

The role of relative word frequency in interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit

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Previous research on interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit do not have consensus on the issue whether non-native listeners are better at understanding non-native speech than native listeners. Our study showed that the relative frequency of the intended word and the mispronounced word is the mediating factor explaining the discrepant results reported in the literature. English and Cantonese listeners transcribed English words spoken by English and Cantonese speakers. Monosyllabic words which are expected to be mispronounced by Cantonese speakers as another word are included as target items (e.g. 'thin' pronounced as 'fin'). Results showed that Cantonese listeners recognized more Cantonese-accented words than English listeners, particularly when the intended word (e.g. 'thin') has a higher frequency than the mispronounced version (e.g. 'fin'). However, Cantonese listeners were not better than English listeners in understanding Cantonese-accented baseline words in which there are no phonological mispronunciations by Cantonese speakers (e.g. 'luck'). Theoretical issues regarding the mental representation of second language speech sounds in native and non-native listeners will be discussed.