to be a large problem with speaking and pronunciation in class. Again, there is a table of the survey statements with the percentage of how many students in the class chose each scaled response, see table 6. For this data it includes the six responses from sixth grade, ten from seventh grade, and seven from eighth grade to the closed confidence questions. Students were able to pick from a scale of never (N), a little (L), sometimes (S), a lot (AL), and always (A).



Many of the statements about pronunciation and accent show that most students do not think they have difficulty with speaking or pronouncing words. The table shows that in response to the statement of how often other students understand what they are saying, the majority of students in all three grades picked *a lot*. When asked if the teacher asks them to repeat themselves (question 6), it takes time for other students to understand me (question 8), and if the teachers understand me (question 10), the majority of sixth and seventh grade students picked *never*, while the majority of eighth grade students mainly picked *a little*. This shows that most of these students perceive they are understood by both their classmates and their teachers.

Table 6

*Speaking - Pronunciation Statements and Responses Chosen #1*

	N	L	S	AL	A
	1	2	3	4	5
3. Other students understand what I am saying.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	16%	33%	50%	0%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	30%	60%	10%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	0%	29%	57%	14%
6. Teachers ask me to repeat myself.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	33%	0%	16%	0%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	20%	20%	10%	0%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	71%	29%	0%	0%
8. It takes time for other students to understand what I am saying.					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	33%	0%	0%	16%

7 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
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8 <sup>th</sup> -	14%	43%	29%	14%	0%
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10. Teachers do not understand what I am saying.

6 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	33%	0%	0%	16%
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7 <sup>th</sup> -	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
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8 <sup>th</sup> -	43%	43%	14%	0%	0%
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\*\*These results reflect all participants in each grade and percentages are rounded.

Also supporting the trend of students feeling understood all the time is that even though students may think they have a non-native English accent; it doesn't mean they are being asked to repeat themselves. The final statement asked if the students think they have an accent. Unlike the previous statements, there were students answering across the scale (see table 7). Even with this wide range of responses, the largest group of responses from students in sixth and seventh grade was *never*, and the largest average of responses from eighth graders was *a little*. However, while about half of the students feel they have no accent in sixth and seventh, the other half of students feel they have a little to a lot of an accent. When asked if they pronounce words differently than their classmates both sixth and eighth graders reported the same, answering *a little* and *sometimes*, whereas seventh graders' highest response was *a little*. This does not follow the same trend as statement 12, when students were asked if they have an accent; however, this may be because of the people surrounding the students who have the same pronunciation or accent.

Table 7

*Speaking -Pronunciation Statements and Responses Chosen #2*

	N	L	S	AL	A
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>5. I pronounce words differently than my classmates.</b>					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	33%	33%	33%	0%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	20%	40%	20%	20%	0%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	0%	43%	43%	14%	0%
<b>12. I have an accent from my first language.</b>					
6 <sup>th</sup> -	50%	16%	16%	16%	16%
7 <sup>th</sup> -	40%	20%	20%	0%	20%
8 <sup>th</sup> -	14%	43%	29%	14%	14%

\*\*These results reflect all participants in each grade and percentages are rounded.

### **Open Ended Questions**

The open ended questions that were specifically about how students felt about their own speaking included answers with a variety of adjectives. The trend found among the data shows that the students felt overwhelmingly positive about their speaking. To look just at student perceptions of their own speaking I grouped the words the students wrote into three categories; positive, neutral, and negative. Again the number one is the category that had the most student responses, see table 8.

When students were asked to describe their speaking in English, the most responses were positive. Students wrote a wide variety of responses, which included the commonplace, “understandable,” “clear,” “fluent,” and “bad,” as well as the surprising,

“ready,” “entertaining,” “messie” (messy), and “listen.” From the three categories, there were thirteen positive, nine neutral, and one negative. This shows that the majority of students reported feeling confident in their speaking ability.

