

The Relative Importance of Language Proficiency Components in Linguistic Laypersons' Impressions of Communication Ability

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In second language (L2) education, it is important for teachers to determine the relative importance of the various components of language proficiency. They need to place more emphasis on some components of language proficiency than others as per students' communicative needs. Similarly, the relative weights of assessment criteria must be determined for the assessment of L2 oral proficiency. However, theoretical models of communicative competence have not specified the relative weights of the components. This study thus sought to clarify the relative importance of *linguistic resources* (grammar and vocabulary), *pronunciation*, and *fluency* by investigating the impressions of non-professionals in language education (or *linguistic laypersons*). Their impressions of communication ability were examined because linguistic laypersons are in general the ultimate arbiters of L2 communication ability in real-life settings.

Twenty-three graduate students (NSs and NNSs) studying disciplines other than applied linguistics and TESOL participated in this study. First, they watched videos of intermediate L2 speakers' monologic performances on the College English Test-Spoken English Test and paired interactions on the Cambridge Main Suite Examinations. The National College English Committee of China and Cambridge English Language Assessment provided the data for the study. Second, participants indicated their impression of each speaker's communication ability on a scale of 1 (*Poor*) to 7 (*Excellent*). Third, they stated the reasons for their rating. Finally, they reviewed the same performances and performed stimulated recall, verbalizing the features of the performances that influenced their impressions. The verbal protocols and interview responses were then analyzed.

The results showed that dysfluency features, in particular pause phenomena, had a considerable negative effect on the participants' impressions of communication ability. They affected the comprehensibility of the message and seriously distracted the participants' attention from the message. Pronunciation was also a factor influencing comprehensibility. However, as long as the message was decipherable, phonological features deviant from NS norms or accents did not negatively affect the participants' impressions. In contrast, linguistic accuracy (grammar and vocabulary) did not seem to strongly affect the impressions of communication ability, because inaccurate linguistic forms based on NS norms rarely impeded message conveyance. In short, conformity to

NS norms was not necessarily idealized by the participants.

The findings of this study will help language teachers determine which proficiency features should be emphasized in class and on assessments.