When Native Speakers Meet Non-Native Speakers: A Case Study of Foreigner Talk

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Abstract—**This study was triggered by speech modification in English overseas Chinese students encounter and find puzzling. Foreigner talk (FT) is such a type of modified speech used by native speakers (NSs) in their communication with non-native speakers (NNSs) in the form of linguistic simplification and foreigner-directed communication strategies. Based on a case study between Canadian and Chinese students, this study investigated FT through natural NS-NNS conversations and surveyed participants' views on FT. The findings go beyond illustrating the *features* of FT in phonology, lexicon, syntax and discourse to unfold native and non-native speakers' opposing views on FT, a conflict caused by NSs' and NNSs' different communicative goals based on communication accommodation theory (CAT), a sociolinguistic framework. This study is significant because a good understanding of this conflict, understudied by existing FT research, is vital to arousing NSs' and NNSs' awareness of each other's attitudes towards FT to promote mutual understanding for effective NS-NNS communication.**

Index Terms—**foreigner talk, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), NS-NNS interaction, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), sociolinguistics**

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, China has been the largest source of international students. A survey conducted in spring 2021 showed that Chinese students preferred English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom and the United States (Textor, 2021). The recent five years have seen a surge of interest in Canada: In 2017, Chinese students in Canadian schools amounted to the largest group of international students (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2019). Overseas Chinese students, who regard limited language proficiency as their most daunting challenge, have experienced more barriers in listening and speaking than in reading and writing because English teaching in China focuses on language knowledge in the form of grammar and vocabulary taught mainly in the native language, rather than on language skills (Guan, 2021; Haxton et al., 2019; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Liu, 2016; Tang et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015; Zhang & Mi, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2021).

Once a Chinese student studying in the USA and now a college English teacher in China, I deeply understand international students' longing to improve their L2 communicative competence through interacting with native speakers. When in the USA, I would try every opportunity to mingle with the locals; however, to my disappointment, most of my native English-speaking interlocutors would slow down and choose simple language to converse with me. This kind of interaction was frustrating and unhelpful in improving my English because of simple input. During my stay as an exchange scholar at one Canadian university last year, several Chinese students shared a similar frustration with me. One Chinese student Ling[1] had a weekly English study with two native English speakers. As their English meetings progressed smoothly, Ling gradually realized that they deliberately adjusted their speech by speaking slowly, using simple sentences and frequently asking questions. This adjustment became even more conspicuous when her husband Feng, with a lower level of English proficiency, came to Canada and joined their study. Like me, the Chinese couple were puzzled as to why the two native speakers (NSs) would make accommodations in their speech to nonnative speakers (NNSs).

This puzzlement motivated me to explore NSs' speech modification to NNSs based on the Chinese couple's weekly English study. The current study aims to arouse both native and non-native speakers' awareness of each other's attitudes towards speech modification to promote effective NS-NNS communication. The following section elaborates on the theoretical foundation with its central concept unveiled and relevant studies reviewed.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Features of Foreigner Talk

The research on NS-NNS verbal interactions has verified that NSs usually modify their speech via simplification when conversing with NNSs. Ferguson (1971, 1981) introduces the term foreigner talk (FT) to refer to one variety of simplified speech used by NSs to address foreigners who, according to NSs' perception, cannot function adequately in

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[1] Since participants would not like their private information to be disclosed, their names presented in this article are aliases and their affiliation remains confidential.

their L2. Ferguson (1975) proposes three major grammatical features of FT: omission, expansion and replacement. Long (1980) separates speech directed to foreigners into input and interaction and suggests that NSs make modifications in both FT and foreigner talk discourse (FTD). By subsuming FTD under FT, Freed (1981) argues that there are syntactic and functional modifications routinely made in FT. It is Hatch (1983) who has established a comprehensive description of the features of FT categorized into speech rate, vocabulary, syntax and discourse. When talking to NNSs, NSs usually use slow, loud speech and long pauses; high-frequency words, fewer idioms and fewer pronoun forms; simple, short sentences; repetitions, restatements, more questions and more corrections (Hatch, 1983, pp. 165–185). Communication accommodation theory (CAT), a sociolinguistic framework initially called speech accommodation theory (SAT), is usually applied to explain NSs' convergence with NNSs by shifting their speech style to accommodate the communicative competence of L2 users (Dragojevic et al., 2016).

