



Should Kiwis speak more slowly?



A RECENT article appeared on stuff.co.nz headlined "Slow down, Kiwi speakers told". The item was based on a plea from Rotorua District Council's settlement support co-ordinator for New Zealanders to reduce the amount of slang in their language and to slow down their speech rate.

This is so that we have a better chance of being understood by migrants, whether these are native speakers of another dialect of English or speakers from other language backgrounds.

The article focused on the speech-rate issue, and claimed that Kiwis often speak "quite fast", although the expert they consulted for the article was unaware of any research either supporting or refuting that claim.

I am aware of one such study carried out by colleagues at Canterbury University, together with a co-researcher from the United States.

This research involved 40 speakers (20 men and 20 women) who were native speakers of New Zealand English, with the same number for American English. They all read aloud the same passage.

It was, indeed, found that New Zealanders spoke a little faster than Americans, both when pauses were included in the total speaking time and when they were left out (to get a better measure of how rapidly speakers articulate the actual sounds of speech). Several explanations were offered by the researchers, including the differences in the pronunciation of the vowels of the two accents, with generally shorter vowels, and hence faster speech, in New

Zealand English. The recordings were also listened to by further groups of New Zealand and American listeners, who each gave a score of the perceived speech rate of each sample.

The New Zealand speech was scored as faster than the American speech, by groups from both dialects. Interestingly, though, there was a tendency for the speech of each group to be scored as faster by listeners from the other dialect group. So the scores given to the Kiwi speech by Americans were higher than those given to the same Kiwi speech samples by other New Zealanders, and vice versa. This probably reflects the difficulty of attending to speech in an unfamiliar dialect.

When it comes to the claim that non-native speakers might prefer it if native speakers spoke a little more slowly, one Canadian study has disproved this.

The researchers recorded the English of native speakers and of Mandarin learners of English as a second language (ESL). They then played each of the recordings at different speeds to a further group of Mandarin ESL students, as well as to ESL students with different first-language backgrounds.

The different speeds were:

1. The original speed of the recording.
2. The overall speech rate of the group of native speakers.
3. The overall rate of the Mandarin ESL speakers.
4. A slowed-down rate, which was 10 per cent slower than the Mandarin ESL speakers.

The two groups of listeners had to

score each recording on a nine-point scale from "too slow" to "too fast".

While there was no general effect of manipulating the speech rate of the recordings, one interesting finding was that the Mandarin listeners preferred Mandarin English to be spoken at the same rate as native-speaker English, which was faster than the original Mandarin English.

Another was that the listeners from other language backgrounds preferred a rate that was faster than the original Mandarin English but not quite as fast as the native speakers.

There seems to be an effect of familiarity here – the Mandarin English speakers were used to a Mandarin English accent and so were comfortable hearing this at a faster rate.

More telling, though, is a study that looked at the effects on learners' listening skills of having them listen to materials played at different rates. Two groups of 31 Iranian learners of English with equal English language skills were given normal or slowed listening materials over 13 sessions. Both groups showed a big improvement in their listening comprehension by the end of the 13 sessions, but the group who heard the listening materials at a normal rate showed greater improvement. So maybe slowing down does not always help.

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