

## Does spoken language proficiency reflect foreign accent and ease of understanding?

### What this research was about and why it is important

This study explored how English-speaking listeners evaluate English spoken by native speakers of Finnish and Finland-Swedish, and how these evaluations relate to the speakers' overall spoken proficiency in English, as determined by a national language proficiency assessment. The English-speaking listeners' evaluations focused on comprehensibility (i.e., how easy or difficult it is to understand the speakers) and foreign accentedness (i.e., how strong of a foreign accent the speakers have). Previous research on comprehensibility and accentedness demonstrate that a foreign accent does not necessarily make the speaker difficult to understand. However, previous research has seldom addressed comprehensibility and accentedness in relation to the speakers' overall spoken proficiency in the target language, but language proficiency assessment has been criticized for not considering pronunciation, comprehensibility and accent systematically. The researcher studied the relationship between the overall spoken proficiency of the participants and their comprehensibility and accentedness. The results revealed only a loose connection, even though comprehensibility and foreign accent were included in the criteria that were used to assess the participants' proficiency.

### What the researcher did

- For this study, 30 Finnish-speaking and 30 Finland-Swedish-speaking teenagers were selected among participants in a national language assessment. Their spoken proficiency in English was determined in the national assessment according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) proficiency scale, and they were evenly distributed across proficiency levels A2, B1, B2.
- A listening test was arranged, using approximately 20-second samples from a speaking task that the participants performed for the national assessment. The speech samples were played to 34 English-speaking teenagers, who used a numeric scale to evaluate how easy or difficult it was to understand the speaker and how strong of a foreign accent they have.
- The numeric evaluations were studied in comparison to the speakers' overall spoken proficiency. In addition, the two speaker groups were contrasted in order to find out whether there were differences in the comprehensibility and accentedness of Finnish and Finland-Swedish learners of English.

### What the researcher found

- The speakers' ease of understanding and foreign accentedness were only loosely connected to the speakers' overall spoken proficiency. The connection was particularly weak between proficiency and accentedness.
- In addition, Finland-Swedish learners of English were found to be easier to understand and less accented than their Finnish-speaking peers at proficiency levels B1 and B2.

### Things to consider

- These findings raise several questions: How does language assessment consider aspects that affect comprehensibility and accentedness (e.g., stress, intonation, speaking rate)? What makes Finland-Swedish learners of English sound more comprehensible and less accented than their Finnish-speaking peers, despite equal overall spoken proficiency?
- As foreign accent does not necessarily make the speaker difficult to understand, accentedness and proficiency do not need to go hand in hand. Foreign accent should not lower the speakers' proficiency, unless the accent significantly affects ease of understanding. Then again, one might expect proficiency to reflect ease of understanding.
- This study implies that language assessment might not sufficiently consider all the aspects that affect ease of understanding. However, the CEFR assessment criteria have been updated since this study was conducted, and the researcher discusses whether using the updated criteria would lead to a closer connection between proficiency and comprehensibility (and accentedness).
- In conclusion, learners are advised to focus on speech features that have been found to affect comprehensibility, regardless of their overall spoken proficiency.

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