Empirical studies (e.g., Alcon & Guzman, 1994; Ayuanita, 2013; Hatch et al., 1978; Long, 1980, 1981, 1983a) on naturalistic NS-NNS talks manifest that FT includes not only speech addressed to NNSs (input), but conversation with them (interaction) and that NSs vary modifications and communication strategies based on their ongoing assessment of NNSs' language proficiency. The recent literature includes four relevant studies. Rodr ǵuez-Cuadrado et al. (2017) studied FT through word reduction by comparing NS-NS talks with NS-NNS talks. Spanish-speaking participants were assigned to pair with either an NS or NNS, instructing their interlocutor on drawing a directional line between two objects. Results showed that when speaking to NNSs, NSs reduced their speed but increased their volume, an indicator of FT and that in all talks, NSs reduced repeated words in both duration and intensity, but repeated words were still longer and louder in NS-NNS talks than in NS-NS talks. In Lugrin et al. (2018) study, an NS of German was supposed to give directions to a virtual speaker with either a local or foreign accent on a demonstrator. Results revealed that the phenomenon of AFC (adapted, foreigner-directed communication) was also applicable to a virtual agent. Participants behaved significantly differently towards the virtual character with a foreign accent by reducing the time of interactions, the number of words and the speed of speech. Zuraida and Fitri (2019) analyzed native English speakers' conversations with Japanese L1 speakers in two videos from a Youtube channel. They identified three types of modified input with the Grammatical Foreigner Talk used the most, as well as nine types of modified interaction with the Confirmation Check employed the most. Kudera (2020) compared NS-NS dialogues with NS-NNS ones in which native Danish/Finnish speakers provided road instructions to native or non-native speakers. Results pointed to not only temporal and spectral differences between the foreigner-directed talk and native talk, but also positive correlations between the degree of differences and NSs' experience with and attitudes to NNSs measured by a questionnaire. Recent evidence has confirmed earlier findings concerning the features of FT as simplified speech observed across languages.

B. Views on Foreigner Talk

How FT is viewed hinges greatly on the role of FT in L2 learning. There are two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, Krashen (1981) claims that language acquisition resorts to comprehensible input provided by the L2 learner's interlocutor. In addition, the negotiation of meaning in interactions is essential to L2 learning (Hatch, 1983; Long, 1983b, 1985). In this regard, NSs mean well to modify their speech to meet the needs of L2 learners to ensure a smooth exchange of information, thus assisting L2 learning by engaging NNSs in the communication (Bobb et al., 2019). In this sense, FT plays a facilitative role and may be viewed positively. On the other hand, L2 proficiency can only be enhanced by exposure to L2's natural, complex and unmodified form, so intelligible speech cannot contribute to L2 enhancement (Margić, 2017, p. 49). Moreover, FT may engender a derisive implication that NSs are superior to NNSs due to the latter's linguistic inadequacy. NSs' good intention may be perceived by NSSs as unnecessary and even condescending (Bobb et al., 2019; DePaulo & Coleman, 1986; Ferguson, 1975). Despite facilitating comprehension and communication, therefore, FT also plays a negative role, from which adverse views may result.

There has been little attention paid to views on FT. In several studies (Knoll & Scharrer, 2007; Knoll et al., 2009; Uther et al., 2007), NSs required to rate the vocal affect for low-pass filtered speeches gave lower ratings to foreigner-directed speech (FDS) compared with other types of speech such as infant-directed speech (IDS) or adult-directed speech (ADS). Margić (2017) surveyed native English speakers' attitudes towards FT using a questionnaire. Results indicated that four fifths of the respondents deemed FT able to foster communication, show respect and consideration for NNSs and avoid conflicts, thus viewing FT positively. Conversely, other respondents expressed doubts about FT thanks to its showing condescension, causing low-quality communication, impeding L2 learning and devaluing English. Bobb et al. (2019) asked NNSs to rate four types of speech accommodation styles: clear speech, FDS, IDS and ADS. Results suggested a comparatively positive rating for FDS: NNSs viewed casual speech rather than FDS as the least favorable; FDS was not rated as less respectful or condescending than clear speech and IDS. Thus, this study found NNSs' positive attitudes towards FDS, in contrast to Knoll and Scharrer's (2007) finding of NNSs' lower rating for FDS.

