

[ARTICLE]

Listening to Unfamiliar English Accents : Japanese EFL learners' Perceptions and Comprehension

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Abstract

This study aims to identify potential factors that can predict EFL learners' listening comprehension of unfamiliar English accents. Specifically, the study examines the relationships among perceived comprehensibility, perceived accentedness, general English proficiency, and actual comprehension of tertiary level Japanese students. Eighty-nine native Japanese-speaking students served as participants. The results found that actual comprehension of unfamiliar English did not correlate with perceived comprehensibility, nor with perceived accentedness, suggesting perceptual levels of both accentedness and comprehensibility may not be good indicators of listening comprehension performance. English proficiency, on the other hand, correlated with listening comprehension at both perceived and actual levels. In particular, low proficiency students' reading comprehension scores were found as a best predictor of their listening comprehension. Based on the results, pedagogical implications from the perspective of teaching English as a lingua franca (ELF) and/or world Englishes (WE) are discussed.

Keywords : World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, listening comprehension, comprehensibility, accentedness, English proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 WE, ELF, and ELT

As a result of globalization and localization, the English language displays diverse social functions as well as linguistic forms everywhere around the world. Based on the roles of the language, Indian linguist Kachru (1992) provided a three-concentric circle model for world Englishes : Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle Englishes. Examples of the Inner Circle countries are the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, where English is used as the first language of the people. The Outer Circle includes such post-colonial countries as Singapore, Kenya, and the Philippines. People in this circle use English as a medium of education and as an official language in addition to their L1. Japan, China, and Korea are examples of the Expanding Circle, where people learn English as a foreign language and have almost no need to use the English language in their daily lives, except for such special occasions as traveling abroad and business transactions with overseas clients. An important implication of these concentric circles is that English users of the Expanding Circle outnumber those in the Outer Circle, and Outer Circle English speakers outnumber Inner Circle English speakers. There is no doubt that English is used among nonnative speakers with varying English proficiency levels and L1 backgrounds.

While the spread of English has resulted in new users and owners of the language, diversities in the English language itself may not be integrated. Particularly, with regard to pronunciation, there is an

inseparable link between identity and accent. Keeping an accent, in a sense, is a way of displaying one's identity. In WE research, investigating people's attitudes toward English accents has been fairly popular, and abundant studies have been reported from a variety of perspectives. Some focused on Inner Circle English speaker attitudes toward Expanding Circle English (Munro & Derwing, 1999 ; Crowther, Trofimovich, Saito, & Isaacs, 2015), and others investigated Expanding Circle English speaker attitudes toward Inner Circle English accents (McKenzie, 2008). Still others investigated EFL learner attitudes toward Outer Circle varieties (Matsuura, Chiba, & Yamamoto, 1994 ; Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995) and Outer Circle speakers' reactions to Expanding Circle English (Matsuura & Chiba, 2008).

In Europe, English has been seen as a lingua franca, which is defined as "any use of English among speakers of different L1s for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Similar the Kachru's WE paradigm, the notion of ELF has developed in response to the need for research in understanding communication between/among nonnative English speakers as well as between native and nonnative English speakers. However, researchers such as Berns (2008) and Seidlhofer (2009) point out, the chief focus of ELF research may be quite different from that of WE. According to Seidlhofer (2009), ELF research has primarily centered on Expanding Circle English speakers, whereas WE researchers have been less concerned with them. She further states that the term "Englishes" in WE implies both "English as a native language (i.e., Inner Circle Englishes)" and "English as a nativized language (Outer Circle Englishes)." In other words, Expanding Circle English, from the viewpoint of WE researchers at least, is not a legitimate variety like Inner and Outer Circle Englishes but is learner English, which is often treated as fossilized forms and errors. However, such a view needs to be revised because functional and cultural boundaries among the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles have become increasingly vague (Jenkins, 2009). Since the globalization of the world has changed the nature and function of communication among English speakers of the three circles, English-using communities are not just in the Inner and Outer Circles but in the Expanding Circle as well (Seidlhofer, 2009). Therefore, more research needs be conducted to investigate how communication is carried out among speakers of all three circles.

