

Comprehensibility: A Useful Tool to Explore Listener Understanding

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Résumé : Dans leur exposé de synthèse, les auteurs traitent du concept de compréhensibilité de la langue seconde (L2) qui s'entend des jugements des auditeurs quant à la facilité ou la difficulté de compréhension du discours en L2. Ils décrivent d'abord brièvement l'intelligibilité et la compréhensibilité, deux indicateurs permettant d'évaluer dans quelle mesure l'auditeur comprend le discours en L2. Ils présentent ensuite des données attestant la valeur de la compréhensibilité comme indicateur de compréhension. Ils font état de leurs observations indiquant que la compréhensibilité de la L2 peut être dynamique, soumise à l'influence sociale et liée à de multiples éléments, relatifs ou non au langage. Enfin, les auteurs analysent de quelle façon les chercheurs, les enseignants, de même que les orateurs et les auditeurs, peuvent aborder la compréhensibilité de la L2 de manière à tenir compte de ses nuances et de sa complexité.

Mots clés : attitudes langagières, compréhensibilité, intelligibilité, méthodes de recherche, pédagogie, systèmes dynamiques

Abstract: In this review article, we discuss the construct of second language (L2) comprehensibility, which refers to listeners' judgments of ease or difficulty in understanding L2 speech. We first briefly describe intelligibility and comprehensibility, two measures that capture listener understanding of L2 speech. We then present evidence that supports the value of comprehensibility as a measure of understanding. We outline findings showing that L2 comprehensibility can be socially influenced, dynamic, and linked to multiple elements, both language-related and other. Finally, we discuss how researchers, teachers, as well as speakers and listeners can approach L2 comprehensibility in ways that account for its nuanced and complex nature.

Keywords: comprehensibility, dynamic systems, intelligibility, language attitudes, pedagogy, research methods

Over 30 years ago, focusing on listeners' understanding of second language (L2) speech, Fayer and Krasinski (1987) categorized the study of listener understanding in two ways. The two categories were objective intelligibility, where listeners complete tasks such as transcription, showing their interpretation of L2 speakers' message, and subjective intelligibility, where listeners judge their understanding of L2 speech, typically through a scalar rating. This distinction was useful because, at the time, the term *intelligibility* encompassed

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both objective and subjective dimensions of listener understanding, which meant that there was no clear basis for differentiating between speech that listeners could accurately interpret or reproduce and speech that they found difficult to understand. However, within a decade, [Munro and Derwing \(1995a\)](#) made a convincing case for two separate yet related constructs of intelligibility and comprehensibility, which clarified Fayer and Krasinski's distinction between objective and subjective intelligibility.¹ In Derwing and Munro's framework, intelligibility is defined as "the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by a listener" ([Munro & Derwing, 1995a](#), p. 76), and comprehensibility refers to listeners' "judgments on a rating scale of how difficult or easy an utterance is to understand" ([Derwing & Munro, 1997](#), p. 2), two definitions that we adopt here. Our goal in this review article is to highlight the value of comprehensibility as a measure in L2 speech and pronunciation research, to lay out empirical support for the complex nature of comprehensibility, and to outline future directions for working on comprehensibility in research and pedagogical contexts. Our specific objective is to demonstrate that there are sound reasons for using comprehensibility as a measure in L2 speech and pronunciation research and that researchers, teachers, raters, speakers, and listeners benefit from nuanced approaches to examining, assessing, and enhancing L2 speakers' comprehensibility.

A (brief) case for comprehensibility as a measure of listener understanding

In their initial research, [Munro and Derwing \(1995a\)](#) and [Derwing and Munro \(1997\)](#) showed that listeners' actual understanding of L2 speech and their rated ease of understanding of the same speech were partially independent. That is, although listeners who transcribed L2 speech accurately (high intelligibility) generally also rated that speech as being easy to understand (high comprehensibility), some listeners with near-perfect transcription scores rated the speech comparatively less easy to understand.