Table 8

<i>Categories from Open-Ended Survey Questions – Speaking</i>		
Question	Number of Students	Categories
2. Write three words to	13	Positive
describe your speaking in	9	Neutral
English.	1	Negative

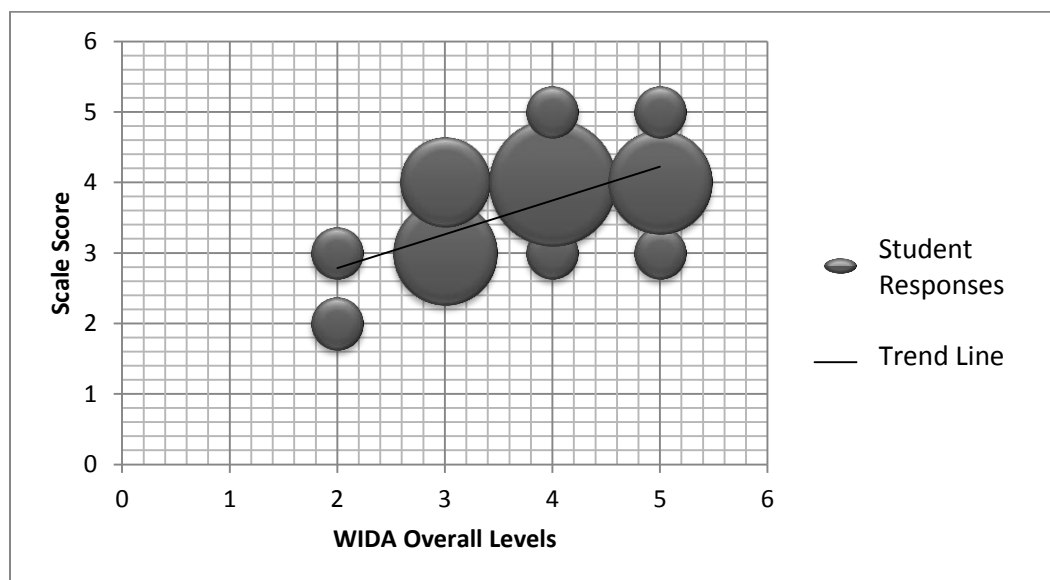
### **The Connection to Proficiency Levels**

The data presented in this stage shows the difference in how students at different proficiency levels answered the statements. The data found that there were no significant trends relating proficiency level to confidence in speaking. There is a small trend between lower English proficiency levels having less confidence in their speaking and pronunciation; however there is not enough data to support this hypothesis. Ultimately, there are no trends when looking at student proficiency levels and their speaking responses. The figures presented use a bubble chart to show how students at each proficiency level answered the statements. The student’s proficiency level is shown across the x-axis. The five point scale of, 1=never, 2=a little, 3=sometimes, 4=a lot, and 5=always, is on the y-axis, showing student reported confidence. The bubbles become larger to show that more students gave that specific answer. This was done because there was a difference in the amount of students who are at various WIDA overall levels. For

example there are two students who are overall WIDA level two and eight students who are an overall WIDA level four.

The only small trend related proficiency level to pronunciation. Figure 1 shows an example of this by displaying responses to the statement; *other students understand what I am saying*. It shows that the students who are an overall WIDA level 2 chose *a little* and *sometimes*, while the students who are an overall WIDA level 3 chose *sometimes* and *a lot*. The students who are overall WIDA level 4 and 5 both chose answers reflecting that other students often or always understand what they are saying. This apparent confidence in speaking skills is not strongly proven because the other speaking and pronunciation responses do not support this. Additionally, this same lack of a relationship is seen when looking at the speaking WIDA level for the speaking and pronunciation statement responses.

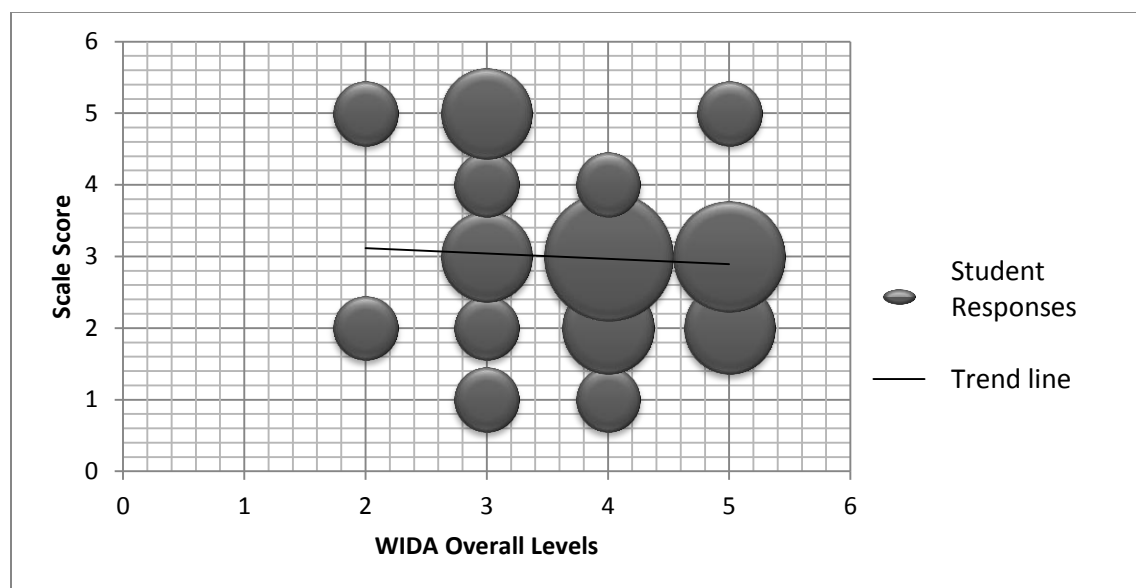
Figure 1: Statement three Student Responses at Proficiency level



