Using Speech Corpora in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Studies on speech corpora for interpretation training purposes are rare, particularly in the context of accent comprehensibility. In this research, two hundred university students majoring in English Language and Translation were exposed to a nonnative English language corpus as a complement to listening and speaking practice to prepare them for their first interpretation course. If listening to English speakers with heavy foreign accents is hard, then listening to such accents in the tense conditions of consecutive or simultaneous interpretation is doubly so. Interpreters' time is wasted and their interpretation efficacy is poorer as they struggle to comprehend the speaker's distorted accent. The study investigated the participants' speech recognition of accented speech by identifying the nonnative features that could hinder intelligibility. We used an easily accessible online corpus which required no prior technical training; The Speech Accent Archive. It contained thousands of recordings of an elicitation paragraph that had all the English sounds. The samples represented more than three hundred language backgrounds. In addition, each page included the native language phonetic inventory, a phonetic transcription of the English production, and a short speaker bio. At the beginning, students were guided through the selected repertoire of nonnative productions. Then they were encouraged to sieve through the corpus for other nonnative instances. The students were later presented with model interpretations as listening topics and as drills for accent recognition. The findings showed considerable changes after using the speech corpora as they spent less time to recognize accented features, and made less errors in comprehension. There was also notable progress in their ability to interpret quickly and accurately when they practiced speaking through sight, consecutive, and simultaneous interpretations.