Given this lack of direct equivalence between intelligibility measures and comprehensibility ratings, researchers and teachers of L2 speech may be tempted to avoid judging L2 speakers' comprehensibility and instead focus on measuring speakers' intelligibility. However, comprehensibility judgments can be very useful as measures of listener understanding in many contexts. One clear advantage of comprehensibility judgments is practicality. Over a relatively short period of time, listeners can judge the comprehensibility of multiple L2 speakers producing either the same or different utterances. These judgments, when made in scalar form, are quite reliable, with measures of rater consistency or agreement typically reaching high values ([Munro, 2018](#)). In contrast, measures of intelligibility require tasks that elicit listeners' actual understanding of L2 speech, unique speech content for each instance when intelligibility is measured (to avoid greater intelligibility for repeated content), and time for listeners to complete the tasks. Intelligibility scores are not highly reliable across task type, being influenced by the nature of the speech sample and the type of listening task used to measure intelligibility ([Kang, Thomson, & Moran, 2018](#); [Kennedy, 2009](#)). Although practicality is not the only consideration, it is an important factor in designing research and assessing L2 speech.

Not only are comprehensibility measures practical and reliable, but they can also provide valuable information about listeners' understanding of and reactions to L2 speech. Although comprehensibility ratings are not directly equivalent to intelligibility measures, they can show similar patterns in listeners' understanding. For example, in [Kennedy and Trofimovich \(2008\)](#), significant decreases in intelligibility scores across different transcription tasks were mirrored by ratings of significantly decreased comprehensibility. Similarly, in

Sheppard, Elliott, and Baese-Berk (2017), higher intelligibility scores for semi-spontaneous speech predicted higher comprehensibility ratings for longer stretches of the same speech.

Comprehensibility measures can be useful for researchers and teachers in another way: Research findings show links between comprehensibility ratings, listeners' effort in processing L2 speech, and listeners' attitudinal or emotional reactions. Listeners' comprehensibility ratings reflect the time they require to process L2 speech (Munro & Derwing, 1995b). Listeners have also demonstrated negative emotional reactions toward L2 speakers if listeners' processing effort is high (Dragojevic & Giles, 2016), and they may even attribute lower credibility to L2 speakers with (relatively) lower comprehensibility ratings (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). Although these subjective reactions may not reflect listeners' actual understanding of speech, they are important to take into account, as listeners' negative reactions can affect their perceptions of speech or speakers. This is demonstrated in a comment from an L2 English speaker working with native English speakers in Canada: "As soon as I say something that they need to make an effort to understand, they just disregard me" (Vujanović, 2017, p. 27).

Comprehensibility as a multivalent construct

Although early researchers acknowledged a multitude of factors in addition to pronunciation which are linked to comprehensibility, only recently have studies targeted the links between comprehensibility judgments and factors other than L2 speech. This work supports a view of comprehensibility as socially driven, dynamic, and varied in the linguistic and non-linguistic elements that affect it.

Social influences on comprehensibility

There is decades-old evidence of social influences on listener understanding of speech. Rubin and Smith (1990) found effects for perceived speaker ethnicity on listeners' comprehension of a lecture topic (intelligibility). Listeners who were presented an Asian guise for the speaker demonstrated less understanding than listeners who were presented a Caucasian guise for the same speaker. Much less research has been conducted on social influences on comprehensibility, but studies have shown particular listener groups rating specific speakers with lower comprehensibility than the speakers' intelligibility scores would suggest. For example, Sheppard et al. (2017) showed that university faculty members who reported negative attitudes toward the English proficiency of international students gave lower comprehensibility ratings to students' L2 English speech than did faculty members who reported positive attitudes, despite both groups of faculty members being equally accurate in transcribing speech.

In a study that aimed to manipulate listeners' social bias, Taylor Reid, Trofimovich, and O'Brien (2019) had older and younger adult native English-speaking Montrealers rate the L2 English speech of Quebec francophone speakers. All listeners had been born and raised in Quebec and were randomly assigned to one of three groups: baseline, positive orientation, or negative orientation. Some listeners were simply asked to rate the speech (baseline group), while others, prior to rating, heard comments from a confederate researcher about the L2 English skills of francophone speakers. One group of listeners heard positive comments, and the other group heard critical comments. Compared with the baseline listeners, the positively oriented listeners generally rated speakers more favourably, including for comprehensibility. In contrast, the negatively oriented listeners' ratings depended on their age. Younger listeners rated speakers significantly more comprehensible, while older

listeners rated speakers significantly less comprehensible, compared with the assessments by baseline listeners. The older a negatively oriented listener was, the lower the comprehensibility ratings s/he gave.

