

2. Teaching pronunciation: Truths and lies

John M. Levis

Introduction

Pronunciation has been professionally neglected in research and teaching since the advent of communicative language teaching, or CLT (Murphy & Baker, 2015). Pronunciation advocates have often described this using the metaphor of Cinderella, an image first used by Kelly (1969): “It will be obvious that pronunciation has been the Cinderella of language teaching, largely because the linguistic sciences on which its teaching rests did not achieve the sophistication of semantics, lexicology, and grammar until the 19th century” (p. 87). Kelly wrote before the advent of CLT, but the image has been kept alive by later writers. In one influential source, we read about “the Cinderella Syndrome – kept behind doors and out of sight” (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996, p. 323). In a more recent source, we see the image of disregard for pronunciation in language teaching circles. Underhill (2010) writes that “...pronunciation is the Cinderella of language teaching. It has been neglected, and disconnected from other language learning activities.” As I and others have argued elsewhere (Derwing, 2019; Levis, 2019), this metaphor has more than run its course and no longer applies because of significant changes in the field of second language (L2) pronunciation, especially evident in journal publications, in conferences, and in professional books devoted to L2 pronunciation.

Journal publications are one marker of the growing visibility of L2 pronunciation. Although pronunciation-related articles have never disappeared, and indeed were always visible in journals that

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emphasized applied linguistics' concerns, such as *Language Learning* and *International Review of Applied Linguistics* (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017), journals dedicated to the teaching of foreign languages have had few articles on pronunciation until the past ten years. For example, the quarterly *Foreign Language Annals* started in 1968 as the flagship journal of ACTFL, the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages. From 1970–2007, it included just four articles related to pronunciation (less than .4% of total published articles). In a remarkable change, from 2008–2017, there were 22 articles related to L2 pronunciation. This flood of articles reflects not only a change in the journal but also in the interests of its readership. A similar shift is visible within the field at large, namely special issues in other journals in applied linguistics. *TESOL Quarterly* (2005) was the first special issue, with a focus on 'Intelligibility, Identity and World Englishes.' In 2006, *Prospect*, an Australian journal that is no longer published, released its own special issue on pronunciation with a focus on the Australian context (http://www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/resources/prospect/V21_N1_2006). Another Australian journal, the *Journal of Academic Language and Learning* (2015) released a special issue on 'New Directions in Pronunciation Theory and Practice.' The high-profile journal *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (2017) dedicated a special issue to 'Task-based Language Teaching and L2 Pronunciation.' And finally, *CATESOL Journal* (2018) published a large special issue on pronunciation with 14 articles. In another important change, the first journal dedicated to L2 pronunciation launched in 2015. The *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation* (JSLP) started with two issues per year, and moved to three issues in its fifth year. This means that over 90 full-articles have been published in JSLP alone, and the number of pronunciation articles published in other journals has not been affected.

The increasing visibility and presence of dedicated pronunciation conferences is a second change in the field. The oldest conference, New Sounds, started in 1989 and is held every three years at different locations in the world. Increasingly, L2 pronunciation researchers who would previously have attended teaching-oriented conferences make up a substantial proportion of presenters. The International Conference on Native and Nonnative Accents of English, held

annually in Łódź, Poland, was the first dedicated pronunciation conference. The English Pronunciation: Issues and Practices conference began in 2009 and is a biennial conference held in Europe. Also in 2009, the annual Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching (PSLLT) conference began in North America. This conference also includes a freely-available electronic proceedings, now in its 12th year (<https://apling.engl.iastate.edu/archive/>). Since then, there have been other irregular conferences such as Sound to Word (Iowa City, USA in 2015), the pronunciation symposium in Wollongong, Australia (2016, 2018) and the Barcelona Pronunciation Workshop (2019) that indicate increasing interest in the field. In addition, major applied linguistics conference such as the American Association for Applied Linguistics now have dedicated strands for pronunciation-related research.

Finally, there has been a recent explosion of professional books related to L2 pronunciation, moving beyond a focus on English to include books on a variety of other languages such as Chinese (Yang, 2016), German (O'Brien & Fagan, 2018), and Spanish (Rao, 2019), and in connecting L2 pronunciation to other applied linguistics area such as assessment (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2016; Kang & Ginther, 2017, identity (Beinhoff, 2013; Levis & Moyer, 2014), listening (Cauldwell, 2013, 2017), ELF/EIL (Deterding, 2014; Low, 2016; Nelson, 2012), foreign accent (Moyer, 2013), and pronunciation teaching (Brown, 2014; Derwing & Munro, 2015; Grant, 2014; Murphy, 2017, etc.). I was able to identify only 7 such books for the 1990s, 12 books for the decade beginning 2000, but since 2010 there have been over 60 so far.

Despite all these changes in the field, research still reports that teachers lack confidence in their ability to teach pronunciation, in understanding pronunciation's role in the language teaching classroom, and in knowing what is true and not true about pronunciation teaching and learning (e.g., Foote et al., 2011). The purpose of this paper is to provide reliable information from current pronunciation research and teaching. Having such information may help teachers feel more confident in teaching pronunciation. I will focus on four truths about pronunciation teaching and also discuss corresponding lies that are still commonly accepted by many teachers.