It is undeniable that the primary purpose of English language teaching (ELT) today is to help learners to become competent communicators via ELF. Researchers and educators should develop curricula that reflect the linguistic diversity within English (e.g., Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). Such discussion to date, however, has been mostly theoretical and ideological ; little attention has been paid to define what exactly needs to be taught and how. Matsuda & Friedrich (2011) stress more research needs to be conducted to gain a deeper insight into ELF/WE instruction. Likewise, the investigator of the present study would like to stress the importance of gaining profound information on English learners involved in ELF communication. The main focus of the present study is to explore contributing factors to Expanding Circle students' comprehension of unfamiliar English accents. Specifically, the study examines which better predicts EFL students' comprehension in listening to unfamiliar Outer Circle Englishes : perceived accentedness, perceived comprehensibility, or general English proficiency.

1.2 Accentedness, comprehensibility, and comprehension

Research on spoken ELF among different L1-background people involves the issue accentedness, which is generally seen as the listeners' perception of how close the pronunciation of an utterance is to that of a native speaker (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). It is also defined as the extent to which a listener believes an utterance differs phonetically from native speaker utterances (Munro & Derwing, 2001). Whether it is close or different, it is the listener side that judges the accentedness level of an

utterance. The listener is not necessarily a native speaker of English, s/he could be a nonnative speaker. Any English speaker could judge an utterance based on their experience with the language. Therefore, depending on L1 background and English learning experience, listeners might bring in different expectations in terms of accents. In ELT research, accentedness has been generally assessed by listeners' subjective evaluation using a rating scale (Munro & Derwing, 1999; Matsuura, Chiba, Mahoney, & Rilling, 2014; Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2015).

There is a set of terms that scholars in accent and pronunciation research have employed to determine the extent to which a speaker's utterances are understood by listeners: intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. Smith (1992) defined these terms as word/utterance recognition, word/utterance meaning, and meaning behind word/utterance, respectively. Following this, Derwing and Munro (1997) gave specific frameworks to the first two concepts, intelligibility and comprehensibility, which had often been employed interchangeably in the past. According to these authors, intelligibility is defined as the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by listeners and was assessed through their orthographic transcriptions. Comprehensibility, on the other hand, is listener's perception of how difficult or easy it is to understand an utterance, and is assessed on a Likert scale. Therefore it is often called *perceived comprehensibility*.

Previous studies have examined listening comprehension in diverse varieties of English, and have assessed both perceived and actual effects on comprehension of L2 speech (e.g., Gass & Veronis, 1984; Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1999; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2005; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). Although accentedness is generally seen as a negative factor that would affect the extent of understanding, past studies indicate inconsistent results. Major, et al. (2005), for example, reported that nonnative accents had significant negative effects on comprehension of both Inner and Outer Circle listeners. Investigating Japanese EFL students' listening comprehension in particular, Matsuura, et al. (2014) reported that one of the two listener groups marked significantly higher scores with their familiar North American English than they did with Indian English, an accent totally unfamiliar to them. The other group also marked higher scores with the North American accent although there was no significant difference between the two accents. On the other hand, several studies suggested that accentedness would not necessarily reduce comprehensibility. Munro and Derwing (1999), for instance, maintained nonnative speech would be highly comprehensible even if the speaker had a strong foreign accent. The contradictory findings of these past studies are apparently due to methodological differences. Therefore, extensive studies are needed to confirm the effects of accents on listener understanding. Possible listener factors influential to their comprehension and comprehensibility judgment are English proficiency, familiarity with the speaker, familiarity with the accent, familiarity of the speech content, and so forth. All of these more or less affect the extent of understanding.