The ratings by positively and negatively oriented listeners may have differed because negatively oriented listeners might have had their attention focused on details, such as non-native forms in L2 speech, while positively oriented listeners might have attended to more holistic characteristics of the speech. Regardless of the explanation, this finding was striking – a positive or a negative anecdote heard before the rating influenced listeners' comprehensibility rating of an otherwise identical speech sample. The age difference in ratings may have been related to listeners' age at the time the 1977 Bill 101 (a provincial law specifying French as the official language of Quebec) was passed; the law lessened the influence and employability of English monolinguals. Listeners who were teenagers or adults then may have felt less willing or able to accommodate to francophone speakers of L2 English, especially when exposed before rating to negative comments about the English speech of francophones. In contrast, listeners growing up as young multilingual Montrealers in the decades following Bill 101 may have felt more open to varied language use, regardless of interlocutor proficiency, even when exposed to negative comments. That listeners' different perspectives on society and linguacultural groups can affect listener understanding of L2 speech is something that is evident for many laypeople with experience of multiple languages and cultures but is generally not accounted for in research on L2 comprehensibility.

Comprehensibility as a dynamic construct

Although longitudinal development of L2 comprehensibility has been an increasingly popular focus of research, changes in the comprehensibility of L2 speech are generally measured over periods of weeks, months, and sometimes years (e.g., [Saito, Dewaele, Abe, & In'nami, 2018](#)). However, listeners' perception of L2 speech can change over a matter of minutes ([Bradlow & Bent, 2008](#)), yet comprehensibility has rarely been framed as a dynamic, variable process that can change in real time.

[Nagle, Trofimovich, and Bergeron \(2019\)](#) recently explored whether comprehensibility can be construed as dynamic, examining how raters explain their assessments as they evolve in real time. Listening to samples of L2 Spanish speakers responding to personally relevant prompts, 24 Spanish-speaking raters rated three-minute speech samples using a computer interface that allowed them to increase or decrease the comprehensibility rating by clicking a mouse as the speech unfolded. The raters then completed a stimulated recall interview, where they commented on their thoughts while watching a video capture of their rating.

Based on their rating profiles, the raters were categorized into the groups of dynamic, semi-dynamic, or non-dynamic raters. Non-dynamic raters (the majority) increased or decreased comprehensibility ratings infrequently over a speech sample. Semi-dynamic raters increased or decreased ratings at a high frequency, but the magnitude of change was small. The two dynamic raters also changed ratings at a high frequency, with a high magnitude of change which was generally in the direction of lower comprehensibility. Most raters reported that their ratings moved in the direction of greater comprehensibility either while listening to the same sample or from one sample to another. When raters' comments focused on specific dimensions of comprehensibility, nearly half of the comments about increasing comprehensibility ratings were about discourse, such as the content or order of ideas. Discourse also featured in comments about decreasing comprehensibility ratings, but the majority of these comments were about speakers' use of vocabulary and grammar.

In the end, it was unclear whether raters' profiles were related to rating strategies or to real-time processing demands.

The raters in [Nagle et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study, which found mixed evidence of dynamicity in comprehensibility judgments, had completed a one-way listening task, with no possibility to interact with an interlocutor. However, interactive speech, where interlocutors are reacting in real time to other interlocutors, may be a context more amenable to changes in comprehensibility judgments. Therefore, in another study exploring the dynamic nature of comprehensibility, [Taylor Reid, Strachan, Trofimovich, Kennedy, and O'Brien \(2018\)](#) paired L2 English speakers from different language backgrounds, completing three interactive tasks and rating each other's comprehensibility at 2.5-minute intervals for a total of seven ratings.

When interlocutors' ratings of their partners' comprehensibility were averaged, a clear pattern emerged. Comprehensibility was initially rated high, then significantly decreased at the second rating time, and then gradually climbed to reach the initial rating by the seventh interval. These mutual comprehensibility ratings were aligned with interlocutors' judgments of each other's anxiety, such that interlocutors' low self-reported anxiety was associated with high ratings of partners' comprehensibility. When the comprehensibility ratings of each pair were analyzed, the difference in ratings between the two interlocutors was relatively large at the first rating time, and then became aligned and was not significantly different for the remainder of the rating times. The dip in comprehensibility following the initial rating may have been due to higher cognitive demands in the second interactive task, with ratings continuing to rise as interlocutors adapted to their partners' speech and to the task, as well as moving to an easier task later. In terms of task difficulty, the initial task ("find three things in common") had low cognitive demands because learners had an unlimited range of possible commonalities to consider, while the second task had higher task difficulty due to the need to exchange non-shared information by accurately describing and identifying referents in pictures. The third task was cognitively less demanding because partners had shared access to the initial information and could complete the task by co-constructing agreed-upon courses of action. A tentative conclusion emerging from this work is that listeners' judgments of L2 comprehensibility can change in real time according to listeners' immediate experience, particularly for listeners in interactive speaking tasks.