Table 1. Truths and lies about pronunciation teaching

Four Truths	Four Lies
1. Pronunciation is unavoidable and essential.	1. Teaching speaking and listening is possible without pronunciation.
2. Pronunciation teaching works.	2. Pronunciation will take care of itself.
3. There is always a way to teach pronunciation.	3. Teachers cannot teach pronunciation.
4. Everyone has an accent; but not everyone gets to judge equally.	4. Adult language learners can sound like native speakers.

Four truths and corresponding lies

In my teaching, I often use ice-breakers to help me get to know my students and them to know each other. A favorite ice-breaker is what I call “three truths and a lie”, in which everyone has to write down four statements about themselves, and one must be a lie. All the other students need to guess which statement is a lie, a surprisingly difficult task that has the side benefit of showing learners that they can fool others in their new language. Similarly, pronunciation teaching is full of beliefs that are indefensible yet still fool many otherwise knowledgeable teachers (Thomson & Foote, 2019). The truths and lies addressed in this paper are summarized in Table 1. Each pair is explained in turn, first the lie, and then its related truth.

Lie 1 – Teaching speaking and listening is possible without pronunciation

Implicit in the communicative approach to teaching oral communication skills is that it is possible to teach speaking skills and listening skills without explicitly addressing pronunciation. In pre-CLT methods such as audiolingualism, there was an assumption that if the accurate form of the language was mastered, then communicative fluency would automatically follow. This was not the case. In CLT approaches, the pendulum swung the other way, and an emphasis on fluency was presumed to result in sufficient accuracy. Pronunciation is, at a very basic level, interested

in accuracy. Sounds and prosody have to be accurate enough for a listener to interpret them as expressing the intended words and meanings. This may mean that L2 pronunciation might closely match native productions, or it may mean that productions are distinctly nonnative yet interpretable as the appropriate category. Ultimately, accuracy in pronunciation means the communication of meaning, and sufficiently inaccurate forms can cause listeners to hear the wrong words, not understand the intended message, or misinterpret the meaning (Levis, 2018; Smith & Nelson, 1985). Inaccurate pronunciation can also make listeners work harder, that is, it can affect comprehensibility. Although pronunciation is only one aspect of weakened comprehensibility (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012), it remains an important aspect. Thus pronunciation, far from being irrelevant to L2 speaking, is always something that is critical in communicating meaning in the L2. When combined with other issues of speech, such as lexical choices or grammar, pronunciation can affect comprehensibility even more (Ruivivar & Collins, 2018).

Pronunciation also is an essential part of listening comprehension. Like speaking, listening moved from a micro-focus on accurate form in older materials (e.g., Morley, 1973) to a focus on macro-listening strategies and understanding the meaning expressed by speakers. Field (2008) describes these two aspects of listening as the bricks and mortar of speech. The bricks are the content words, those that are stressed, more easily heard, and less predictable. The mortar includes the function words, which are unstressed, harder to hear, and more predictable. Like speaking, listening instruction has suffered from myopic methodologies. Both macro-listening and micro-listening are important in L2 listening abilities, but a dominant focus on macro-listening and content word listening is almost always accompanied by a diminished focus on the role of pronunciation in successful listening, and on the function words that provide connections between content words. L2 listeners still need to negotiate the pronunciation issues that allow them to understand words in speech, that allow them to understand connected speech in careful and casual speech, and that help them to understand new voices (Cauldwell, 2018). This means they need help in noticing the role of pronunciation in identifying words in speech.

		LISTENER	
		NATIVE (NS)	NONNATIVE (NNS)
SPEAKER	NATIVE (NS)	(A) Dialect understanding	(C) Language Learning and Teaching
	NONNATIVE (NNS)	(B) L2 Intelligibility Studies	(D) Lingua Franca Communication

Figure 1. Listener-Speaker Intelligibility Matrix (adapted from Levis, 2005)

Truth 1 – Pronunciation is unavoidable and essential

The first truth, that you cannot speak a language without pronunciation, is self-evident but often forgotten. A related truth is that you cannot understand others without understanding their pronunciation during both careful and casual speech. This means that for anyone who wants to speak another language, pronunciation is critical. Speaking another language is power, and pronunciation is the face of that power. It is the first thing listeners notice, and it is the most basic level of language form that allows communication to take place. As Hinofotis and Bailey (1981) describe it, there is an intelligibility threshold which, if not met, stops communication from truly taking place. Spoken intelligibility has, at the very least, both speaking and listening components. In Levis (2005), I conceptualized this in terms of a matrix with four quadrants (Figure 1) in which native and nonnative speakers play both the role of listener and speaker.

In Quadrant A, native speakers of a language speak to other native speakers. Typical assumptions for this quadrant are that communication breakdowns between native speakers and listeners will be rare, but we actually know very little about whether this is true. Dialects of the same language can be very different, and intelligibility between dialects is not guaranteed. In Chinese, for example, what most linguists would consider different languages are termed dialects, and spoken intelligibility is unlikely, but written intelligibility is likely to be certain. In English, different

dialects of the same variety such as American English are likely to be largely intelligible, but varieties of English are not always going to be easily intelligible. Still it is certain that, apart from lexical and grammatical differences, pronunciation differences are likely to play a significant role in the extent to which speakers and listeners will understand each other. Larger and more unexpected differences are likely to cause greater loss of understanding.