1.3 Research questions

The present study is motivated by the need to investigate how EFL students understand unfamiliar spoken English. Aiming to identify possible listener factors that impact the extent to which they actually understand unfamiliar accents, this study focuses on tertiary level Japanese students' perceptions of comprehensibility and accentedness as well as listening comprehension performance. Unlike many past studies that examined native English speakers' as well as ESL (not EFL) students' perceptions and comprehension (e.g., Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006), this study examines performance of intermediate level English learners who have never experienced living in an English-speaking country. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) Is perceived comprehensibility a good indicator of actual comprehension in unfamiliar English?
- (2) Does perceived accentedness affect actual comprehension and perceived comprehensibility?
- (3) Is general English proficiency a good indicator of actual comprehension and perceived comprehensibility?
- (4) Does the extent of perceived accentedness differ depending on students' English proficiency levels?
- (5) Which best predicts actual comprehension in unfamiliar English : perceived accentedness, perceived comprehensibility, listening proficiency, or reading proficiency? Do different proficiency level students indicate different tendencies?

2. METHODS

2.1 Instruments

Two types of tests were employed to collect data from listeners. The first was a general English proficiency test, which was created by a Tokyo-based educational company ALC. The test consisted of two sections : 20 test items for listening and another 20 items for reading. The types of questions were quite similar to those in TOEIC, although the length of the test itself was much shorter (30 minutes in total) and the recordings in the listening section were all done in North American English. While the current TOEIC includes the four types of accents (American, Canadian, British, and Australian accents), the test used in this study was quite similar to the earlier version of TOEIC. This test was selected for data collection because of its short test time to avoid listener fatigue and because of the assumption that Japanese students in general are most familiar with American English from the very early stage of learning English.

Another test was to assess actual comprehension, perceived accentedness and perceived comprehensibility. All the test items were adopted from Official TOEIC Bridge books (ETS, 2007 ; 2008). However, unlike the TOEIC Bridge, recordings were all done by Outer Circle English speakers. Each item included a short reading passage read followed by a multiple-choice question. Examples of prompts were airport announcements, radio newscasts, and product advertisements. Each passage consisted of two to four sentences, and the vocabulary and sentence structures were fairly basic. A total of 30 listening test items were included here. The prompts were read by five Outer Circle English speakers recruited from universities in the United States and Australia. Among more than 10 speakers, these five were selected based on their fluency and accentedness. Their backgrounds were in Table 1.

In order to assess listener perceptions of accentedness and comprehensibility, two statements were included in the test : "This speaker's accent is unfamiliar to me and "It is easy to understand this speaker." These statements were followed by seven options : "strongly agree," "agree," "agree some-

Table 1. Backgrounds of the speakers

country	gender	age	L1
Singapore	M	20s	Singaporean English & Chinese
Kenya	M	20s	Swahili
India	F	20s	Bengali
Ghana	M	40s	Akan
Sri Lanka	F	20s	Sinhalese

what,” “neutral (cannot decide),” “disagree somewhat,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” The “strongly agree” option was given a score of 1, and the “strongly disagree” a score of 7. Since the present study did not intend to compare listener judgment ratings to each of the five speakers, but to examine their accentedness and comprehensibility judgment as a whole, each listener evaluation ratings for the five speakers were tallied in terms of accentedness and comprehensibility, respectively.

2.2 Participants

Eighty-nine Japanese university-level students, 44 males and 45 females, served as listeners. All of these students were native Japanese speakers residing in the northeastern region of Japan, and all had experienced studying English for at least six years as a mandatory subject prior to tertiary education. At the time of the survey, these students were enrolled in an English language course at their university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 with a mean of 19.78. All of these students reported that they are most familiar with American English, while several of them indicated that they had heard the Outer Circle English varieties previously but very few times. None of these listeners had experienced living abroad for a long time, except for one student staying in the UK for a short period of time (a month only). General English proficiency of these students varied. The average TOEIC score estimated by the ALC’s test was 445.28 ($SD = 151.31$) with the maximum score 850 and the minimum 200.

