

It sounds the same – Chinese ELLs use similar strategies to English speakers in order to understand words

A plain language summary of *The weighting of vowel quality in native and non-native listeners' perception of English lexical stress*

What you need to know:

In the past, researchers found that certain parts of non-native speech can be difficult to understand if a learner's native language does not use it. In this study, researchers tested Mandarin ELLs and found that they used a mixture of strategies, including the same ones that native speakers use, when listening to spoken English.

What is the research about?

Some English language learners, for example, those from French backgrounds, find it hard to work out what is being said if two words differ only by stress, for example, DEsert (noun, a very dry climate), and deSERT (verb, to leave or abandon). This is because, in French, stress is positionally fixed, which means that it always occurs on the same part of the word.

Some researchers have found that "stress deafness" can occur if this kind of stress is not found in a learner's native language.

Researchers thought that because vowel quality, which refers to how fully a vowel is pronounced, is not used in Mandarin, it would be a difficult cue for Mandarin speakers to notice.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers gathered two groups of listeners from Purdue University. The first group were 24 native English listeners, while the second group were 24 Mandarin Chinese listeners.

Researchers conducted three different experiments to see how native English speakers, and Mandarin English speakers identified words.

Experiment 1:

Researchers looked at how much the groups used vowel quality, or how speakers changed the frequency of their voice (raising or lowering pitch) to understand what word was being spoken.

Experiment 2:

Researchers identified whether each group relied on vowel quality, or the amount of time it takes to say each syllable to understand what was spoken.

Experiment 3:

They considered if groups used vowel quality, or the intensity that a word is said, to identify the word.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that native and non-native English speakers used similar cues to understand what was being said.

Researchers found, that Mandarin speakers were used vowel quality to identify what English word was being spoken, even though vowel quality is not used in Mandarin.

Although some researchers think that the accents, and mispronunciations of non-native English speakers are a result of non-native speakers' unfamiliarity with certain kinds of pronunciation (perceptually motivated), this research study suggests that there not a perceptual issue but a productive issue (making the sound).

How can you use this research?

Chinese ELLs are used to listening to different tones, but not how fully a vowel is pronounced. With experience they will develop this skill, but it may take time to develop. Therefore, be mindful of words that are differentiated by vowel quality, and use them in your lessons.

Even though students may struggle to pronounce different words, it doesn't mean they are unable to understand them.

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