Quadrant B, with nonnative speakers and native listeners, is the quadrant that represents most studies of intelligibility, accent-*edness*, and comprehensibility. This quadrant assumes that NSs are the ones who are the best decoders of spoken language, and nonnative speakers are the ones who are tasked with delivering spoken language that is decodable. Most studies of this sort make an assumption that the success of an interaction is based on the ability of nonnative speakers to make themselves understood, preferably by using a reasonable representation of a well-known native speaker accent, e.g., for English, some variant of Received Pronunciation or General American English.

Quadrant C, with native speakers and nonnative listeners, is the quadrant of language teaching and nonnative speakers encountering native speech in natural communication. Intelligibility is typically thought of as nonnative speakers having to make themselves understood to native listeners who are able to understand speech that is well delivered. But Quadrant C is an equally critical aspect of pronunciation teaching, because being able to understand the details of pronunciation in native speech is perhaps harder than making one's self understood (Rivers, 1981). Indeed, this type of listening was the core of early types of listening instruction such as found in Morley (1973), where micro-listening practice was focused upon understanding pronunciation differences between past and present tense, singular and plural forms, and many other aspects of listening that reflect pronunciation distinctions. After decades of being deemphasized, micro-listening related to pronunciation has been making a comeback because of evidence regarding the role of pronunciation in L2 listening comprehension (Cutler, 2015; Field, 2003, 2008), in regard to role of particular pronunciation features in intelligibility (Levis, 2018), and in regard to the significant role of pronunciation variations in understanding normal

connected speech (Brown & Kondo-Brown, 2006; Cauldwell, 2013, 2018; Johnson, 2004; Levis, 1999; Shockey, 2003).

The final quadrant (Quadrant D) reflects an area in which pronunciation is also critically important, especially in regard to the role of English in the world. In this quadrant, we have situations in which NNSs use the target language to communicate with other NNSs, either because they do not share a common L1 or because the context requires the use of the target language (TL), such as Aviation English. Jenkins (2000) convincingly demonstrated that pronunciation is perhaps the most common reason for loss of intelligibility. Thus in all four quadrants, pronunciation is both central to communicative success and unavoidable.

If anything, this intelligibility matrix oversimplifies the extent to which pronunciation is central to successful communication. NSs and NNSs are not all the same, and languages like English also include a middle ground in which English has become nativized, as in countries like India, Singapore and Nigeria (Kachru, 1992; Nelson, 2012). In such countries, these new Englishes are closer to native varieties than to nonnative, meaning that new, stable pronunciations become part of the listener-speaker equation. In addition, proficient speakers have multiple speech styles, from the most casual to the most careful, each of which has different pronunciation patterns that will affect intelligibility.

Lie 2 - Pronunciation does not need to be taught

This lie about pronunciation is simple and influential. Going back to the earliest days of the communicative and comprehension-based approaches in the 1970s and 1980s (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017; Murphy & Baker, 2015), there were assertions that because adult learners could not become nativelike, pronunciation should not be taught explicitly. Instead, learners should be taught to communicate in the L2. Pronunciation weaknesses would then be compensated for by successful use of the language in other ways, and pronunciation would even improve because of communicative improvement. In other words, pronunciation would take care of itself. It slowly became clear that this was not true. One of the most important areas of evidence for this was research being done with foreign teaching assistants (FTA) in the United States. These FTAs came from all over the world to study for their Master's

and PhD degrees. As part of their graduate work, they taught classes in their fields to American undergraduate students, who were not experts and were studying the topic at the lowest level in general education requirements (e.g., basic chemistry or biology). Bailey (1984) reports that the dominant approach to pronunciation was to simply leave it alone, because “pronunciation patterns were resistant to change” (p. 4):

Pronunciation is a problem with high visibility. TAs often regard it as their highest priority in terms of language mediation. Students frequently cite it as the biggest obstacle to understanding. With TAs from certain countries (India is perhaps the best example), pronunciation problems mar what is otherwise highly proficient speech (Bailey, 1984, p. 34).

Hinofotis and Bailey (1981), in an earlier report, said research indicated there was “a threshold of intelligibility” (p. 124) in FTA speech, and that pronunciation was not a binary issue (native vs. nonnative) but rather a continuum along which speech could be more or less understandable.

A related thread that led to a marginalization of pronunciation teaching during this time was the idea that teaching language form was either not productive or even counterproductive to unmonitored use. This is best known from Krashen’s Learning-Acquisition dichotomy (e.g., Krashen, 1977, 2013). The Learning/Acquisition distinction asserts that L2 learners have access to two different types of knowledge, that provided by instruction (Learning) and that provided by meaningful use (Acquisition). Learning is promoted by conscious improvements that are the result of explicit instruction, while Acquisition is unconscious development that comes from responding to the appropriate level of input. Learning does not become Acquisition, that is, language learned by attention to form is not available to the learner in unconscious, meaningful use of the language. This assertion was always questioned by other researchers (e.g., McLaughlin, 1978) as being too strong and based on insufficient evidence. With succeeding years, it has become clear that Focus-on-Form is critical for all kinds of second language development (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998), including pronunciation (Saito & Lyster, 2012).

