



# Comprehensibility and intelligibility of international student speech: Comparing perceptions of university EAP instructors and content faculty



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 March 2016

Received in revised form 17 January 2017

Accepted 30 January 2017

### Keywords:

Comprehensibility

Intelligibility

Intensive english program

International students

English for academic purposes

## ABSTRACT

Many international students at U.S. universities study in intensive English courses to improve their language skills before taking content-oriented courses toward their degrees. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors in intensive courses and university faculty in content courses both listen to international student speech, but it is unclear whether they perceive it similarly or differently. In the present study, two groups (Content Faculty and EAP Instructors) provided comprehensibility ratings and transcribed an excerpt of speech from international students. Both groups of participants answered questions about their experience with the English of international students and other non-native speakers and their attitudes towards the English proficiency of international students. Comprehensibility ratings and intelligibility scores for both groups were similar, but EAP Instructors were able to transcribe more accurately for less-intelligible speakers. Content Faculty with negative attitudes towards international students' language abilities gave lower comprehensibility ratings than those with positive attitudes, even though their transcription accuracy was equivalent. These results strengthen our understanding of the relationship between comprehensibility and intelligibility and have implications for university EAP curricula.

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In recent years, international student enrollment has increased markedly at many universities in English-speaking countries (Fischer, 2014). With numbers of international students reaching at least 10% of the student body at 51 U.S. universities in the 2014–2015 school year (US News & World Report, 2016), issues of mutual comprehensibility between international students and their professors and classmates have gained salience in discussions of pedagogy and policy. At one US university, a recent survey of faculty found that 73% of respondents expressed concern about the oral communication skills of international undergraduates, with “an overwhelming sense that non-native speaking students are taking courses before their English language proficiency is adequate” (Evans, 2014, p. 2). When international students are under-prepared in language, it can lead to negative outcomes such as a loss of confidence for students and a lack of respect for the skills and knowledge these students bring to their universities (Ryan & Viète, 2009).

Many international students in the U.S.A. and other English-speaking countries study English in an intensive English program (IEP) prior to beginning their university degree programs. In an IEP, adult students take English language classes

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from EAP instructors on an intensive, full time basis (18–30 instructional hours a week). In some university IEPs, students can continue directly to university study after passing the final IEP course if they meet other admissions requirements of the university. This is the case at the university in the USA where this research was conducted.

University-based IEPs are EAP environments, aiming to prepare students with the language skills they will need for success in their university classrooms; implicitly, IEP instructors are preparing students with language skills to meet the expectations of other university teaching faculty. Both of these groups of instructors listen to the speech of international students, but there has been little research exploring the degree to which their perceptions match. Therefore, this study compares ratings of perceived comprehensibility and a measure of intelligibility for two groups of participants: faculty members teaching content courses and EAP instructors from the IEP.

## 1. Definitions

“Intelligible” and “comprehensible” both mean understandable. The ability to understand and be understood is essential for international students, as it is for any students. The terms “intelligibility” and “comprehensibility,” however, are not always consistently defined in the literature. For the purposes of this study, we adopt definitions used by [Munro and Derwing 1995; 2001; Derwing & Munro, 1997](#); and see an excellent summary in [Murphy, 2014](#), p. (261). Thus, intelligibility refers to the extent to which listeners can correctly identify the words they hear, often as measured by correct transcription. Comprehensibility, on the other hand, refers to the listeners' perception of the ease or difficulty with which they can make out a speaker's meaning, often measured by a rating on a 9-point Likert scale ([Munro & Derwing, 1995](#); see [Isaacs & Thomson, 2013](#); for a discussion of scale length).

Comprehensibility and intelligibility as defined above cannot be located exclusively with either the speaker or the listener ([Hustad, 2006; Zielinski, 2006](#)). Qualities of the speaker's speech such as speed and pronunciation will have an effect, as will qualities of the listener such as experience and attention. Successful communication depends on the efforts of both parties. Thus, a given sample of speech should not simply be identified as universally comprehensible or intelligible; it is essential to consider for whom a speech sample is comprehensible and/or intelligible, and in what contexts ([Lindeman & Subtirelu, 2013](#)).

## 2. What is the role of the listener in comprehensibility and intelligibility?

In order for communication to be successful, the listener must also do his or her part, and research has examined differences in comprehensibility and intelligibility using listeners with varied characteristics, and under varied listening conditions.

Listener L1 has been shown to have an effect on intelligibility of speech masked by noise, with L2 listeners better able to understand the speech of L2 speakers, even those with different L1s ([Bent & Bradlow, 2003](#)). When this effect has been tested in non-degraded speech, differences in intelligibility and comprehensibility due to the L1 of the listener, while significant, were much smaller than differences in results for individual speakers ([Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006](#)).

Familiarity with non-standard speech has been shown to facilitate transcription accuracy in laboratory studies when subjects listen multiple times to the same speaker or speakers with the same L1 ([Bradlow & Bent, 2008; Sidaras, Alexander, & Nygaard, 2009](#)), and this increase in intelligibility can extend even to novel accents ([Baese-Berk, Bradlow, & Wright, 2013](#)). Familiarity with the topic of the speech increases transcription accuracy as well ([Gass & Varonis, 1984](#)), and increased semantic context can facilitate both intelligibility and comprehensibility for sentences spoken by L2 speakers, while having no effect for comprehension of L1 speech ([Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008](#)).

Mixed results have been found concerning the effects of listeners' life experience with non-standard speech. [Kennedy and Trofimovich \(2008\)](#) found that EAP teachers, having greater experience with the speech of language learners, transcribed more accurately but made similar comprehensibility judgments to inexperienced listeners. [Kang and Rubin's \(2009\)](#) findings likewise included a correlation between length of language teaching experience and successful transcription in a cloze procedure. [Derwing and Munro \(1997\)](#) found that self-reported familiarity with a language predicted subjects' ability to identify speakers of that language through their L2 English; this recognition in turn correlated with better intelligibility scores. However, listeners' reported familiarity with specific accents has also been found not to correlate with increased intelligibility or comprehensibility ([Munro et al., 2006](#)). Listeners' beliefs about pronunciation have shown little effect on accentedness judgments or intelligibility scores ([Hayes-Harb & Watzinger-Tharp, 2012](#)). Further, training listeners in linguistics, and/or cross cultural awareness has been found to affect subjects' attitudes towards speakers of non-standard English, but to have no effect on comprehension or intelligibility scores ([Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro, 2002](#)).

Listener attitudes in particular have been shown to affect listeners' perceptions of comprehensibility. For example, [Lindeman \(2002\)](#) demonstrated that, in an interactive communication exercise, listener attitudes influenced perception of communication success. All subjects with negative attitudes rated their communication as unsuccessful (even though two thirds of them were in fact successful based on objective measures) while those with positive attitudes were more likely to rate the communication as successful. That is, listener attitudes had a greater effect on perceptions of communication success than on actual communication success. [Kang and Rubin \(2009\)](#) also found greater effects from listener attitude on subjective measures of communication success than on more objective measures of comprehension.

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