Previous research has well documented the features of FT in both input and interaction. Nonetheless, most studies did not investigate how the features would vary with NNSs' language proficiency. The limited research concerning speakers' attitudes towards FT has yielded mixed results, based mainly on ratings or questionnaire responses. Moreover, almost no research has addressed both the features of FT and attitudes towards FT by examining natural NS-NNS conversations. In this regard, the purpose of the present study is twofold. The first is to present data from the weekly English study to illustrate the features of foreigner talk in response to language proficiency. The second is to interview

all participants to unfold both native and non-native speakers' views on foreigner talk. Two research questions are explored: (1) whether and how NSs modify their speech deferentially in response to NNSs' language proficiency; (2) how NSs and NNSs would view speech modification differently.

III. METHODOLOGY

The current study involved two Mandarin-speaking Chinese students (mean age = 27.5) and two English-speaking Canadian students (mean age = 24.5), all enrolled in graduate school at a Canadian university. Ling, an English major, had been in Canada for more than a year, while her husband Feng, an engineering major, had only been in Canada for four months. Based on their scores on IELTS, Ling was a higher-level English learner and Feng a lower-level one. The two Canadian students, G and S, were both female and English majors. The four students had two weekly studies where the Chinese couple practiced English with the English speakers in one study and in return the latter practiced Mandarin with the former in the other. Approval was sought from all participants.

While most relevant studies (e.g., Lugrin et al., 2018) elicited NS-NNS talks from artificial tasks, the data of the current study came from a natural situation. As requested, participants tape-recorded four weekly English studies. Their meetings, held at the Chinese couple's home, revolved around the discussion of diverse topics such as popular culture, politics, education, etc., each lasting roughly one hour. The recorder was turned on until the end, collecting a variety of information including NSs' speech to NNSs as well as NS-NS and NS-NNS conversations, i.e., both input and interaction. After the recordings were finished, I interviewed NSs and NNSs about their views on FT separately in a cafe and tape-recorded their responses. For NNSs, questions included: Did you sense FT? How do you like FT? For NSs, questions included: Did you perform FT? If so, why would you do that?

The data consisted of four one-hour recordings and responses to interview questions. I fully transcribed all recordings for typical examples, which were compared, based on Hatch's (1985) summary of FT's features, for phonological, lexical, syntactic and textual differences. I also looked through interview replies to analyze participants' views on FT.

IV. RESULTS

A. Features of Foreigner Talk

Analyses revealed NSs' adjustments in both input and interaction. Although not all features match all aspects of FT in Hatch's summary, there are strong similarities regardless of the situation. The results are presented as follows in the form of statistics and dialogues.

Phonology. The speech rate was calculated using the phonetic program Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2018). G and S reduced their speech rate when talking to the Chinese couple. As in Fig. 1, their speech to Ling (131 words/min) dropped to approximately three-fourths normal rate of their speech to each other (182 words/min) and that to Feng dropped to two-fifths normal rate (75 words/min). The rate difference of 56 words/min between the speech to Ling and that to Feng was caused by longer pauses between major constituents and fewer contractions G and S used to make their utterances more understandable to Feng with a much lower English proficiency than Ling.
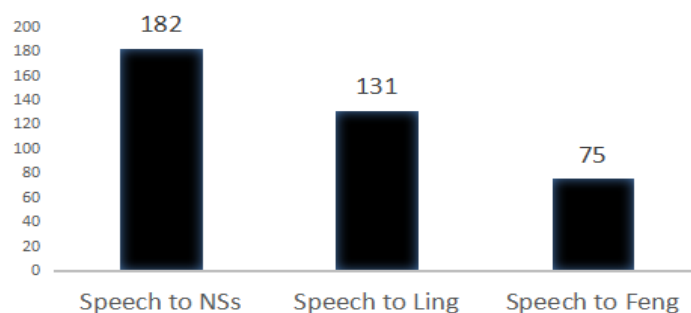