2.3 Procedure

The English proficiency test created by ALC was administered online. It took approximately 30 minutes for the participants to complete it. On a different day, participants took the listening comprehension test recorded in unfamiliar English accents. They listened to five reading passages recorded by a single speaker, and selected the best option for each. After listening to the first speaker and answering the first five questions, the test administrator stopped the CD so that students could rate the speaker’s accentedness and comprehensibility. Then they moved to the next speaker for the next five listening comprehension questions. After the listening part, students responded to the questionnaire with regard to their age, gender, major, experience of staying abroad, and familiarity with English varieties.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question asks whether perceived comprehensibility is a good indicator of actual comprehension when EFL students listen to unfamiliar English. A correlational study between the listeners’ comprehensibility ratings and actual comprehension test scores found that these two did not correlate at the significant level ($r = -.139, p = .194$). The finding suggests that a perceived degree of comprehensibility may not be a good indicator of actual comprehension, which coincides with the finding of Matsuura, et al. (1999). Their past study investigated the relationships between EFL learners’ perceived comprehensibility and actual comprehension of native English varieties : American and Irish Englishes. It appears that regardless of English varieties, students’ judgment of comprehensibility and listening comprehension performance are not closely linked. ELT educators should be aware that even if students claim high (or low) comprehensibility to an unfamiliar variety, their judgment may or may not indicate the extent to which they actually comprehend it. The comprehensibility judgment is fairly subjective and appears to depend upon a listener’s experience with a particular variety, i.e., the extent of familiarity with the accent.

The second research question is whether perceived accentedness affects both actual comprehension and perceived comprehensibility. The correlational studies found that accentedness ratings did not significantly correlate with listening comprehension test scores ($r = -.037, p = .727$), nor with perceived comprehensibility ratings ($r = -.169, p = .113$). These results suggest that perceived degrees of accentedness may not be a good indicator of the actual comprehension and comprehension judgment. However, past studies indicated mixed results. Munro, Derwing, and Morton (2006), for example, found that nonnative accents were judged severely despite high comprehension rates by nonnative listeners. Matsuura, et al. (2014), on the other hand, reported contradictory results. Their EFL listeners judged North American English, i.e., their most familiar accent, more comprehensible than they did with an accent unfamiliar to them (Indian English). Moreover, these listeners indicated higher comprehension test scores with the familiar accent. Apparently, these contradictory findings between the past and present studies were attributed to the methodological differences. Replication of the studies, therefore, is crucial for researchers to gain in-depth understanding of accentedness effect on perceived comprehensibility and actual comprehension.

The third research question is concerned with the effect of English proficiency of the listeners. First, a correlation between English proficiency and actual comprehension was examined. The results found a significant level of correlation ($r = .434, p < .001$). Therefore, the higher the proficiency of a listener, the more s/he was able to overcome unfamiliar accents. While the passages the participants listened to were fairly basic, strategic differences of the listeners more or less seem to have affected the extent of comprehension. To get the meaning, higher proficiency students may be able to better utilize contextual information within utterances (top-down processing), although Jenkins (2000) claims that non-native English speakers even with a high level of competence also process speech using bottom-up strategies. Lower proficiency students, on the other hand, are more heavily dependent on local information, i.e., unfamiliar segmentals and prosody, and are more likely to fail in guessing intended meaning in utterances. Or some of these lower level students simply might have lacked reading skills that are necessary to comprehend the passages themselves. A post hoc test or follow-up interviews may be necessary to confirm these points.

As for the second part of the third research question, a correlation study was run between English proficiency and perceived comprehensibility, and no significant correlation was detected between these ($r = -.040, p = .708$). Students' English proficiency therefore may not be a good predictor of comprehensibility. Again, we should note that perceived comprehensibility is based on subjective judgment of listeners, and that it is possibly affected by prior English learning experiences.