A second problem with the view that pronunciation does not need to be taught is the question of fossilization. First put forth by Selinker (1972), fossilization has sometimes been used to describe the lack of development in pronunciation for long-term learners of a language (Derwing & Munro, 2014). Some research indicates that naturalistic pronunciation learning levels off after the first year in the L2 environment (Derwing et al., 2006), but there is also evidence that the pronunciation of long-term learners can be “defossilized” through instruction (Acton, 1984; Couper, 2006), and that changes can be evident even to naïve listeners (Derwing et al., 1998; Gordon & Darcy, 2016). In one recent study addressing fossilization, Derwing, Munro, Foote, Waugh and Fleming (2014) looked at the effects of pronunciation instruction for Southeast Asian workers in a window factory in Canada (L1: Vietnamese, Khmer). The workers had lived an average of 19 years in Canada, and they had significant pronunciation problems. For example, one worker was reported to say ‘stockitt’ for the word ‘target’, an error that caused significant intelligibility problems. The workers received 17 hours of pronunciation instruction over 3 months, with out of class assignments. The results showed intelligibility improvements both in their perception of spoken English and in their spontaneous speech. In other words, they were not really fossilized.

Truth 2 – Pronunciation teaching works

The second truth about pronunciation teaching is that it is successful. Learning can occur in the absence of teaching, given the right timing, environment, motivation, etc. But this kind of improvement is limited and is most obvious within the first year being surrounded by the L2. Such a window of maximal opportunity (Derwing & Munro, 2015), once closed, does not mean L2 learners cannot improve their pronunciation. Multiple articles demonstrate that pronunciation need not fossilize, even after long periods of no improvement (e.g., Derwing et al., 2014).

Indeed, L2 learners, even those who have shown little naturalistic development, almost always improve when they practice and are instructed with some degree of regularity. For years, a critique about pronunciation teaching is that we had no certainty

about its usefulness. From the Critical Period Hypothesis (Scovel, 1969) to the anti-pronunciation bias of communicative and comprehension-based approaches to teaching (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017; Murphy & Baker, 2015), there have been questions about whether pronunciation teaching was worth the time because of the evidence that adult L2 learners only rarely achieved a native-like accent (Birdsong, 2007; Bongaerts et al., 1997; Brinton, 2012). Reports of nativelike passing ability are short-lived and can be maintained for service encounters (Moyer, 2014; Piller, 2002).

This paper does not question these findings but instead argues that nativelikeness is an inappropriate goal for pronunciation teaching and learning. Although few ever achieve this level of pronunciation (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009), becoming completely nativelike is unnecessary to intelligibility or communicative effectiveness. There is abundant evidence that even highly accented L2 speakers can be completely intelligible (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

Claims that pronunciation teaching works mean that L2 learners who are instructed in how to produce or perceive segmentals and suprasegmentals in the L2 almost always improve their production and perception of those features. Although some types of instructional interventions are likely to be more effective than others, e.g., suprasegmentals over segmentals (Derwing et al., 1998; Gordon & Darcy, 2016), the overwhelming finding about pronunciation instruction of all kinds is that it works, and often works well (Lee et al., 2015). The findings of a number of recent analyses of pronunciation studies has demonstrated this. Saito (2012) identified 15 quasi-experimental pretest/posttest studies of the effect of instruction on pronunciation improvement. Saito found that most instruction resulted in improvement, whether the instruction focused on segmentals or suprasegmentals, that improvement was more likely to be evident in controlled rather than spontaneous speech, and that focus of instruction was likely to effect the degree to which improvement was noticed in spontaneous speech. For the few studies that included control groups, meaning-oriented instruction alone did not result in pronunciation improvement. Only studies that focused explicitly on pronunciation found improvement.

A meta-analysis of 86 pronunciation studies conducted by Lee et al. (2015) found more compelling evidence for the positive effects of pronunciation instruction. The 86 studies included a wide range of instructional interventions. Overall, the meta-analysis found that there was a large effect for the results of pronunciation instruction. These effects were strongest for longer periods of instruction, interventions that provided feedback on learner language, and for more controlled language use. In other words, it appears that pronunciation instruction done over a longer period of time (up to 15 weeks) is likely to be more successful, especially if learners are given specific feedback on their pronunciation. And not surprisingly, when learners are asked to pronounce in contexts where they can focus on pronunciation form more completely, they are more likely to demonstrate improvement than when they have to juggle communicative goals and attention to pronunciation form. L2 pronunciation includes a strong element of automaticity, and controlled production is likely to improve more quickly than spontaneous production, in which attention to meaning overwhelms attention to form and leads to L1 pronunciation automaticity rather than L2.

