

The Effect of Listener L2 Proficiency on Non-Native-Directed Speech  
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In conversation, we often adjust the way we speak in order to help our listener understand our message. Research suggests that speakers make such adjustments for conversational partners they perceive to have lower linguistic competency, such as non-native speakers of their language. Results from these studies are inconsistent, however. For example, when talking to a non-native listener, native speakers may either expand their pitch range (Papoušek and Hwang, 1991; Smith, 2007) or reduce it (Biersack et al., 2005); increase the length of their vowels (Scarborough, 2007) or not (Biersack et al., 2005); and speak slower (Scarborough, 2007) or not (Smith, 2007). The current study addresses one potential confound that may contribute to this inconsistency by exploring the effect of interlocutor L2 proficiency on the degree of phonetic adjustment.

If non-native-directed speech is a response to a speaker's assessment of their conversation partner's linguistic competence, then we might expect different adjustments for different proficiency levels. Specifically, we might predict a gradient degree of change across levels of proficiency such that there would be the greatest change for the low proficiency listener with the degree of adjustment lessening as the non-native interlocutor's L2 competence moves toward fluency. However, to date, no study has investigated whether speakers make the same adjustments for low and high proficiency non-native listeners. Furthermore, given that studies often use imagined non-native listeners, unknown differences in the imaginary speech partner of each participant could affect results. It may be the case, then, that inconsistencies in previous results stem from a confound that is difficult to control: how an individual pictures a prototypical non-native listener. The current study introduces a methodological option between imagined listeners and interactive speech partners: short videos of interlocutors to imagine.

In the current study, native English-speaking participants watched short videos of people with differing proficiencies in English introducing themselves. Participants were then instructed to imagine that they were giving directions to the person they had "met" in the video. They were presented with a map of the University of British Columbia campus and a pre-drawn route to describe. A small photograph of the interlocutor remained in the upper right hand corner of the screen as a reminder. Their productions were recorded, and three acoustic correlates were measured: segment durations, pitch range, and speech rate.

Participants did not slow their speech rate significantly for non-native listeners regardless of proficiency level. They did, however, lengthen their segment durations for low proficiency trials and expand their pitch ranges for the last two-thirds of the low proficiency trials. Thus, the results do not support the prediction that participants would adjust their speech for the non-native high proficiency listener. Instead, the only significant effects were for the low proficiency interlocutor. This result indicates that participants treated the high proficiency listener as more similar to the native listener than to the low-proficiency non-native listener, suggesting that English speakers pay attention to differences in non-native proficiency levels when adjusting their speech.

## References

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