

## Developing a second language comprehensibility scale to measure academic speaking

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

This study reported on the development of a rating scale for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers which can be used with L2 English learners from different first language (L1) backgrounds on different types of oral production tasks. The scale is used to assess second language (L2) *comprehensibility* (listeners' perceptions of how much effort is required to understand non-native speech) and the purpose of the scale is to help EAP teachers assess the spoken academic English of their international students at English-medium universities as well as to help them pinpoint the aspects of speech that are most crucial for being understood, so that they can be prioritized in instruction.

### What the researchers did

- *Goal*. To expand a set of preliminary, empirically-based L2 English comprehensibility guidelines, which were restricted to learners from only one L1 group on a single task type, so it could be used with international students from different first language backgrounds on a wide range of academic oral production tasks.
- *Discussion sessions*. Nine audio recorded focus group sessions involving 10 experienced EAP teachers were conducted in Canada and the UK (total duration: 23 hours). At each session one new aspect of the scale (e.g., L1, task) was systematically introduced. Using speech samples of Canadian and British international students drawn from an unpublished corpus the EAP teachers discussed and provided suggestions for optimizing the scale descriptors.
- *Modification procedure*. Drawing on EAP teachers' comments and taking into account empirical evidence from related quantitative studies assessing the same speech samples for L1 and task effects, the scale development team then modified the scale in an iterative process, presenting the newest version of the scale with a detailed summary of modifications at the start of each focus group session and eliciting further suggestions for changes. Finally, one British EAP teacher rated 250 speech samples on three different academic tasks drawn from the corpus to pilot the near final version of the scale.

### What the researchers found

- The original three-level global comprehensibility guidelines were ultimately expanded to include: (1) A six-level global scale summarizing speakers' **overall comprehensibility level** in terms of the perceived listener effort in processing the speech, (2) an analytic or **more detailed scale comprised of four subscales** (Pronunciation, Fluency, Vocabulary, Grammar), which can be used to identify an individual L2 learner's strengths and weaknesses in terms of the linguistic aspects that matter most for comprehensibility, and (3) a **glossary of terms**.
- The final global and analytic scales and instructions for teachers on the how to use this tool are publicly available on IRIS (<https://www.iris-database.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york:932362>). The researchers stressed that the scale should only be used for pedagogical purposes—for example, to help build learners' awareness of their own abilities or monitor their progress over time to support their L2 oral language development. Conversely, the scale should not be used to make judgments or decisions about test-takers that could potentially have life consequences or repercussions (e.g., using the scale for university admissions purposes would be an inappropriate use). Notably, the top level of the scale explicitly states that a speaker can have a noticeable L2 accent and still achieve the highest comprehensibility level; sounding like a native speaker is not required for being easy to understand. That is, accent should only be taken into account in scoring if it increases listeners' effort. The developed scale could help EAP teachers make evidence-based decisions about the linguistic features to focus on to improve their learners' comprehensibility. It can also be used to promote learner autonomy by raising learners' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. The tool designed in this study is the world's first L2 English comprehensibility scale.

### Things to consider

The scale was developed at English-medium universities in countries that attract large numbers of international students. Further studies need to be carried out to determine the applicability of the scale for use in other contexts. The scale was also developed for monologue oral production tasks and may not be appropriate for dialogues. Statistical analyses with a larger group of EAP teachers also need to be conducted to validate the scale (e.g. over- or underuse of scale bands).

Materials available at [www.iris-database.org](http://www.iris-database.org)

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