In a narrative analysis of 75 pronunciation studies, Thomson and Derwing (2015) looked at the effect of pronunciation instruction in classrooms and in computer-assisted contexts. A narrative analysis differs from a meta-analysis in focusing more on qualitative differences between the methodology of different studies and not the quantitative analysis of success. Thomson and Derwing agreed with Lee et al. (2015) that most instruction was successful in promoting better pronunciation, but critiqued the studies based on their definitions of improvement, their targets, the types of tasks used, and the inclusion of control groups. First, most studies defined improvement in terms of whether L2 learners became more native-like in their production of the targeted pronunciation features. This focus on nativeness is different from a more appropriate goal of intelligibility, setting up a conflict between what knowledgeable pronunciation teachers and researchers regard as the ultimate goal of instruction and an outdated view of improvement. Second, most studies they examined focused on segmentals rather than suprasegmentals, despite evidence that suprasegmentals

are more likely to lead to improvements in comprehensibility and intelligibility in the short run, while focusing on segmentals, even the most important segmentals, may lead to improvement that is not noticed in spontaneous speech (Neri, Cucchiari & Strik, 2006). Third, there was a strong bias toward reading aloud. This is understandable from a perspective of experimental protocols, but reading aloud is a different type of spoken performance from spontaneous speech, and ultimately learners need to be intelligible in normal communication, not just in reading aloud. Thus, Thomson and Derwing argue for greater attention to studies that emphasize the gold standard of improvement that can be noticed by listeners (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Finally, the authors argue for the inclusion of control groups in pronunciation improvement studies because without control groups, the evidence for improvement over time will always be uncertain.

Lie 3 – Teachers cannot teach pronunciation

A more basic problem with teaching pronunciation has been reported in many articles, that is, that teachers express that they lack the training and confidence to teach pronunciation (e.g., Breikreuz et al., 2001; Macdonald, 2002). Teacher beliefs are known to affect the ways that teachers approach pedagogy in many areas of language teaching (e.g., Farrell & Ives, 2015; Richards et al., 2001). One reason pronunciation is different is the historical state of language teacher training more generally, in which pronunciation has not been part of most teacher training programs for decades, leaving practicing teachers with the task of developing expertise through workshops and reading while they are teaching. Most do not do this. Since coursebooks also do not integrate pronunciation well, teachers often have inadequate models of practice (Levis & Sonsaat, 2016; Sonsaat, 2017). There are other reasons as well for teachers' reluctance. Pronunciation teaching often does not result in immediate changes in learners' performance. Research shows that accents of adult language learners rarely change much in naturalistic (Derwing et al., 2006) or instructed contexts (Derwing et al., 1997). If teachers take a nativeness approach to pronunciation teaching (Levis, 2005), this evidence can be discouraging. But there is little evidence that

accentedness is directly related to understanding (Derwing & Munro, 2015). In other words, if teachers think pronunciation is about perfect accents, not communicative effectiveness, they are less likely to teach it.

Another reason that teachers may feel that they cannot (or need not) teach pronunciation is that they worry about how pronunciation changes may affect a learner's identity. This concern is not new (Pennington & Richards, 1986; Zuengler, 1988), but it sometimes is taken to mean that L2 learners should not have to change their pronunciation because it will change their identities (Golombek & Jordan, 2005). Such a concern seems to be overblown (Levis, 2015), and second language pronunciation work is always tied to imagined identities (LeVelle & Levis, 2014) as shown in research on passing as native speakers (Marx, 2002; Piller, 2002) and in the effects of social networks on pronunciation (Lybeck, 2002).

A more mundane reason for not teaching pronunciation is that teachers worry about being boring. In my experience, this is one of the worst reasons to avoid something important. Being boring has little to do with whether a topic is important, and learners often perceive boring and interesting quite differently from teachers. Pronunciation teaching and learning can be fun, no doubt, as is clear from many innovative materials (e.g., Hancock & McDonald, 2017; Yoshida, 2016), but this should never be the primary reason to include anything in a language classroom.

As we see from the research about pronunciation teaching's results in Truth #2, pronunciation teaching works. The many, many studies on pronunciation improvement likely include both fun and boring approaches to teaching, and the overall finding of these studies is that learners improve when they are taught. This is perhaps the most critical reason to teach pronunciation. Learners usually want help with their pronunciation. They recognize that it is central to how they are perceived, especially in the L2 environment (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). They often do not know what is wrong, nor what matters, nor how to participate in the L2 community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Our teaching, even when it is not perfect or extensive, can help them with their intelligibility, especially if we pay more attention to pronunciation

features that make a difference such as suprasegmentals (e.g., stress, melody, rhythm), high functional load segmentals (such as /l/-/r/, /p/-/b/), and varied types of practice activities, from form-based practice to communicative practice and connections to other language skills.

Truth 3 – There is always a way to teach pronunciation

A common objection to teaching pronunciation is that there is no time to do so. Teachers' class times are filled with many requirements, from the teaching of different language skills to completing testing requirements. Pronunciation may then seem like just another thing for which there is no time. This objection is specious, at least when phrased this way. Pronunciation is not taught because many teachers do not see a compelling reason to do so. Teachers always find time to teach what is important, either because a curriculum prioritizes it, an important test requires it, or because a teacher finds a topic essential to what they think learners should master. Another reason that the argument is specious has to do with an inadequate understanding of what pronunciation is and how it relates to other aspects of language that are already being taught.