When looking at the relationship of confidence in speaking to proficiency level there are a variety of differences in the answers. Figure 2 is an example that shows the

irregularities of this data. It shows responses to statement four, *I feel good speaking out loud in English in all of my classes*. Students who are an overall proficiency level 2 chose *a little* and *always*, and students who are an overall proficiency level 3 chose all possible answers. Again, these responses show there are no strong trends that relate students' confidence in speaking to their WIDA overall proficiency levels. The trend line shown in figure 2 demonstrates the lack of strong opinions for any single proficiency levels by not increasing or decreasing significantly as the proficiency level increases. Similar results were found when looking at students' responses in relationship to their speaking proficiency levels.

Figure 2: Statement Four Student Responses at Proficiency level



### Summary

In this chapter the results from the three stages of data collection were presented. The first stage was about student responses to the confidence statements and open-ended questions. The second stage analyzed the student response to the speaking statements and open-ended questions, and the third stage was about connections to students' WIDA

levels. In this third stage, the WIDA overall proficiency levels were analyzed for trends in the survey statements. In chapter five, I will discuss my major findings, their implications, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTION

In this study I attempted to answer the question *how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency level?* In this chapter I will review the major findings, which include the trends that were and were not found. Then, the limitations of this study will be addressed as will implications for other teachers. Finally, I will give suggestions for further research and reflect on the study.

### Major Findings

This section will review the major findings from the student survey. It offers insight into the thinking of middle school ESL students and the connections between their speaking confidence, their grade levels, and their English proficiency levels. It is presented in the same three stages in which the data was organized and analyzed, in order to answer the target question: *How confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency level?*

#### ESL Middle School Confidence

When it comes to students' confidence, the students who took this survey felt good about their overall and speaking confidence. This trend is supported by the fact that not one student picked the response *never* when answering statements about their confidence. Of the six questions about general confidence and confidence when speaking in English,



students on average answered that they felt confident *some* of the time. This average response shows that students were generally average about their feelings of confidence, not lacking all confidence nor overly confident. Similarly, statement nine asked if students speak quietly when they share out loud, and no one picked *always*, and only one student picked *a lot*. This suggests that when the students speak out loud they have the confidence to be heard most of the time. This could also indicate that these students are self-assured or even have outgoing personality types. One other notable point is how many students felt more confident speaking out loud in small groups, as seen in survey statement two. When students have an ESL class, most ESL teachers have students converse in small groups in order for more students to talk and for students to feel comfortable because only a few people are listening. In statement two, half of the sixth grade students answered *sometimes*, whereas the seventh and eighth grade students both answered *always*. This indicates that conversing with a few of their peers in class can be stress-free. Being in a small group allows students to talk about what they are learning, perhaps explain it to another student, ask questions, or debate an idea, all of which would lead to a greater understanding of the topic and more confidence in that subject area. This practice, speaking in small groups in various classrooms, may contribute to the confidence students have when speaking out loud in other places.

Another trend of the closed confidence statements is that the higher the grade level, the more confident the students were. This may be related to how long students were in the country or in one specific middle school; however, my data did not target for this. It may also be because of the maturity level of the students. Wood (2007) writes about student social emotional behavior at the ages of these students, saying that at age thirteen

(seventh grade) students become judgmental and challenge teachers, as well as having a preference to partner projects instead of collaborative large group work. This leads me to wonder if this trend relates to students' independence. As students go from sixth to eighth grade, they yearn for more independence while still battling the need to fit in with their peers.

