

In foreign classroom contexts, having a ‘good ear’ does not reliably predict all aspects of L2 speech

What this research was about and why it is important

Successful learning of a second language (L2) after puberty is characterized by great variation between individuals. One source of this variation could be, just as in first language (L1) acquisition, the extent to which learners have ‘a good ear’, that is, the ability to represent single acoustic dimensions (such as melody, rhythm, and frequencies). The current study set out to review existing research into the role of auditory processing in L1 and L2 acquisition, and to examine the generalizability of the research to date to *classroom* L2 learners. With respect to adult L2 learners in *naturalistic* (non-classroom) settings, our review showed that learners with more precise auditory processing abilities can benefit more from conversation opportunities, leading to better L2 speech (more accurate, fluent, and complex use of language). However, the findings of the current study only *partially* supported the idea that auditory processing has an influential role in *classroom* settings.

What the researchers did

- We recruited 39 Vietnamese adult learners who had studied English for a few hours a week, for an average of 11 years, in the classroom (i.e., without any naturalistic experience of the language overseas).
- We elicited their spontaneous L2 English speech via an oral interview, and analyzed the accuracy and fluency of their phonology (pronunciation) and lexicogrammar (vocabulary and grammar).
- We tested two types of auditory processing abilities: (a) acuity (the ability to *discriminate* sounds so as to be able to establish meaningful categories of the sounds of the language) and (b) integration (the ability to convert what you hear into speech motor actions so as to be able *reproduce* those sounds).
- We examined the importance of (a) the amount of prior L2 English instruction and (b) their two auditory processing abilities in determining how good their L2 speech was (the accuracy and fluency of their phonology and lexicogrammar).

What the researchers found

- Those who attained higher levels of L2 speech tended to have not only more extensive foreign language learning experience, but also more precise auditory processing abilities, relative to those with lower levels of L2 speech.
- However, a reliable link between auditory processing and L2 speech was found only for one type of auditory processing (‘integration’ [reproduction], not ‘acuity’ [discrimination]) and for one measure of L2 speech (i.e., lexicogrammar, not phonology).
- This finding was different to previous findings with learners from naturalistic settings, where both types of auditory processing (acuity and integration) can be associated with both aspects of L2 speech (phonology and lexicogrammar).

Things to consider

- These findings may reflect how the participants in the current study (Vietnamese EFL students) usually practice the language (e.g., through production-based grammar translation), and their lack of authentic input, which could impede the refinement of auditory acuity.
- The type of learning experience (i.e., naturalistic vs. classroom) could influence which type of auditory processing abilities (integration and/or acuity) learners draw on, and which aspects of language (phonology and/or lexicogrammar) come to rely on auditory processing capacity.
- Given that L1 acquisition researchers have shown that training can improve auditory processing, future studies could investigate the extent to which training auditory processing (versus teaching the language itself) can boost the rate and ultimate attainment of L2 learning in various settings.

Materials, data, open access article: Materials and data are publicly available at <https://www.iris-database.org>.

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