Figure 1: Speech Rate in Words/Minute

Lexicon. The most salient feature is that the two English speakers exploited structurally simple words in the speech to both Ling and Feng. Interestingly, G and S never used idiomatic phrases or slang; instead, they preferred commonly used words that they thought were familiar to NNSs. With their knowledge of different sizes of Ling's and Feng's vocabulary, NSs knew well to select synonyms to express the same meaning in their respective talks with NNSs, as follows:
  (1) S: What is a prayer?
       Ling: It's a kind of wish that our dream will come true by the blessing of our ancestors in Chinese culture.
       S: OK. In our culture, through a prayer, we can hope talk to God and we can *supplicate* for God's forgiveness.
  (2) S: What is a prayer?
       Feng: I think it's a way to talk to Heaven, want to have hope.

S: Ok. Some hope. In our culture, a prayer is a way to communicate with our God, to ***request*** for his forgiveness.

In example (1), S used a less frequent word *supplicate* in her speech to Ling based on Ling's language competence. However, S substituted a basic word *request* for *supplicate* when talking with Feng in example (2) according to her assessment of his competence.

Syntax. Most significantly, the average sentence NSs addressed to NNSs was lexically shorter and topologically simpler than that addressed to each other. Comparison of speech examples also reveals that NSs varied sentence structures in response to NNSs' English proficiency.

As shown in Table 1, the mean length of the sentence varied with the increased competence of interlocutors, from roughly six words in NSs' talk with Feng to eight words in that with Ling and to 14 words in NS-NS speech. There were 60% of the sentences directed to Feng that contained only one main verb (labeled s-node), compared with 57% in their talk with Ling and only 48% in their talk with each other. The difference in syntax did not appear as apparent as that in speech rate. The reason, according to Hatch (1983, p. 174), is that less complex syntactic structures are also common in NS-NS talks.

TABLE 1
ANALYSIS OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY

Sentence complexity	NSs with Feng	NSs with Ling	G with S
Words/sentence	6.4	8.8	10.2
% of sentences with one s-node	0.60	0.57	0.48

Comparison of the following two dialogues does show how NSs manipulated complexity in relation to NNSs' English proficiency.

(3) G: Ling is gonna listen to the tape?
Feng: Yeah.
S: It's cold outside. Winter again.
Feng: Yeah.
G: Exactly like winter.
Feng: I know the cold weather where come from.
G: You are familiar? From Canada?

(4) G: If you pray, what language do you use?
Ling: English.
G: Why would you do that?
Ling: Because this is not in China, so I pray in English to practice it.
S: Usually we recommend people pray in their own mother tongue.
Ling: Ok. I see.

In example (3), NSs used more phrases in their conversation with Feng, while in example (4), more complete sentences were used in their conversation with Ling.

Modifications based on language proficiency are illustrated through the separate speech they addressed to Feng in example (5) and to Ling in example (6):

(5) G: You know where the Student Hall is. We have meetings a lot. You can come here. Your English will get better. Just listen. And you can meet a lot of people and learn from each other. You can come here many times. You will be better. It will be interesting to you.

(6) S: A young man from Brazil, he married a girl from, actually I forget which country she came from, but her mother language is Spanish. And he speaks Spanish very well now. I asked him, "Your first language is English, while her first language is Spanish. So what language do you use when talking with each other?" He said the language is always Spanish because she always wants him to improve his Spanish and also because it's from her heart. That's the reason why his Spanish improves so quickly. When they wake up each morning, they always speak Spanish.

Example (5) was dominated by simple sentences with only one main verb, but in example (6), S exploited various subordinate clauses. In this light, the more proficient the L2 listener, the more complex sentences there were.

Discourse. When conversing with NNSs, NSs normally utilize various strategies to keep conversations alive. Compared with talking with Ling, NSs had more difficulty involving Feng in the communication owing to his lack of lexical resources. Therefore, more strategies were used in their interactions with Feng than with Ling. One typical technique was to compliment Feng on his English as in example (7):

(7) S: Your English is getting better and better.
G: Right. Right. I can tell that.
Feng: No, no, it's bad, so bad.

They also frequently asked him questions; by doing so, they did not mean to get an answer, but to encourage the exchange of information as in example (8):

(8) S: Feng, Chinese people don't eat avocados, right?
Feng: (Silence. Maybe nodding.)

