

Oral comprehensibility and vocabulary use can be judged based on small multi-word units more than on single words

What this research was about and why it is important

Many scholars and educators emphasize that what matters in real-life second language (L2) communication is comprehensibility (rather than linguistic nativelikeness). It might be that comprehensibility depends, to some extent, on collocation use (i.e., meaningful co-occurrences of multiple words). In this study, the researcher examined whether collocations can determine the extent to which L2 speech can be successfully understood and be perceived as lexically appropriate (with the right words used in the right way). First, 10 first language (L1) speaking English listeners rated the overall comprehensibility and the lexical appropriateness of 85 L2 speakers' spontaneous speech transcripts. The findings showed that these listeners relied on the L2 speakers' use of combinations of words that contained infrequent, abstract and complex words.

What the researcher did

- Speech was elicited from 85 Japanese learners of English, with a range of proficiencies, as they described a series of pictures.
- Written transcripts of this speech were read by ten L1 English raters: five made intuitive judgments of comprehensibility and five made judgments of lexical appropriateness, without being given any rating descriptors.
- The lexical profiles of the speech samples were analyzed for what kinds of words were used, both in terms of single words and combinations of two or three words.
- Statistical analyses were performed to understand the extent to which different factors might have influenced the judgments given by the listeners.

What the researcher found

- The listeners' judged that more comprehensible and more lexically appropriate L2 speech was related to the use of more infrequent two- and three-word units.
- Also, longer speech was perceived as being more comprehensible and more lexically appropriate.
- In contrast, the frequency and other characteristics of *individual* words seemed to influence only a small amount the judgments about comprehensibility and lexical appropriateness.

Things to consider

- L2 speakers may be perceived as more comprehensible if they employ combinations of infrequent, and also possibly more abstract, words. This might be because pairs or triplets of words that are strongly associated (without too many other competitors) might help speech to be more easily understood.
- Compared to similar findings about L2 writing, the strength of the relationship between perceived comprehensibility and small units of collocated words seemed relatively large.
- Teachers and learners could consider how to enhance the nature of L2 learners' collocation knowledge, though this study did not try any such techniques and did not document learning over time.
- The current study used transcripts of speech, and so eliminated other variables that might also influence listeners' judgements about comprehensibility.

Materials are publicly available at <https://www.iris-database.org>.

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