Linguistic correlates of comprehensibility

As many speakers and listeners are aware, comprehensibility ratings also reflect the linguistic content of speech. For instance, as early as 1995, Munro and Derwing reported significant correlations between listeners' comprehensibility ratings and speakers' grammatical accuracy. Based on recent research, the linguistic elements linked to L2 speakers' English comprehensibility can be roughly separated into two dimensions (e.g., [Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2017](#)): pronunciation (individual segments, prosody, fluency) and lexicogrammar (variety and richness of vocabulary and accuracy/complexity of grammar). However, the importance of these elements for comprehensibility can depend on the linguistic background of the L2 speaker and on the speaking task (e.g., [Crowther, Trofimovich, Isaacs, & Saito, 2018](#)).

With respect to other languages, only L2 German and L2 French have been explored for linguistic correlates to comprehensibility. For L2 French, [Trofimovich, Kennedy, and Blanchet \(2017\)](#) found links between comprehensibility ratings and speakers' prosody and fluency, while comprehensibility ratings in [Bergeron and Trofimovich \(2017\)](#) were linked to pronunciation, lexicogrammar, fluency, and discourse richness. In a study targeting L2

German, O'Brien (2014) showed that comprehensibility was tied to fluency and accuracy measures for vocabulary, morphology, and pronunciation.

Although comprehensibility ratings are generally consistent across raters, the reasons for raters' decisions can vary widely. In only a few studies have raters been asked to explain their comprehensibility ratings. In Derwing and Rossiter (2003), experienced ESL teachers rated excerpts of L2 English speech for comprehensibility and two other constructs, and then read transcripts of the excerpts and categorized non-target production as difficult to understand, bothersome (annoying), or salient (noticeable). The non-target productions were most frequently categorized as salient (44%), then as bothersome (32%), with difficult to understand as the least frequent category (24%). Isaacs, Trofimovich, and Foote (2018) had experienced instructors of English for academic purposes in Canada and the United Kingdom repeatedly try out increasingly refined versions of a comprehensibility rating scale, using unique L2 English semi-spontaneous speech samples in each rating session. In focus group discussions, instructors weighed pronunciation and fluency as more important than vocabulary and grammar in rating comprehensibility and recommended keeping vocabulary and grammar as separate elements in the scale. Kennedy, Blanchet, and Guénette (2017) also had four teacher-raters explain their comprehensibility ratings of interactive speech between pairs of L2 French speakers. Teacher-raters focused on speakers' general pronunciation, their knowledge and use of vocabulary, and whether speakers understood each other. However, different teacher-raters emphasized different elements for comprehensibility, ranging from pronunciation, to segments, to task type.

Putting it together: Implications for research and pedagogy

The clear social influences on judgments of comprehensibility have ramifications for research and pedagogy. For research, the importance of attitudes toward L2 speech means that eliciting measures of raters' attitudes will help in the analysis and interpretation of comprehensibility ratings. Moreover, any social biases that a rater is exposed to before rating can affect the rating itself. Researchers should carefully consider who is involved in administering the rating session (native-like speaker or less proficient speaker), what is said prior to the ratings, and how these could influence raters. For pedagogy, initiatives that involve structured opportunities for positive contact between native and L2 speakers, explaining to native-speaking listeners some differences between their language and another language and giving structured practice in transcribing L2 speech, or having native speakers take the perspective of a non-English-speaking co-worker have all been shown to increase native speakers' positive attitude and empathy toward L2 speakers (e.g., Derwing, Fraser, Kang, & Thomson, 2014).

Regarding dynamicity in L2 comprehensibility, speech-sample length generally has been considered appropriate if raters are ready to rate by the time the sample finishes. However, if comprehensibility ratings, especially for the same speaker, can vary over time and multiple measurements, it is important for researchers to consider how the length of a speech sample or the frequency of rating might influence its comprehensibility. Another important consideration is interlocutors' anxiety levels, which have been linked to comprehensibility ratings. Many researchers do try to ensure that recording and rating sessions are not stressful for speakers or listeners, but practice tasks and self-reports of anxiety could help to modulate or document the possible influence of anxiety on interlocutors' comprehensibility. As interlocutors feel less anxious, their mutual comprehensibility may improve.