A second theory to this trend of higher confidence at high grades could relate to the responses about classroom community in the open-ended questions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the open-ended questions about confidence gave great insight into factors that were not brought up in the statements. The category that came up more than once was having a positive classroom community. At the beginning of the school year teachers are encouraged to build a strong classroom community, and the data from this survey reflected this. In fact, Diaz-Rico (2008) has several claims about the classroom community becoming a classroom of learners, including the teacher, by getting to know each student, being open to students' sudden creativity, and to give students ways to manage their own learning. This could allow students to enjoy English and school because they would feel safe and comfortable with those around them. Question number four of the open-ended questions asked about a time when students did not feel confident, and students in each grade level mentioned a topic relating to a need for class community, however more students in seventh grade wrote about this category than sixth graders and more eighth graders wrote about this category than seventh graders. In fact, sixth grade students mostly responded that they did not know the answer or felt too scared to speak. Similarly, students in seventh grade wrote about a time when they were scared but not as many students as the sixth grade students. This shows that as the students increased in

grade level more of them felt that the lack of classroom community had made them less confident, and less of them responded about being scared. This could be because of the social aspects of school. By eighth grade students are very interested in peer relationships and peer acceptance. Working in a safe classroom allows students to fit in with their peers while still exploring and testing their individuality and identity. For example, if the classroom is a safe space, a student may share a different opinion from the group and not be bullied. The group may then, think of the new idea as a possibility. Another possible reason for this outcome may be that as students increase in age, they realize how being scared relates to the classroom community. Also, it could be that as they increase in grade level they stay with some of the same students and thus more willing to speak in class when those students attend.

The idea of classroom community is woven in and out of the answers to the open-ended questions, as seen in the paragraph above and again here. When asked about one thing that would improve student confidence, many students across all three grade levels responded with various elements that improve classroom community. This indicates that students want either more classroom community or a better approach to building classroom community. As referenced in Chapter two, Pappamihiel (2001) wrote about a study that found that many ESL students have high anxiety in mainstream classrooms because they feel like they will be laughed at. At the same time, a part of having a strong classroom community is when students are friends or at least friendly with each other. As seen in Table 5, some students felt more confident speaking out loud in class when they had friends close by. This could be from having a built-in support system. Many researchers purport, that a strong community can build student confidence,

participation, and in turn, learning (Dewing, DeCorby, & Ichikawa, 1999). Another observation was that some students felt comfortable when they had to present, as in question 3 of the open-ended questions. These students may have a strong classroom community to feel comfortable presenting in front of the whole class.

### **Being Understood, Pronunciation, and Accent**

The trends in pronunciation and speaking are that students thought they were understood most of the time and, similar to the students' confidence levels, the students' perceptions of their speaking and pronunciation were positive. The first trend, where students felt they were understood by both their peers and their teachers most of the time and rarely needed to repeat themselves, indicates that students feel they speak clearly and with enough fluency to be understood. The final question, number twelve, asked if students have an accent from their first language. Although the responses were across the board, it did not seem to impact the previous responses of being understood by their peers and teachers. Derwing and Munro (2005) write about the need for pronunciation class to be tailored to the students' needs, and that although the students report to having an accent, their speaking confidence remains fairly high. This could mean that their accent from their first language is subtle enough that it does not impair the listeners, or that students think they have a stronger accent than they do.

When students described their speaking in their own words it was most often positive. Only one student responded negatively; however, they did include one positive word, "good," out of their three words. Other students had varied responses, such as "good, awesome, sometimes okay," showing that they know their speaking is not always perfect. This shows that their thinking may have included times of the day when their speaking is

different than other times, or situations when their speaking confidence might change. One student wrote, “clear, strong, sometimes too fast,” showing awareness that their speaking could be slowed down a bit to be understood even more. Overall, this connects back to the trend in the previous section, about how students feel good about their overall speaking confidence. When students describe their speaking in positive terms, then it shows they feel good about their speaking, and thus have some confidence in their speaking abilities.