As already discussed, pronunciation is an essential part of any person's communicative skills. This means that pronunciation is not simply a matter of mastering decontextualized forms and imitating a model accent, but of becoming understandable and understanding others. This means that while pronunciation may sometimes require focused attention, it does not need to be always taught apart from other aspects of language. If students are speaking and listening, they have to pronounce or understand others' pronunciation. If students are reading or learning vocabulary, they have to be able to connect the written form of words and sentences to their spoken forms. In other words, pronunciation fits naturally within other areas of language, and should mostly be taught that way. Jones (2016), in a book highlighting the ways in which pronunciation can be integrated with other aspects of language, includes chapters on reading, vocabulary, listening/speaking, presentation skills, general listening, grammar, and spelling. One of the advantages of integrating pronunciation

with other aspects of language is that the relevance of pronunciation is usually more obvious when it is integrated than when it is taught alone. Another advantage is that integrating pronunciation takes little extra classroom time. It will take more time to prepare, especially when a teacher first starts trying to integrate pronunciation into established patterns of teaching. But this is true of any aspect of teaching, and is not unique to pronunciation. Following are a few ideas for how pronunciation can be integrated with the teaching of other skills.

Pronunciation of formulaic sequences

Corpus studies indicate that a lot of everyday language is relatively formulaic, that is, we use similar or identical ways to communicate in routine situations. One routine situation that is important for language classes and for daily life is the use of self-introductions and repeated questions. For these routines, the pronunciation feature of prominence, or sentence stress, is essential. The example activities that follow have been successfully used in ESL classes from beginning to advanced (Levis & Muller Levis, n.d.). The task itself is important because it provides the opening for L2 learners to continue speaking. Being able to introduce oneself and have another person hear your name, even if the name is unfamiliar, is a crucial first step to interaction. I am not saying that L2 learners do not know how to say their names. Rather, they often do not know how to package the prosody of their names in a way that will help interlocutors hear it in English. Similarly, repeated questions (e.g., How ARE you? FINE. How are YOU?) are also formulaic in prosody and help L2 learners negotiate small talk routines. Both self-introductions and small talk make further conversation more possible.

These activities are built into an ice-breaker which can be done and recycled over several days, depending on the level of the learners. They are presented in a dialogue that plays out in some form or another in many daily conversations where two people meet for the first time.

Activity 1 – Ice breaker

Formulaic sequences are relatively invariant routines. This ice-breaker includes two sequences: self-introductions and repeated questions.

- John: Hi, my name's John LEVis.
 Elisabeth: Hi, I'm Elisabeth ZETTerholm.
 Where are you FROM?
 John: I'm from Ames, Iowa.
 Where are YOU from?
 Elisabeth: I'm from Linköping, SWEden.

Formulaic sequences often have formulaic pronunciation. In this case, certain words have prominent syllables that are pronounced with pitch changes and extra syllable length. These pronunciation features create a melodic shape that helps listeners understand what you are saying. This means that your speech is much more likely to be intelligible.

- Person 1: Hi, my name's John LEVis.
 Person 2: Hi, I'm Elisabeth ZETTerholm.
 Where are you FROM?

Notice that the last word in each sentence has a prominent syllable. This happens in most English sentences, and it always happens for names.

Prominent syllables may move away from the end of the sentence depending on the structure of the conversation. For example, in questions that are said by both people (called Repeated questions), the melody of the sentence always shifts to the word "You" or "Your" when the question is repeated.

- Person 2: *Where are you FROM? (first question)*
 Person 1: I'm from Ames, Iowa.
Where are YOU from? (repeated question)
 Person 2: I'm from Linköping, Sweden.

Activity 2 – Extending activity 1 with less control (Muller Levis & Levis, 2014)

It is also essential for learners to be able to adjust to unexpected changes and to be able to speak more freely, so self-introductions and repeated questions should be practiced with less control and with using their own names. A dialogue in which learners use their own information allows them to do this and can be repeated with multiple interlocutors.

Person 1: Hi, my name's _____.

Person 2: Hi, I'm _____.

Where are you FROM?

Person 1: I'm from _____, _____.

Where are YOU from?

Person 2: I'm from _____, _____.

There are many other variations that can be used to practice repeated questions that can be integrated into later practice on question formation and interacting in formal yet formulaic situations (e.g., mixers). The point of these examples is that there are ways to give pronunciation a communicative purpose from the very beginning of instruction. This is often not done because teachers do not recognize the ways in which pronunciation features such as prominence help communicate meaning.

It should be pointed out that hearing and saying one's name, which is important in an ESL context, is likely to be just as important in other contexts, albeit with modifications about how names are pronounced. Speakers in ELF interactions, in which two or more L2 speakers of English interact, may also find names challenging but the prosodic features that allow L1 English speakers to hear names more effectively may not be operative in the same ways. Additionally, it should also be evident that L1 speakers of English may need to adjust their own presentation of their name's pronunciation in order to be effectively understood, depending on the communicative context. Ultimately, speakers in any interaction will need to converge on pronunciations that promote understanding and allow interactions to move forward.

Activity 3 – Spelling your name aloud

Self-introductions are formulaic in other ways. For example, learners may need to spell their name aloud when they are on the phone or at an appointment, especially if their name is unfamiliar to a listener. As a result, rather than repeating the name the same way, it helps to have a strategy available to be understood. This means that it is helpful to be skilled in spelling one's name aloud. Such oral spelling is often taught early in language learning, then largely ignored in more advanced classes.

