

Second Language Speaking Proficiency: Reviews, Results and Implications of Empirical Studies

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As English increasingly becomes the primary vehicle of international communication, particularly among non-native speakers, developing adequate second language (L2) oral proficiency takes on a role of great importance, especially for learners who wish to use the language to achieve career- and academic-related goals. The first component of the lecture provides a state of the art review on L2 speaking research focusing on (a) “*ideal*” learning goals that many foreign language learners, such as Japanese learners of English, typically have (i.e., speaking an L2 like a native speaker); and (b) “*realistic*” learning goals that researchers actually suggest, drawing on empirical evidence (i.e., using the L2 as a successful non-native speaker). Subsequently, I would like to introduce three L2 speech projects that I have been involved with.

1. Evaluating the pedagogical potential and limitations of EFL education in Japan

My research team at Waseda University has aimed to establish benchmarks for adult Japanese learners of different levels of L2 oral ability. In particular, our project focuses on examining (a) the extent to which Japanese learners can improve their speaking skills after six years of EFL education in Japan at secondary schools (e.g., approximately 900 hours in total); and (b) how their performance differs not only from native speakers of English (i.e., an ideal goal), but also from experienced Japanese learners in Canada who use English on a daily basis for professional purposes (i.e., a realistic goal).

2. Measuring important linguistic correlates of L2 oral proficiency

My research team at Concordia University (Canada) and University of Bristol (England) has aimed to identify which aspects of language—pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar—are relatively important for improving L2 oral proficiency. In conjunction with spontaneous speech samples from 120 Japanese learners of English in Canada, we have analyzed how phonological (segmentals, word stress, intonation), temporal (speech rate), lexical (appropriateness, density, variation, abstractness, frequency, sense relations), and grammatical (accuracy, complexity) variables interact to influence native speakers’ impressionistic judgements of beginner, intermediate and advanced-level L2 speaking proficiencies.

3. Teaching second language speaking

I have examined how integrating form-focused instruction into meaning-oriented classrooms can impact the development of L2 speech perception and production skills by conducting several classroom intervention studies with more than 100 ESL and EFL students in Canada and Japan. The project has shed light on when, how, and to what degree a combination of contextualized input- and output-based activities can lead L2 learners to enhance the rate and ultimate attainment of L2 speech acquisition.