The fourth research question is whether the extent to which students perceive accentedness differs depending on students' English proficiency level. In order to examine this, the participants were divided into three groups depending on their English proficiency (Table 2). Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics by the three proficiency groups of students. A one-way ANOVA performed on their accentedness ratings found no significant group effect ($F = 2.255, df = 2, p = .111$). The three proficiency groups, therefore, perceived similar accentedness levels toward the given accents. Perhaps, the similar English-learning environments they shared up to the tertiary education contributed to similar levels of accentedness they perceived. Most of the participants experienced three years of learning English in junior high school and another three years in senior high, using textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and based on the Ministry's educational guidelines. Audio files attached to these textbooks are recorded mostly in American English. In fact, the Japanese participants answered in the questionnaire that they had been exposed to American English most frequently since they started learn-

Table 2. Estimated TOEIC scores of the three proficiency groups

	M	SD
Low (<i>N</i> =32)	293.750	46.229
Middle (<i>N</i> =27)	432.593	42.953
High (<i>N</i> =30)	618.333	95.216

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the three proficiency groups

	Comprehension M (SD)	Listening in AE M (SD)	Reading M (SD)	Accentedness M (SD)	Comprehensibility M (SD)
Low	8.35 (2.15)	5.87 (2.01)	5.81 (2.10)	3.57 (0.97)	4.56 (0.84)
Middle	9.74 (3.37)	9.07 (1.90)	8.00 (1.96)	2.99 (0.99)	4.72 (0.97)
High	11.23 (3.36)	10.73 (3.19)	12.13 (2.74)	3.33 (1.15)	4.41 (0.85)

ing English, and had had few chances to listen to other English varieties. These shared experiences in learning English might have yielded similar evaluative reactions in this study.

The last research question asks which best predicts actual comprehension : perceived accentedness, perceived comprehensibility, listening proficiency, or reading proficiency. It also asks whether different proficiency level students indicate different (or similar) tendencies. In order to examine whether there are group differences (or similarities), multiple regression analyses were employed. The results of the low proficiency group found that their reading score best predicted their comprehension (Table 4). On the other hand, the results with relation to the middle and high proficiency groups indicated no significant level of descriptors for their listening performance (Tables 5 & 6).

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis in low proficiency group

	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Listening in American English	0.161	0.771	0.448
Reading	0.631	2.997	0.006
Accentedness	0.068	0.385	0.703
Comprehensibility	0.037	0.207	0.837

Table 5. Multiple regression analysis in middle proficiency group

	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Listening in American English	-0.029	-0.107	0.916
Reading	0.182	0.712	0.484
Accentedness	0.141	0.622	0.540
Comprehensibility	-0.084	-0.372	0.714

Table 6. Multiple regression analysis in high proficiency group

	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Listening in American English	0.366	1.796	0.085
Reading	-0.222	-1.123	0.272
Accentedness	-0.085	-0.445	0.660
Comprehensibility	-0.214	-1.153	0.260

In terms of the low proficiency group, their reading proficiency, which is apparently based on grammar and vocabulary knowledge, was a good predictor of their listening comprehension performance. While the passages themselves used in the study are assumed to be relatively easy for all three groups of participants to read, processing unfamiliar English is truly a heavy burden for any listeners. Unlike face-to-face conversations in the real world, the listening task here is one-time information processing, and basic reading skills are certainly helpful for participants, particularly for the lower proficiency group, to guess the intended meaning in unfamiliar English. A similar finding was reported by Matsuura and Rini (2014), who investigated Indonesian EFL students' listening comprehension of Japanized English. Their participants, all of whom were at the (low-) intermediate level, indicated a significant correlation between their reading comprehension and listening comprehension given in Japanese English, i.e., an accent totally unfamiliar to the Indonesians. Their listening comprehension in American English, on the other hand, did not indicate a significant correlation with listening comprehension in Japanized English. Here also, knowledge of grammar and vocabulary appears to help intermediate level listeners successfully guess the meanings.