In addition, because many letter names are hard to understand, even for native speakers, it helps to give a key word so listeners will know which letter is being used. A common strategy is to say the letter and then exemplify it with a common name or word clue. For example, "S as in Sad." (Of course, it is critical that the word clue be pronounced correctly!)

Other common examples are

"c as in cat"	"v as in victory"	"r as in rough"
"f as in food"	"m as in mother"	"l as in loud"
"b as in boy"	"n as in no"	"t as in top"
"p as in Peter"	"z as in zone"	"d as in dog"

Activity 4 – Pronunciation and pragmatics in speaking

This next activity also involves the use of prominence, in this case contrastive prominence, but it is intended for more advanced learners because of its interaction with the use of politeness while disagreeing or correcting someone else and its assumption of differing power dynamics. Correcting someone else is always face-threatening, but it is especially face-threatening if the person is of a similar or higher status. The activity is an adaptation of an exercise described by Kenworthy (1987).

Background: A major corporation is cutting back on its operations. A company spokesperson is meeting with an aide to go over the details of the information about the cutback. The spokesperson has previous information about the cutbacks, but it has been replaced by updated information.

Directions: Each pair of students receives cards for the spokesperson and the aide. The spokesperson card starts the role play by checking the accuracy of a piece of information. The aide uses the information on the card to correct mistaken information by using appropriate prominence to highlight contrasting information. When the aide corrects information the spokesperson has, the aide should use hedging devices to be pragmatically appropriate. Some of these devices include:

‘Excuse me, but’ ‘Actually’
 ‘It’s not quite that high (low)’ ‘In actual fact’

Example

Spokesperson: “So, I see that we have three factories CLOSing.”

Aide: “Actually, it’s not quite that high; it’s only 2 factories.”

Spokesperson’s card

	Spokesperson	Aide
Factories closing	3	
Jobs lost	700	
Managerial jobs lost	52	
Decrease in costs	\$300,000	
Increase in profit	\$700,000	

Aide’s card

	Spokesperson	Aide
Factories closing		2
Jobs lost		500
Managerial jobs lost		42
Decrease in costs		\$330,000
Increase in profit		\$800,000

Activity 5 – Connected speech listening

Listening comprehension is often connected to pronunciation features, as in the following example using a cloze dialogue. The

purpose of this activity is simply to hear the words that are difficult to hear in conversational speech. This type of activity can be done without extra preparation, or it can be done after asking students to predict the missing words and then listening to confirm their own expectations. Because the missing words in the dialogue are all unstressed and many have deleted [h] at the beginning of some words, such a prediction task is likely to make the task more doable, as in the example below.

Listen to the dialogue and fill in the missing words.

Jim: Did you hear about Al?

Joe: No. What _____ done now?

Jim: He totaled _____ car.

He ended up in _____ hospital.

Joe: The hospital? How bad _____ ?

Jim: How bad? I'm not sure.

I think he's _____ cast.

He might _____ laid up _____
couple _____ months.

Teachers often say they do not teach pronunciation more because pronunciation is not connected to other things they have to teach. These few examples of how pronunciation can be connected to other language skills are only a beginning of an answer to these objections. There are many other examples of the integration of pronunciation with other language skills. Books like Jones (2016) provide extended examples of different possibilities, while books like Murphy (2017) provide models of how to approach the teaching of pronunciation in whole courses in varied contexts. What these books say is clear. If you want your students to be able to communicate, pronunciation should be an essential part of what is taught. It does not have to be the only thing taught; pronunciation teaching works, even in short interventions (Gordon & Darcy, 2016; Levis & Muller Levis, 2018). Learners can become more intelligible, even at beginning levels of spoken proficiency (Zielinski & Yates, 2014).

Lie 4 – Adult language learners can sound like native speakers

Accent raises an issue that is crucial for L2 learning, teacher beliefs, and student expectations. Many learners want to sound

native. They think it is possible if they just try (Levis, 2015). And teachers often think that this is an appropriate goal even if they do not believe it possible. The reasoning that underlies this is that a teacher should not try to stop a learner from aiming as high as they want, and that nativeness is a high goal. Unfortunately, adult L2 learners rarely become nativelike beyond restricted contexts of being able to pass, as in service encounters (Piller, 2002). A focus on nativeness can also lead to wrong thinking about what is possible and whether nonnativeness is a pathology that can be reduced, neutralized or modified, rather than a normal aspect of language learning (Thomson, 2014).

The mythological status of nativeness is particularly surprising when considering English pronunciation. English is a collection of accents that are very different from each other. Besides the many native accents, studies of World Englishes have shown us that there are many nativized accents such as varieties of Indian English (Pandey, 2015), Singaporean English, Nigerian English, etc. These different accents are especially appropriate models in their own contexts, as well as being appropriate though less familiar than well-known L1 accents in other areas of the world. The multiplicity of different accents point out that our most basic goal when speaking a language, whether L1, L2, or L3, is to be understood and to understand, that is, to be intelligible, not to match a particular well-known accent (Levis, 2005).

