

Re-examining phonological and lexical correlates of second language comprehensibility: The role of rater experience

Kazuya Saito

Pavel Trofimovich

Talia Isaacs

Stuart Webb

Abstract

Recently, some empirical studies (e.g., Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012 in *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge University Press) have begun to examine in depth how native speakers attend to phonological (segmentals, syllables, word stress, intonation, speech rate) as well as lexical (frequency, diversity, polysemy, hypernymy, text length, lemma, morphology) aspects of language when evaluating comprehensibility (i.e., ease of understanding) in second language (L2) speech. The current study aimed to investigate whether and to what degree two types of native speaking raters (with and without professional experience in L2 assessment as trained linguists and ESL/EFL professionals) differentially assess L2 comprehensibility of extemporaneous speech samples produced by non-native speakers with a wide range of proficiency. Overall, the expert raters provided more lenient comprehensibility scores than the novice raters. The results of the linguistic analyses further revealed that while both of the expert and novice raters similarly processed phonological information (particularly drawing on prosody) during their comprehensibility judgement, they showed different processing patterns as to L2 lexical information. Unlike the novice raters' comprehensibility judgement, which was exclusively linked with the number of different words L2 talkers used without much repetition in their L2 speech, the expert raters paid attention not only to surface details (diversity) but also to actual meanings (lemma) of L2 words. The results suggest that experienced raters' leniency towards accented L2 speech may be related to their ability to assess L2 talkers' appropriate use of words in context despite the non-nativelike phonological and lexical forms.