The last notable finding in the result section is concerned with the high proficiency group, which indicated a weak but significant correlation detected between listening comprehension of American English and that of unfamiliar English ($r = .318, p = .044$). No significant level correlations, on the other hand, were detected for the middle and low proficiency groups ($p < .05$). The results suggest that higher listening proficiency in American English could help advanced level listeners' comprehension of accented English. However, as the results of the multiple regression analysis suggest, listening proficiency in American English alone may not be sufficient to better comprehend other English varieties. It is possible high listening competence in American English might disturb students' comprehension of unfamiliar English because they are likely to expect American English pronunciation patterns they are most familiar with. Advanced level learners at least (and intermediate level students also) need to be exposed to a wider variety of English if they wish to be better communicators in ELF, where various accents are highly likely involved. Teachers are suggested to select English accents to incorporate in classroom activities according to the aim of their instruction and students' needs.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

As Kachru's three circle model of WE suggests, English learners in the Expanding Circle are likely to encounter multiple English accents, both native and nonnative varieties, outside their classroom. While further research is needed, this study partially answered an important pedagogical question as to which level student is best suited for listening practice in multiple English accents. The results suggest that regardless of proficiency level, tertiary Japanese students are able to perceive a similar degree of accentedness in unfamiliar English, which might imply that students could differentiate a familiar accent from an unfamiliar one. English instructors are suggested to introduce a variety of accents to class if the goal is to let students become better listeners in ELF and world Englishes. However, listening materials and instructional styles need to be carefully selected depending on student proficiency. For example, in order to avoid confusion on the side of students, reading lessons including grammar and vocabulary practices should be prioritized before a lower level class is introduced to unfamiliar accents. In a listening practice, an instructor should let students familiarize themselves with new vocabulary and grammar items first with their familiar pronunciation, and then in an unfamiliar accent. Giving students, at any level, some time to compare familiar and unfamiliar pronunciations may be advisable for teachers,

while allowing them to link the meaning and sound of English. There are many things to consider on the side of ELT instructors.

There are some limitations in this study. Suggestions and implications above were based on the study concerning pronunciation effects on listening comprehension of unfamiliar accents. This study did not examine effects of other linguistic varieties on listening comprehension such as vocabulary and grammar usage as well as semantic and pragmatic matters. In fact, on top of unfamiliar pronunciation, students need to overcome various linguistic aspects (and non-linguistic aspects as well) in order to become competent communicators in ELF. Other limitations of this study are concerned with research methodology. First, the number of participants in each proficiency group and the number of reading passages recorded in unfamiliar English were limited. Second, participants' linguistic and educational backgrounds were also limited: They were all native Japanese speakers studying at the same university in Japan. Third, the methods of data collection might have affected the results. For example, participants' general English proficiency levels were determined through an online English test. A paper and pencil test is still more popular in Japan, and therefore, the online test might have disadvantaged some of the participants. Researchers of a future study should keep these limitations in mind, and extended research is needed in order to confirm the findings of this study at least with a larger number of participants and reading passages, a wider variety of English accents, and a different type English proficiency test.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was exploratory in nature, investigating the interrelationships among Japanese EFL learners' listening comprehension performance in unfamiliar accents, perceptions of accentedness and comprehensibility, and general English proficiency. One of the most interesting findings was that low proficiency students' reading proficiency appeared to be a good predictor of their listening comprehension in unfamiliar accents. While the passages used in this study were fairly easy even for lower level students to read, higher competence in grammar and vocabulary may be helpful to activate top-down listening strategies that are necessary to process unfamiliar pronunciation. Another interesting finding was that regardless of general English proficiency, participants indicated similar accentedness levels to the speech samples. The results imply that tertiary level EFL students in Japan are able to differentiate a familiar accent from an unfamiliar one, and because of this, ELT instructors should go ahead and introduce multiple accents to their students wishing to better cope with a variety of Englishes in this globalized world. Listening practices in one particular English accent is not sufficient to improve their listening comprehension skills in other English varieties they might encounter in real world situations.

Finally, further research is needed to find out what other linguistic and nonlinguistic factors are involved which enhance or disturb learner comprehension of English varieties. Also needed is research on instructional goals and methods in teaching ELF/WE to learners in the Expanding Circle: What are the legitimate goals and what is teachable and learnable are the questions which remain unanswered. Not only quantitative research methods (like the ones in this study) but also qualitative as well as mixed method approaches (including post hoc interviews and open-ended questionnaires) should be implemented to gain more in-depth understanding of learner comprehension of unfamiliar English.

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