It is quite possible to be understood in a foreign language even when you do not sound native (Munro & Derwing, 1995). It is also possible to be misunderstood when you sound quite native-like. In speaking across accents, everyone may need to converge toward variants that promote intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000; Low, 2014; Walker, 2010). For speakers whose accents are not stable or expected in a particular context, especially in immigrant-receiving contexts or in professional contexts, pronunciation issues that promote intelligibility will likely be different than in contexts that do not share the same social contexts.

Truth 4 – Everyone has an accent, but not all accents are socially equal

Accent primarily involves pronunciation. It is simply part of speaking a language. There are native accents and nonnative accents,

and they can be intelligible depending on who the speaker and the listener are. This means that there are different accents, not wrong and right accents. World languages like English have many native accents. These accents may be more or less intelligible to each other, but they are all native accents. Nonnative accents vary because a language learner's L1 affects the kinds of features that are pronounced differently in the L2. Thus, we can speak of a French or Japanese or Russian accent because the typical differences in speaking the L2 are identifiable by even moderately aware listeners. Like native accents, nonnative accents are not easily changed, which is why most adult L2 learners continue to sound different from native speakers. Because nonnative accents do not change easily, those who promise to reduce an accent, fix an accent, or otherwise change a bad accent into a good accent, promise something they cannot deliver.

Despite the ubiquity of accent, there are other ways in which accents are not simply part of speaking a language. This is because pronunciation is socially significant, and accents that are communicatively equivalent are often socially judged. Even particular words may be stigmatized, such as *wash* being pronounced *warsh* in the United States. In the wider society, some accents and pronunciations are socially valued, while others are socially stigmatized. And all accents are valued and stigmatized in different social contexts, depending on the fit between the accent and the values of the community and the context in which the accent is used. The same is true of L2 accents (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005). In a context in which the speaker's L1 is not dominant, a nonnative accent may be less valued. In other words, accent includes both pronunciation patterns and indexical information. Accent is, in the words of one writer, "a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation" (Moyer, 2013, p. 11). As such, accent both serves communicative needs and signals information about social affiliation, marking in-groups and out-groups.

This social aspect of accent is not well understood in pronunciation teaching, but it may be a powerful aspect of pronunciation improvement. We know that certain aspects of pronunciation are more socially noticeable, and that such aspects carry higher

sociolinguistic power. These kinds of features may be particularly important in being heard as a legitimate speaker, that is, in being recognized by becoming audible. For example, Miller (2003), in a study of immigrant high school students in Australia, found that some L2 speakers were more successful at becoming audible to others through a combination of pronunciation, lexical choices, and other elements such as humor. Audibility allowed the L2 speakers to access the language of the community and improve their language abilities, as well as to construct and express their L2 identity. Lack of audibility, in contrast, was associated with nondevelopment or even shriveling of L2 skills and identity construction. We also know that L2 speakers often get better at pronunciation when the social context encourages it. In Lybeck (2002), American women married to Norwegian men in Norway had different pronunciation success in pronouncing the Norwegian /r/, a sociolinguistically marked feature in Norwegian. The key to success seemed to be whether the women had a strong social network involving their mothers-in-law and other women. Those who had weak social networks and felt like outsiders were more likely to retain their English /r/, often deliberately, as a marker of their outsidership.

We also know that accent is both a matter of affiliation and hiding affiliation. Canadian Nicole Marx (2002), in a first-person account of her accent journey, recounts her study abroad in Germany. Because people mistook her as American, she initially took on an accent related to her second language, French, in order to avoid being characterized as American. As she continued to try to sound native-like in German, she first began to dress like other German college students so that she didn't look the part of a foreigner, then worked on aspects of her German that suggested that she was less foreign than she felt. These aspects often included sociolinguistic markers related to German dialects. Marx found that she could sometimes pass as a native speaker in limited contexts. She also found that her German accent spilled over into her English when she returned to Canada, and that it took some time for her old social context to reflect itself in her speech.

The choice of pronunciation model is also sociolinguistic. Models matter, but not in the way we think. Typically, pronunciation

is taught with reference to models such as Standard Southern British or General American, but these may not be the models that are relevant to learners. In Cutler (2014), Ukrainian immigrant youth in New York City gravitated toward the speech and accent of hip-hop artists, even when they did not have a personal social connection to that community. Rather, the speech was socially important in the type of community they aspired to. When I first read this study, it struck me that the young people's choice made perfect sense as a matter of their imagined identity, but that I would struggle to be able to teach them because of my own accent and assumptions about pronunciation goals. However, it does suggest that the choice of model could be more local than most pronunciation materials can accommodate. Teachers and L2 speakers in Scotland should be able to use a Scottish variety, those in Australia an Australian variety, and those in the US South a southern variety. In other words, pronunciation should be socially appropriate to the context and social group norms.

Conclusion

The teaching of pronunciation, after a long time in which it was neglected, has become much more visible again in language teaching. However, not all information about pronunciation teaching and learning is accurate. We know that pronunciation is an unavoidable part of language that does not simply improve without instruction, that intelligibility is an appropriate goal for L2 pronunciation and that a focus on nativeness is an unnecessary goal for teaching pronunciation. We know also that pronunciation teaching leads to improvement, that pronunciation can be taught effectively by integrating it with other language skills, and that pronunciation is a socially connected skill. All of these aspects suggest a growing influence for how pronunciation is approached in language teaching.

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