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# Comprehensibility and liveliness in nonnative student oral presentations before and after training: A mixed methods study

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study analyzes comprehensibility and liveliness in nonnative student oral presentations. The purpose of this study is threefold: to investigate the effectiveness of training nonnative students in prosody and oral presentations skills; to examine the relationship between accentedness and comprehensibility; and to examine whether speakers receive more positive comprehensibility ratings from listeners of the same L1 background as compared to listeners with different L1s. The study involved four Chinese speakers and 64 listeners from 14 different L1 backgrounds. Inferential statistics reveal different levels of improvement for the four speakers. An analysis of the ratings assigned to “accent” and “comprehensibility” shows that even when accent is perceived as strong, it does not hinder comprehensibility. As for the comparison between comprehensibility ratings from Chinese listeners and other L1 background listeners, results from eight independent two-sample t-tests show only two significant instances; in those two instances, the comprehensibility ratings assigned by listeners that share the speakers’ L1 (Chinese) were more positive than the ratings assigned by listeners from other L1 backgrounds. The findings yielded in this study indicate that training in prosody and oral presentation skills is effective and may help the academic success of international students.

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## 1. Introduction

The number of international students pursuing higher education in the United States continues to increase, and reached a record high of 886,052 students in the 2013/2014 academic year ([Open Doors, 2014](#)). Coming from a great variety of first language and cultural backgrounds, international students frequently describe a fear that they will not understand the lectures, succeed in their exams, or even keep up with their native classmates during their first semesters at American institutions.

Oral presentations are a particular source of anxiety, as they are a component of many undergraduate and graduate courses across fields. Confidence in spoken English skills is a considerable obstacle. A large number of international students “cannot perform without feelings of anxiety” ([Liu & Littlewood, 1997](#), p. 377); many have reported experiencing “feelings of inadequacy and frustration” during classroom discussions and when presenting oral projects for classes ([Kim, 2006](#), p. 480).

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Hincks (2005) argues that “public speaking difficulties are magnified for second language users, who are operating under a heavy cognitive load of planning lexical content and its articulation at the same time as they may lack confidence and familiarity with the potentialities of spoken academic English” (p. 577).

Accent is another major source of anxiety for nonnative students giving oral speeches. Most students are self-conscious about their nonnative accents, which causes them to be tense about presenting in public. However, research has shown that the presence of an accent does not always hinder comprehensibility or communication (Derwing & Munro, 1997, 2001; Munro & Derwing, 1998, 2001; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006). Although accent may not hinder comprehensibility, the way students use prosody (i.e., the rhythmic and intonational patterns of a given language) may affect the content of the presentation, causing part of the message to be obscured. Presenters should speak with a lively voice that varies in intonation in order to deliver more comprehensible messages (Hincks, 2005). Intonation is defined by Levis and Wichmann (2015) as “the use of pitch variations in the voice to communicate phrasing and discourse meaning in varied linguistic environments” (p. 139). Hincks argues that, “a lively voice is achieved by consciously modifying the three prosodic dimensions of loudness, pitch and tempo” (p. 576). She adds that modification in intonation patterns helps the listeners understand the content of the message.

The skills that students employ in oral presentations may significantly impact their delivery. Thus, making effective use of specific prosodic features, along with training in oral presentation skills in the American academic setting, can help nonnative students become more effective oral presenters, relieving the language anxiety and mitigating the fear of being misunderstood.

This perceptual mixed methods study investigates comprehensibility and liveliness in nonnative student oral presentations, examining how comprehensible and lively nonnative listeners judge nonnative student oral presentations to be before and after training. This study also investigates the relationship between accent and comprehensibility and examines whether Chinese speakers receive more positive comprehensibility ratings from Chinese listeners as compared to listeners from other L1 backgrounds.

## 2. Background

Research on the evaluation of second language (L2) speech has analyzed nonnative utterances based on several dimensions. Among the most relevant and least disputed measures are three identified by Munro and Derwing (1995): *intelligibility*, the extent to which an utterance is understood, *comprehensibility*, the listener's perceptions of difficulty in understanding certain utterances, and *accentedness*, how strong the speaker's foreign accent is perceived to be.

Research on intelligibility (i.e., decoding of speech) employs speech transcription or fixed cloze tests as a means to evaluate how intelligible nonnative speech is. Comprehensibility, on the other hand, is often measured through perceptual scales or other types of comprehension tests. Because this study investigates the degree of difficulty that listeners perceive in understanding the content of oral presentations (comprehension) as a whole before and after training, the focus is on the dimensions “accent” and “comprehensibility” rather than on “accent” and “intelligibility”.

### 2.1. *Accentedness and comprehensibility: native listeners' perceptions of L2 speech*

Accentedness, “the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance sounds different from an expected production pattern” (Munro et al., 2006, p. 112), used to be regarded as one of the major factors hindering comprehensibility, an overall rating of how easy it is to understand a given speaker (Field, 2005). However, recent research has shown that accent and comprehensibility are not completely related. In fact, comprehensibility may not be affected even when the accent is very strong (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012; Munro & Derwing, 1995, 2015).

Munro and Derwing (1995) investigated the effect of accent on sentence processing time; twenty native listeners rated a set of true or false statements uttered by 10 native speakers of English and 10 native speakers of Mandarin. The results showed that the utterances by Mandarin speakers took longer to process; however, while the degree of comprehensibility influenced response times, the researchers found no evidence that accentedness *per se* had such an effect.

The relationship among *accent*, *comprehensibility*, and *intelligibility* was the focus of another study on accent and processing time (Derwing & Munro, 1997). The results showed a divergence between perceived comprehensibility ratings and success in transcribing the texts; although native listeners assigned negative comprehensibility ratings to nonnative speech, they were able to successfully transcribe the texts they heard. This finding indicates that some accented but completely intelligible utterances may require additional effort or processing time, which drives native listeners to rate them as difficult to understand.

What then causes listeners to rate perfectly intelligible speech as heavily accented? Munro and Derwing (1995) argue that even when an utterance by an L2 speaker is fully understood, accent may have an impact on communication because listeners often show a degree of prejudice against some L2 speakers or against nonnative accents in general. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) claim that the accessibility of an utterance depends not only on the speaker's accurate and clear enunciation, but also on “the listener's expectation and attitude, such as experience with, and tolerance of, low prestige or foreign accents” (p. 10). Other researchers also attribute this negative reaction toward accented speech to impatience (Lacina, 2002; Lippi-Green, 1997) and, listeners' inexperience with L2 speech (Lippi-Green, 1997).

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