



Accent and speech rate effects in English as a lingua franca



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ABSTRACT

The study examines whether a slower speech rate enhances listening comprehension of unfamiliar English varieties. The participants were 179 Japanese university students studying English as a foreign language in Japan. Speech samples elicited from a variety of fluent English speakers were digitally recorded. In our first experiment, we determined that a less familiar accent (Indian English) was more difficult for these students to comprehend than a more familiar North American English accent. In the second experiment, Japanese participants heard the samples first at the original speech rate and then, several weeks later, at a reduced rate. When listening to the most heavily accented speaker, participants, irrespective of their proficiency, achieved significantly higher mean comprehension scores with the slowed speech rate. However, no significant speech rate effect was observed for the less heavily accented samples. The results of the study will contribute to pedagogical developments in teaching English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

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1. Introduction

Although linguistic diversity of English has been recognized by scholars and educators, most textbooks, standardized tests, and local classroom practices need to keep pace (Canagarajah, 1999; Matsuda, 2009; McKenzie, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2011; Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011). Individual educators, however, are beginning to raise students' awareness of English varieties, develop strategies for communicating in English with speakers of other varieties, and offer models of what different varieties sound like while showing how lexical or syntactic patterning can also vary (Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Murata & Jenkins, 2009). Yet how to teach English from such a pluralistic perspective in order to ensure comprehensibility among such diverse speakers is only just being explored.

Linguistic features which appear to be relevant to perceived accentedness include segmentals, prosody (supra-segmentals), syllable structure, voice quality (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, & Koehler, 1992), and extended discourse (Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002, 2005). In research pertaining to second language learner academic listening, Flowerdew (1994) noted two major input variables: accent and speech rate. In the present study, we address two second language listener variables important to comprehensibility for our learners in Japan: perception of accentedness and rates of speech (actual and modified). We believe that Japanese learners' perceptions and performance in relation to listening

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comprehension of various accents in English have the potential to inform both comprehensibility studies and teaching practices in other countries as well.

In Japan, English has been taught and assessed as a foreign language with native-speaker only models (Yano, 2011) most often with American and, to a much lesser extent, British Englishes (Hu, 2012). Other English varieties may prove more difficult for the Japanese university student to comprehend in instruction or assessments. However, since Japanese students may encounter different varieties of English in their future careers or continuing education, the educational reform in Japan has indicated a need to incorporate different varieties of English rather than depend upon an essentially US-only variety (Matsuda, 2009; McKenzie, 2013).

Kachru's (1992) model of Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles provides a useful framework for classifying the Englishes of countries worldwide. This model places Japan, where English is neither an official nor auxiliary language, in the Expanding Circle. Researchers in ELF have noted that large-scale tests of English have had a focus on Inner Circle English varieties, specifically American and British (Bruthiaux, 2010; Harding, 2012; Hu, 2012; Jenkins, 2006, 2007; Khan, 2009). Applying native speaker accents and standards for the interpretation of error in testing has had a washback effect in that classroom materials and practices with a focus on Inner Circle varieties of English are used to the exclusion of others (Jenkins, 2006; Matsuda, 2009).

Authenticity in assessment, in which tests mirror real-life language usage, including the use of different varieties of English, has been studied in terms of equality of access to all learners and is increasingly being incorporated into large-scale assessments. Hu (2012) reported that the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) uses readings and listening texts from a variety of Inner Circle speakers, and adds non-native speakers as examiners for both oral and written tests. Harding (2012) found that the Test of English as a Foreign Language internet-based (TOEFL iBT) and IELTS both use a range of accents in the listening sections of the tests, although on the TOEFL iBT, this is limited to the mini lecture sections. The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) has been used in Japan, Korea and other countries to assess general language proficiency for employment purposes, including the ability to communicate about daily life and basic job duties (Stoynoff & Chapelle, 2005). The listening section of the current TOEIC, implemented in 2006, includes varieties of Inner Circle English, while the original version had employed American English only.

A range of studies of listening comprehension have examined diverse varieties of English, and have assessed both perceived and actual effects on comprehension in order to avoid any test bias based on participants' native languages (Harding, 2012). Perceived accentedness may differ depending on the listener's native language (Munro & Derwing, 1995) or the listener's prior linguistic experience and general English proficiency (Gass & Varonis, 1984). Accentedness of non-native speakers of English may be judged severely despite high comprehension rates on the part of native speaking listeners (Anderson-Hsieh et al., 1992; Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1995, 1998) and non-native listeners alike (Munro & Derwing, 2001).

The effects of non-native accents on comprehension by native and non-native speaking listeners have been studied by Major et al. (2002). Listeners from a variety of L1 backgrounds listened to TOEFL style lectures by speakers with several accents. Findings revealed that while Spanish speakers performed well when listening to other Spanish speakers, the same was not true for the Chinese listeners, who scored significantly lower when listening to speakers of their own first language speaking in English. The researchers speculated that similarities in prosody may have resulted in better comprehension even when accents were perceived as strong.

Speech rate assumed to facilitate or impede listener understanding of English has been examined by a number of researchers (Derwing & Munro, 2001; Griffiths, 1990; Munro & Derwing, 2001; Zhao, 1997). Flowerdew (1994) noted that somewhat slowed rates may facilitate both native and non-native speakers' understanding, although production that is too slow may actually be detrimental to comprehension. Evidence from research on speech rate is so far inconclusive.

Some research has shown that, when non-native speakers listened to speech samples from English native speakers, a slowing of speech rates elicited positive results. Griffiths (1990) varied speech rates with listeners of lower-intermediate levels of English responding to true-false comprehension questions. Results indicated a significant difference between the scores at fast and slow rates; however, the difference between the average and slowed condition was not significant. Zhao (1997) found that listening comprehension improved when L2 learners were able to control the speech rate of the recording. Native speaker listeners appear to be more sensitive to heavy L1 accents than to rates of delivery. Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler (1988) investigated native speaking listeners' understanding of various native and non-native speakers. The results of comprehension tests and scalar judgments of rate indicated that the native speaker of American English scored highest, as expected, and the listeners' scores for all speakers at the natural rate of speech were higher than those at an increased rate. Understandably, the comprehension of faster speech from the most heavily accented non-native speaker was significantly lower-rated.

Munro and Derwing (1998) surveyed how slowing the speech rate of Mandarin speakers of English can affect comprehension of native speaker listeners. Results indicated that the Mandarin speakers were generally judged to be less comprehensible and more accented when they slowed down, with their conscious efforts to slow down creating intonation problems which may have annoyed listeners. In a subsequent study, Munro and Derwing (2001) found a positive effect on both comprehension and accentedness with native speaker listeners when non-native speech was sped up; however, they also detected that there was "a point beyond which an increase in rate is detrimental" (p. 464), concluding that the relationship between speech rate and judgments of comprehensibility is curvilinear.

In a similar study by Derwing and Munro (2001), the slowed English speech of Mandarin speakers was not preferred by native English or native Mandarin listeners. A group of other non-native listeners, however, preferred a slowed Mandarin rate even to that of native English speakers. Yet this same group did perceive the rate of the slowest Mandarin speakers to be too

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