### **The Connection to Proficiency Levels**

As I began this study, it was easy to assume that students who are at lower English proficiency levels would feel less confident about their speaking and pronunciation in English. From this current data collection, I found that this may still be true; however, was not enough consistent data to conclude this. The data in figure one, which looked at the student answers to statement three in relationship to the overall WIDA proficiency levels, did show some trends. The little difference between students with a level two speaking score and students with a level six was that at the lower speaking proficiency level the students had lower confidence and at the higher speaking proficiency level students had higher confidence that other students understand what they say. This may be the start of a relationship between proficiency level and speaking confidence; however, there are no common trends in answers at each proficiency level found within most of the speaking and pronunciation statement answers. My data does not show any solid trends, which displayed across all four figures. This may indicate that the overall and speaking proficiency level is not a factor when students are well supported in small groups and classes with strong community. One idea of why students answered so differently is that

when students feel included and teacher instruction is differentiated, it will not matter their proficiency level, they can still participate and feel confident.

### **Limitations**

This study unearthed many new findings about middle school ESL student speaking confidence; however, there were some limitations. In order to give more accurate data on students' feelings across WIDA tested English proficiency levels it would have been better to have more students evenly represented at each level. There were a limited amount of students who were overall and speaking WIDA level 2, and there were no students who were overall or speaking WIDA level 1 or 6. This may have changed the results of the section on connections to proficiency level by showing more of the subtle trends, or revealing big trends that are unknown at this time.

The open-ended questions were informative; however, some responses were only phrases making it possible for more details to be added to the data. Since the students were not writing in their first language, there is a possibility that there were more details or an explanation that could have been shared. Allowing students to use their first language may have given even more input and more accurate results. A different approach to this same issue would have been to adapt the questions to elicit more detailed responses or require that students write several sentences in response to each question. This may mean a follow-up question within some of the questions or requiring students to write a few sentences in each space.

### **Implications**

This study's first major finding revealed that middle school ESL students have moderate to high levels of confidence. This, in turn, means there is little to no need for a

pronunciation class in middle schools because, as reported in this survey, pronunciation is not being asked for, nor is it hindering students from speaking in class, however both ESL and mainstream teachers should continue to build their classroom community throughout the year. Currently, few, if any, ESL teachers are including a pronunciation class in their middle school ESL class curriculum. Students may still need some help with pronunciation; however, based on this survey this could be handled individually, with a differentiated lesson at the request of the student. The second major finding revealed that the majority of students from this study indicated a good classroom community allows them to be able to speak out loud and participate more. In particular, the eighth grade students, who had the highest levels of confidence, said their worst speaking times were when there was a lack of various elements, such as classmates who don't laugh at them, friends in class, and teachers who allow them time to talk, that are part of a good classroom community. Teachers need to build a strong community in their classrooms not just in general, but in a way that highlights the differences in each student in order for students to feel like they can share out loud without being laughed at. There is no easy or fast solution for this; it takes time to get to know all students and what strengths they have. Diaz-Rico (2008) stresses the need for teachers to get to know their students, but also reminds us that "only the most fragile sense of community can grow within the classroom if the larger society is corrupt and uncaring" (p. 359). As teachers learn more about their students, they can then incorporate this new knowledge into their practice of creating classroom community. Additionally, while many ESL students may struggle outside of the classroom, for example, moving homes or deported parents, it makes creating a safe place at school even more important and more difficult.

### Further Research

The question that propelled my study forward was *-how confident do middle school ESL students feel about their speaking and pronunciation and is there a connection to their WIDA overall proficiency level?* After analyzing the data and synthesizing the findings, there are a few trends that could be further investigated and many more points that could be brought up. The first trend that could be investigated further is that as students increase in grade level in middle school they increase in confidence. There was data to suggest this; however, having a larger test group with fewer variables may give stronger results. Second, only once was there data showing a relationship between confidence and ESL proficiency level. A study with a set amount of students in each overall WIDA proficiency level could lead to more conclusive findings. There were other questions that arose as data was being considered, thus, looking at the middle school native English speakers versus non-native English speakers may be able to show if there is a difference in the levels of confidence between the two populations. It would also be beneficial to repeat this study with students at various schools. This would not only increase the validity of this study but help to understand if students' backgrounds play a part in student confidence. The students I see at the urban school I work at appear very self-conscious. There are some who I cannot get to speak loud enough to be heard by the class. After looking at the results, I agree that part of the reason is the classroom community, but there seems to be another piece that keeps them quiet, even in the hallways. It may also be of interest to have a longitudinal study to see how confidence may change based on strategies they learn in various classes.



One other question came up as I was looking at the results was whether family support and student socioeconomic status affect student speaking confidence. I wonder if the students speak less if they are spoken to less because their family is not available as often as other families. If the parents are not there to push them or reflect on their day with them, then are they keeping their thoughts quietly to themselves? And does this transfer to the classroom? This would be a different study, however, still relating to the factors that contribute to ESL student speaking confidence in the classroom.