Pedagogically, the implications of potential dynamicity are also crucial for the length of interactions. Because L2 comprehensibility trends upward over the course of interactions, L2 speakers who want to work on being comprehensible or to gain confidence in their comprehensibility should be encouraged to seek out opportunities for spoken interactions that are not brief by nature. These might be found in group discussions or brainstorming sessions, interviews, workshops, and community group meetings. Confidence, or lower anxiety, can also be promoted by teachers or L2 speakers through calming or self-affirming exercises prior to and during spoken interaction.

The relationship between self-reported anxiety and comprehensibility is also relevant to native-speaking interlocutors who may have little experience interacting with L2 speakers. Initiatives involving structured positive contact, perspective taking, or explicit instruction regarding L2 speakers and their speech have been linked to changes in native speakers' anxiety and attitudes. Structured positive contact (e.g., Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2014) is a technique in which native speakers who are inexperienced with L2 speech do pre-arranged activities with L2 speakers, and perspective taking (e.g., Weyant, 2007) is a technique in which participants discuss the process of learning a less familiar language or do activities using a less familiar or unfamiliar language with a native speaker of that language. Native speakers have also received explicit instruction in how their native language might be produced by L2 speakers (e.g., Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro, 2002; Lindemann, Campbell, Litzenberg, & Subtirelu, 2016). There is evidence that these activities could help lower native speakers' initial anxiety while interacting with L2 speakers and possibly also contribute to more positive attitudes. However, these techniques have typically been explored in the university context, with university students as participants in research projects tied to particular courses. With encouragement and support from administration and managers, these types of techniques can also be done in workplaces with existing workforces of native and L2 speakers, such as lunch buddy programs or language classes, whether formal or informal, to learn L2 languages. Of course, individuals can themselves seek out contact with L2 speakers or try to learn or use a less familiar language, and so reduce anxiety or develop more positive attitudes about communication with L2 speakers.

Finally, it is encouraging to see new research in which not just pronunciation but also many different dimensions are being examined for their links to L2 comprehensibility (e.g., Saito et al., 2018). For pedagogical purposes, teachers, L2 learners/speakers, and potential listeners should be aware that comprehensibility is a construct with multiple elements, not just pronunciation. Elements that may be relevant or important should be highlighted as much as possible. For instance, the type of speaking task or genre, the speaker's use of vocabulary and grammar, the listener's level of anxiety, attitude toward or experience with L2 speech are all elements that could be linked to comprehensibility. Teachers, speakers, and listeners (including native speakers) can then work on elements over which they potentially have control, such as anxiety, pronunciation, vocabulary use, attitude, or experience with L2 speech. Clearly, neither teachers nor speakers nor listeners can attend simultaneously to all elements that could be linked to comprehensibility. The importance of particular elements will vary according to the person and context, and speakers and listeners should be encouraged to enhance their awareness of these elements through consciousness-raising activities, such as guided reflection, analysis of self or others' spoken language (beyond simply pronunciation), or body awareness (to manage anxiety).

Conclusion

In this article, we have made a case for comprehensibility as a valuable construct, arguing that social attitudes and biases can influence listeners' judgments of comprehensibility, suggesting that comprehensibility ratings have the potential for dynamic change, especially during interactive speech, and explaining that multiple elements are linked to comprehensibility ratings. Our goal was practical, namely, to suggest different approaches to addressing social attitudes, dynamic change, and multiple elements in researching, teaching, and learning L2 comprehensibility. And although we focused predominantly on comprehensibility, we acknowledge that various measures of listeners' understanding are crucial in examining, teaching, and learning L2 speech, and we advocate an awareness of both intelligibility and comprehensibility as important constructs. Last but not least, most research discussed here was carried out by Canadian researchers, often targeting users of English and French (Canada's official languages) or speakers engaged in study or work in Canada. Much of this research has also been generously funded through the Government of Canada's research grants, and several publications appeared in Canadian journals. We are immensely grateful and proud to be part of a large (and constantly growing) cohort of Canada-based scholars researching L2 speech learning.

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Note

1. The research featured here builds on the foundational work by Derwing and Munro. We value these researchers' significant contributions to research and thank them for their continued mentorship of scholars. We recognize that the term *comprehensibility* has been used to denote the degree to which listeners understand word/utterance meaning. In this article, however, comprehensibility should be interpreted within Munro and Derwing's framework.

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