With no response, S asked another question:

S: Do you like to eat avocados?

Feng: Well.

Having failed again, she tried one more question patiently:

S: What's your favorite fruit?

Feng: Let me think.

The reason for this one-way communication may be Feng's inability to understand the word *avocado* or to express his ideas in English.

To make their messages clear, G and S used other strategies characteristic of FT, which are displayed in example (9):

(9)   Feng: Many Canadian people exercises in the sport, basketball…

G: Basketball court.

Feng: Yeah. They clime the stairs.

G: It's true. In the coliseum, they go up and down stairs. But not me.

Feng: Where? Coli…

G/S: Coliseum.

Feng: Coliseum?

G: The basketball court you mentioned just now.

Feng: Yeah, Yeah. I knew it. I just don't know how to pronounce.

Feng did not know how to express *basketball court*, so G exploited the "fill-in-the-blank" technique (Hatch, 1985, p. 178). When Feng did not understand *coliseum*, both G and S repeated this word. After this simple repetition failed, G made a restatement, i.e., using a synonym.

Comparison of NSs' separate conversations with NNSs manifests that NSs, when talking with Feng, made more clarification checks (what?), confirmation checks (Do you mean?) and comprehension checks (Do you know?), as follows:

(10) Clarification check

Feng: We should be molest persons.

S: What? What do you mean by *molest*?

(11) Confirmation check

G: You should dress up in the Student Hall. That means you show your respect for others.

Feng: You know, in Chinese, I don't like to dress up so much time.

G: In Chinese? Oh, do you mean in China?

(12) Comprehension check

S: Last time, we talked about the comparison between Chinese and western festivals.

Did I tell you the Saint Patrick's Day? Do you know it?

Feng: Yeah. You didn't say it, but Ling told me.

When conversing with Ling, however, G and S did not burden themselves to keep conversations going because both NSs and Ling took up their turns naturally. Moreover, their conversation ranged over diverse topics, whereas topics of the conversation with Feng were much more limited. In examples (13) and (14), Ling incorporated her expertise into her exchange of ideas with NSs.

(13) G: When we pray, we may pray silently. It's from our heart. We cannot show to others that we are praying. Do you know why?

Ling: I think that's religious commitment.

G: I know its meaning, but can you tell me more about it?

Ling: Ok. A great theologist Jonathan Edward in the 18th century wrote a book *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*. He talked about religious commitment. He said it's not enough that you can understand the verses in the Bible. You must be converted followers. That is, accept those principles with your faith, your heart. Ok. Let me give you a metaphor to make it clear. Actually, it was given by Jonathan himself. Quote unquote. When you see the word *fire*, you know its meaning. Right? But you can't sense it until you are burned by fire.

(14) S: Some Canadian Chinese can speak three languages: English, French and Chinese.

Ling: Wow, three languages. Acquiring English is killing me, let alone two or three

second languages.

S: I am always amazed by anyone who can speak a second language, especially

those learning English as an adult.

Ling: That's right. From my course I knew that in terms of phonology, adults can never acquire native-like accent. But in vocabulary or syntax, they may. But having target-like accent is almost impossible. Right?

S: I agree.

B. Views on Foreigner Talk

Analyses of interview responses unfolded contrasting views on FT. On the one hand, both Ling and Feng sensed FT. They felt grateful for NSs' accommodation, but perceived it as unnecessary because FT prevented their exposure to authentic L2 conducive to their English improvement and caused them to feel underestimated linguistically and

cognitively. Compared with her husband, Ling expressed stronger resistance to FT because of her much higher English proficiency, a finding which presumably suggests a correlation between the level of L2 competence and the degree of resistance. This result is consistent with Knoll and Scharrer's (2007) finding of NNSs' lower ratings for FDS, but in contrast to a positive response to FDS in Bobb et al. (2019) study. On the other hand, G and S admitted to deliberately adjusting their speech to Ling and Feng for comprehension and mutual communication. They viewed FT as necessary to NS-NNS interactions but worried about its negative impact on NNSs. One of their Canadian friends once told them that they were insulting NNSs' intelligence by using FT. They had a hard time understanding why their good intention was misperceived as an insult. As they said, "Even if NNSs don't like it, we have to do it because we're only trying to help." NSs' views in the present study echo Margić's (2017) finding of NSs' generally positive attitude towards FT with concerns about its appropriateness.

