

**An investigation of the stress influences on intelligibility and comprehensibility –
The case of advanced Hong Kong ESL learners**

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Abstract

This capstone project aims to find out the influences of sentential stress on listening intelligibility and comprehensibility of advanced HKE speakers. Flat tone and dislocated sentential stress could be common in Hong Kong English speaking context due to L1 influences. However, whether this phenomenon aids or deteriorates the listening comprehensibility of speech is unknown. Therefore, by conducting listening comprehension tests and speech evaluation with local advanced ESL learners who have attained university level or above, it is to find out if these prominent stress features of HKE could affect HKE actual and perceived listening comprehensibility.

From the results, it shows that despite of HKE speakers' knowledge in their L1, Cantonese, it has little help in enhancing HKE comprehensibility even among local interlocutors. Participants also rated speech samples with correct sentential stress significantly higher than samples with flat tone and inappropriate stresses. Proven sentential stress could very possibly be an influential factor of HKE listening comprehensibility, however, none of the participants was taught with sentential stress during their compulsory education. It is hoped that this project could provide insights for future researches, and eventually aids local ESL learners in understanding and learning English with effective phonological trainings.

Reflection

Studying English for four years of undergraduate studies, I am more aware of my identity as a Hong Kong ESL speaker, and that made me being more attentive to the

future role of Hong Kong English in our community. Having been taught of the importance of “standardized” English, Jennifer Jenkins’ concept of International English and my exchange experience in Europe inspired me to jump out of the box and re-considered an alternative path towards effective communication in English, rather than simply being native-like. I am both surprised and glad to find out that suprasegmental features, especially stress usage might cause significant influences on listening comprehensibility even in non-native English speakers’ communication. This is implying that there are still more factors to consider in ESL teaching curriculum and they might in fact be effective tools to improve ESL speakers’ intelligibility and comprehensibility if suprasegmental features are attended, but not only with correct pronunciation. Lastly, I wish this research shall give more thoughts to readers who are used to, but also frustrated in achieving the impossible height of being “native-like”.