

Exploring the relationship between aural decoding and listening comprehension among L2 learners of English

What this research was about and why it is important

A good command of vocabulary is a precondition of listening comprehension ability. Common methods of testing listening, including multiple choice, have limitations in revealing the details of listening process, and few studies have investigated *aural decoding* in second language (L2) listening comprehension. Aural decoding means recognizing sounds and figuring out where words start and end in continuous speech. This study has explored the relationship between aural decoding and listening comprehension, the threshold of decoding that leads to good listening comprehension, and the predictive power of decoding scores. This study also finds the most common decoding errors and listening comprehension errors and the possible reasons for them. It has pedagogical implications for English teachers to better understand the role of aural decoding in listening comprehension for L2 learners of English.

What the researchers did

- 42 second-year students majoring in English in a Chinese university participated in a decoding test, a listening comprehension test, and two questionnaires after the tests.
- Four short stories were selected and recorded for the decoding and listening tests.
- In the listening comprehension tests, participants listened to a recording of a story twice. Immediately afterwards they wrote down what they remembered in their first language (L1 – Chinese).
- In the decoding test, the same stories were played with a pause after each sentence. Participants wrote down what they heard in their L2 (English). The stories were played again without pauses to check the transcriptions.
- Two questionnaires completed after the tests were designed to find the possible reasons for the decoding errors and the listening comprehension errors.
- Participants' transcriptions for the decoding task were analyzed to collect data of their decoding errors and participants' written recalls in L1 were analyzed to collect data of their listening errors.
- Statistical analyses were undertaken to find out the role of aural decoding level in determining the success of L2 listening comprehension.

What the researchers found

- There is a strong relationship between decoding scores and listening comprehension scores.
- A threshold of aural decoding of around 80% accuracy of decoding scores may lead to good L2 listening comprehension.
- Aural decoding scores may predict 46.9% of the variance in L2 listening comprehension.
- The most frequent decoding errors tend to be those which have no similarities to the input and those which are phonetically similar to the input.

Things to consider

- This study shows that for L2 learners of English, decoding a higher percentage of input accurately can lead to better listening comprehension, though a small number of participants rely more on contexts.
- Teachers could help students practice more on improving decoding skills, which could be beneficial for constant improving listening comprehension.
- In future research, participants' L2 proficiency should be taken into consideration and a more precise scoring method should be considered.

Materials, data, open access article:

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