### **Final Reflections**

Hamline's School of Education encourages its students to become not only educators in the classroom but also part of society at large. In this final reflection I will share not only the struggles I have overcome and lessons I have learned, but also the impact of what I have done within the community around me, and my teaching practice.

### **Links to Hamline's Conceptual Framework**

Hamline has four targets in which all of its developing educators must aim for. These include promoting equity in schools and society, building communities of teachers and learners, building knowledge, and practicing inquiry and reflection. As I reflect, I realize how I can be an agent of change in promoting equity in schools. One major finding is that students feel more confident when there is a strong classroom community. I plan to share this idea with other teachers by presenting my findings at the Minnesota English Learner Education (MELEd) Conference in the fall of 2016. I have attended this conference for the past five years and would like to contribute by becoming a presenter. I hope to encourage and push for mainstream teachers to continue to build their classroom communities throughout the school year as they learn the strength of each of their

students, in particular their ESL students. Additionally, I would like to take what I have learned and test it out in my own classroom. This would look like a continuation of classroom community building activities, not just at the start of the school year, but throughout the year to encourage students to feel safe to share their learning. This will help ESL students feel more included and more willing to speak out in class. This leads into the fact that the students in the classroom can then shape the classroom by influencing the teacher and the class as a whole, thus making it a classroom of learners, including the teacher. The confidence these middle school ESL students demonstrate would show that they are willing to speak up and be part of the interactive activities that aid in learning success.

The knowledge that I have constructed from this study gave me a greater view of the history of ESL student perceptions on their own speaking ability. The majority of the studies I read showed the insecurities of many adults ESL students about their speaking and pronunciation. This led me to connect to the families that I see at parent teacher conferences and the feeling that they are going through on top of the worry about their child. I will apply this knowledge, along with the addition of continued classroom community, into my teaching practices.

Overall, this study will change not only how I work with my ESL students, but also how I work with their families and my co-workers. I hope to build up student confidence by building classroom communities that include their strengths, cultures, and address their concerns. This will be done by having more small-group speaking activities at the beginning of the school year and lead into more and more presentations as well as opportunities for speaking in front of the classroom. As I improve this process, I hope to

share it with co-workers to spread this to other classrooms. Additionally, I will be more mindful when talking with families about concerns they have.

### **Personal Reflection**

As I personally reflect on the process of this study, I realize how dedicated I am. I may struggle through the process, but I keep with it because I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and the benefits of this study. My stubbornness may be part of this drive. I recognize I like things to be scheduled and deadlines to be made and met. With that in mind, I have also learned how to make things work and to stay calm when there are big issues that are out of my control. I have also found that I enjoy reading about advances in the ESL teaching community. It is not often I have time to seek out new information; however, with this study I was forced to. As I move forward, I would like to continue reading about current topics as part of my weekly routine. Finally, I wonder, as I am sure many other students in my position do, how many people will read this research and have it affect how they teach. My hope is that someone takes what I have started and continues to explore this topic. I know I will be addressing confidence with my eighth grade students next year and implementing more class community activities throughout the year. As far as student confidence in their speaking and pronunciation skills, I hope to tie it into some of the classroom activities to ease students who are self-conscious into a greater speaking role.

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## APPENDIX A: STUDENT SURVEY

Survey last updated 12/5/15

(\*Teacher can fill-in) \*Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ \*Overall Proficiency Level: \_\_\_\_\_ \*Speaking Level: \_\_\_\_\_

1. I am confident at school.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

2. I feel good speaking out loud in English in small groups.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

3. Other students understand what I am saying.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

4. I feel good speaking out loud in English to the whole class in of all my classes.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

5. I pronounce words differently than my classmates.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

6. Teachers ask me to repeat myself.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

7. I feel confident saying long words in English.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

8. It takes time for other students to understand what I am saying.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

9. I speak quietly in class.

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always

10. Teachers do not understand what I am saying,

Never            A little            Sometimes            A lot            Always



11. How often do you volunteer to speak out in class?

Never      A little      Sometimes      A lot      Always

12. I have an accent from my first language.

Never      A little      Sometimes      A lot      Always

1. What one thing would improve your confidence at school?

2. Write three words to describe your speaking in English.

3. Write about a time you felt the most confident speaking out loud in class.

4. Write about a time you felt the least confident speaking out loud in class.