

# Teaching a foreign language? Best teach in the accent of the listener

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Perception of second language speech is easier when it is spoken in the accent of the listener and not in the 'original' accent of that language, shows a new study from the University of Haifa. The study was published in the prestigious *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*.

Many adult schools teaching second languages insist on exposing their students to the languages in their 'original' accents. However, this new study, carried out by Dr. Raphiq Ibrahim and Dr. Mark Leikin of the University of Haifa's Edmond J. Safra Brain Research Center for the Study of Learning Disabilities, Prof. Zohar Eviatar of the Department of Psychology and Prof. Shimon Sapir of the Department of Learning Disabilities, found that this system is not necessarily the best and certainly not the most expeditious.

The present study set out to reveal the level of phonological information that the adult learner requires in order to identify words in a second language that had been learned at a later age, and whether the level of phonological information that they require varies when the words are pronounced in different accents.

The researchers recorded four Hebrew sentences in which the last word was a noun pronounced in a different [accent](#): Hebrew, Arabic, Russian and English. These sentences were electronically encoded on a computer system and applied to the "gating" paradigm, in which participants are exposed to increasing amounts of a speech stimulus (40 milliseconds), and at each 'gate', are asked to identify the stimulus. This procedure

allows the identification of the point at which a word is recognized.

The sentences were played to 60 participants aged 18-26; 20 of the participants were native Hebrew speakers; 20 were new adult immigrants to Israel from the Former Soviet Union who had learned Hebrew only after moving to Israel; 20 were Israeli Arabic speakers who began learning Hebrew at age 7-8.

The findings show that there is no difference in the amount of phonological information that the native Hebrew speakers need in order to decipher the words, regardless of accent. With the Russian and Arabic speakers, on the other hand, less phonological information was needed in order to recognize the Hebrew word when it was pronounced in the accent of their native language than when they heard it in the accent of another language.

"This research lays emphasis on the importance of continuing investigation into the cognitive perspectives of accent in order to gain a better understanding of how we learn languages other than our native tongue. In Israel and in other countries where the population is made up of many different [language](#) groups, this understanding holds great significance," the researchers conclude.

Provided by University of Haifa

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