# Individual differences explaining second language listening comprehension: A study of Chinese learners of English

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In this paper we focus on individual differences which can explain variability in listening comprehension (LC) among adult Chinese learners of English. Although many studies have been conducted on LC among second language (L2) learners, individual differences in listening have received less attention than individual differences in reading. A better understanding of individual differences which determine L2 learners' success in comprehending speech input is therefore urgently needed because L2 learners find it hard to make progress in improving their LC (Graham, 2011).

187 adult Chinese learners of English took part in the study. One group was based in China (N = 147); the other group in the UK (N = 40). LC was measured with the listening section of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET Listening), and with the College English Test Band 4 (CET4). Four groups of explanatory variables were included in the study: linguistic knowledge, sentence processing speed, cognitive factors and learners' use of English in daily life. Structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis and multiple regression analysis methods were used to analyze data. A structural equation model of LC based on Andringa, Olsthoorn, Van Beuningen, Schoonen and Hulstijn (2012) was tested among the participants.

SEM analyses show that together the four groups of factors explained 65.7% of the variance in LC among adult Chinese learners of English.

The LC of learners in China was significantly lower than that of Chinese learners in the UK. Linguistic knowledge, frequency of use of English in daily life and aural sentence processing speed were key predictors of listening in both groups. Phonological knowledge was the most important predictor of LC among the variables measuring linguistic knowledge and word recognition from speech explained variance in listening comprehension over and above the contribution of word segmentation from speech. The SEM models of LC built in the current study differ from that in Andringa et al. (2012) because we added frequency of L2 use to the model. This variable uniquely explained 5.8% of the variance in LC as measured with the PET listening and it explained 5.1% of the variance in LC as measured with the CET4 listening. When the two groups of learners were considered separately word recognition from speech was the most important predictor for learners in China whilst for learners in the UK, learners' grammar knowledge and the reasoning ability were key. Pedagogical implications for teachers and learners of English and test developers in China and in the UK are provided based on these findings. These include that recognition of spoken words will need to be trained much more explicitly among Chinese learners of English, both in the UK and in China.