V. Discussion

In summary, data analyses suggested that G and S addressed Ling and Feng differently than they did to each other and adjusted their speech to the needs of NNSs. Analyses also indicated that NSs manipulated the linguistic complexity of phonology, vocabulary, syntax and discourse in connection with the interlocutors' language proficiency. NSs' speech was clearly articulated because they spoke slowly and reduced contractions. Their well-formed utterances were also associated with their selection of high-frequency vocabulary and simple sentence structures. To maintain the conversation, they drew on various techniques not used in the NS-NS talk according to their perception of NNSs' communicative skills. It is apparent that G and S modified their speech deferentially in response to Ling's and Feng's English proficiency. The results of the present study verify the findings described in the literature (e.g., Ayuanita, 2013; Long, 1980, 1981, 1983a) that NSs make characteristic adjustments in both the speech to and interaction with foreigners through linguistic simplification and discourse strategies.

The conflict in views on FT seems to derive from a different understanding of effective communication. From the NNSs' perspective, communication is effective only if it can help their L2 learning; from the NSs' perspective, communication is effective only if it is comprehensible to all speakers. Accordingly, NSs might as well not make accommodations, but they have to do so; likewise, NNSs might as well appreciate and embrace accommodations, but they cannot help feeling hurt. This result echoes one relevant issue addressed by Hatch (1983). On the one hand, she defends FT in that it "helps promote communication" and serves as "an explicit and implicit teaching mode" (p. 183); on the other hand, she recognizes that "[m]any foreign students are insulted when the simplification is obviously a mismatch, far more than is necessary" (p. 181).

This conflict can be further explained by Zuengler's (1991) analysis of the dynamics intrinsic to NS-NNS interactions based on the CAT model formulated by Coupland et al. (1988). First, NSs have their own interactional goals, which may be communication efficacy, information comprehensibility, interlocutors' approval or divergence from interlocutors. In the current study, G and S held effective communication and mutual understanding as their goals for interactions with Ling and Feng. Second, NNSs shift their goals with their perception of interlocutor characteristics based on evaluations or merely stereotypes of L2 proficiency. G and S maintained their original goal of intelligible communication and deemed it proper for NNSs' communicative needs. Third, NSs modify their speech to facilitate conversations and increase the use of FT to accommodate lower-level L2 learners. That is exactly why G and S adjusted their speech deferentially for Ling's and Feng's varying levels of English competence. Finally, it is time for NNSs to interpret NSs' well-intended speech modification. Out of NSs' expectations, their good intention may be regarded as "being condescending or controlling" (Zuengler, 1991, p. 239) because FT cannot enable NNSs to achieve their communicative goal of L2 enhancement, only to make them feel inferior, incompetent or alien. In Zuengler's (1991, p. 240) words, NNSs may feel as if they were dismissed as foreigners or language learners, thus viewing FT negatively. It follows that different perspectives on effective communication actually result from different communicative goals which give rise to different attitudes towards FT. This is why Ling and Feng's views contrasted sharply with those of G and S.

VI. Conclusion

Based on a case study between Canadian and Chinese students, the present study focuses on NSs' linguistic accommodation NNSs encounter and find baffling during NS-NNS communication. Results have shed light on the features of FT in phonology, lexicon, syntax and discourse as well as on NSs' and NNSs' contrasting views on FT. The findings draw attention to a seemingly irreconcilable dilemma caused by different communicative goals: What is deemed comprehensible by NSs is not sufficient for NNSs to improve their L2; what is perceived as authentic by NNSs is not proper for NSs to promote mutual comprehension. As such, the current study provides some practical implications. Its findings will allow a wide audience, who may have a chance to interact with NNSs, to learn about the mechanism underlying NS-NNS interactions. Hopefully, effective communication will arise from NSs and NNSs understanding each other's attitudes: NSs may treat NNSs as they do NSs to let NNSs gain opportunities to improve their L2 proficiency and meanwhile come to realize the necessity of modification when NNSs have difficulty comprehending unmodified speech.

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