

A TEACHER'S VIEW OF RESEARCH: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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A clarion call raised 50 years ago by Allen (1971) and echoed by Levis (1999) awaits our field's next paradigm shift. While both the Allen and subsequent Levis TQ articles focused on teaching intonation, their shared lament and mutual aim addressed bridging the theory to practice divide. As noted by Murphy and Baker (2015) in their analysis of the history of ESL pronunciation teaching, it took over a century for primary empirical research to inform our work and set an agenda in “three areas of focus: (1) what features of ESL phonology are necessary to teach; (2) how to effectively teach them, and (3) what teachers and students believe and know about pronunciation instruction” (p. 56). The 12th annual PSLLT conference is the appropriate forum to acknowledge and embrace the progress that has been made and the foundation that has been laid, and to envision and embark upon the next wave of innovations that promise to bring knowledge from the ivory tower to the teachers in the field.

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The View from the Ivory Tower

As viewed from the ivory tower, there is much to celebrate. The Intelligibility Principle, with its focus on communicative success and incorporation of lexico-morphosyntactic and other factors, has largely vanquished accent remediation and native-like pronunciation, two mainstays of the Nateness Principle. Current pronunciation pedagogy instead views accent as normal variation, and advocates mutual intelligibility as an attainable and appropriate goal for oral communication (Abercrombie, 1949; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Levis, 2005, 2018; Derwing & Munro, 2009).

The global spread of English further shifted the pedagogical focus away from a native-speaker norm, prompting Jenkins (1998) to explore alternative pronunciation models and to propose a *Lingua Franca Core* (2000). Contributions from Walker (2010) and Low (2014, 2015) helped to develop the field of World Englishes and to prepare students for interacting in English as an International Language contexts. Kachru (1985), in his three circles model which advocates for recognition and acceptance of native, nativized, and non-native varieties, called for “new paradigms and perspectives for linguistic and pedagogical research and for understanding the linguistic creativity in multilingual situations across cultures” (p. 30).

The welcome challenge to the primacy of segmentals (Hahn, 2004; Wong, 1987) ushered in a focus on suprasegmentals and an accompanying leap from segmental accuracy to a broader focus on discourse-level communication (Chun, 2002; Levis & Pickering, 2004). Rather than a forced either/or weighting, the segmentals or suprasegmentals debate has now struck an equilibrium. As Zielinski (2015) noted, “both [are] important to intelligibility” and “both [are] part of an integrated system” (p. 409).

Another cause for optimism about the field is the increasing recognition of the role of listening as a separate component of language learning. This is reflected in its eventual inclusion in one of TESOL's Interest Sections following tireless advocacy by David Mendelsohn, Judy Gilbert and others to add 'L' to the Speech, Pronunciation Interest Section (SP-IS). No longer considered a passive activity, thanks to scholars like Morley (1984), Rubin (1995), Field (2002), Rost (2002), Vandergrift (2004), Goh (2008), Graham (2017), Cauldwell (2018) and many others, listening has finally found its voice.

Further cause for optimism is the popularity of interactive perception practice games like English Accent Coach (Thomson, 2012) based on High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT), widely available on websites and mobile apps. Additional evidence-based online resources abound, with over two decades of contributions from IATEFL's PronSIG in the form of blogs, webinars, and the *Speak Out!* Newsletter, TESOL's 'As We Speak' Newsletter of the Speech, Pronunciation, Listening Interest Section (SPL-IS), and CATESOL's Teaching of Pronunciation Interest Group (TOP-IG) helping to raise our visibility. Innovative researchers in second language pronunciation now have multiple outlets. The American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) approved a new *Phonology/Phonetics and Oral Communication* strand. PSLLT, a dedicated conference venue and Proceedings, and the Journal of Second Language Pronunciation (JSLP), a scholarly journal were founded, attracting new scholars and building an infrastructure poised to dispel the tripartite 'Cinderella, neglected, orphan' image (Derwing, 2019; Levis, 2019).

In the half century since Allen's call to bridge the theory to practice divide, venues and resources have proliferated to disseminate the state-of-the-art in pronunciation pedagogy. Workshops, symposia, invited talks, and the International TESOL Association's full-day pre-convention institute (PCI) dedicated to the essentials of pronunciation teaching are some examples of the kinds of resources available at local, regional, and national levels. A wealth of readily accessible materials has been published. Murphy (2014) divides these into three genres: teacher preparation texts (e.g., Gilbert, 2009; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010), activity recipe collections (e.g., Hancock, 1996), and ESL classroom textbooks, some with accompanying teacher manuals (e.g., Gilbert, 1993, 2012; Grant, 2007, 2010). These research-informed resources capture and reflect the state of the art in scholarship as pertains to pronunciation teaching.

The View of the Ivory Tower from the Trenches

As viewed from the trenches, however, there is much work to be done. With conference access hostage to limited professional development funding, teachers turn to alternative resources such as textbooks. However, as Allen (1971) observed with respect to overreliance on imitation of textbook dialogs, teachers see little carry-over from practice exercises to students' spontaneous production. A research-informed teacher is needed, one who knows how the sound system of the language they are teaching works, how to identify the locus of learner errors, and how to efficiently and effectively address these at both the segmental and suprasegmental level.

Constraints, Cognitions, and Complexity

A major constraint in pronunciation teaching is pronunciation training, which remains sparse, as documented by studies in Britain (Burgess & Spencer, 2000), Canada (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011), and Australia (MacDonald, 2002). Within the United States, a survey of MATESOL programs by Murphy (1997) found that of those teacher preparation programs that offered phonology-related courses, the focus was on topics such as transcription mastery and common pronunciation problems, with only limited attention given to instructional techniques or pronunciation pedagogy. In the absence of training, while many of the surveyed ESL teachers acknowledged the value of intelligible pronunciation, they reported lacking in knowledge, skills, or confidence, and tending to avoid teaching it altogether.

Conversely, and consistent with the literature on second language teacher cognition (SLTC), delivery of pronunciation instruction can be problematic despite the best of training. Enlightened cognitions, even when attained, are reported to falter under personal and contextual constraints, as evident in results of longitudinal studies such as those conducted and reported by Burri and Baker (2021). Factors such as teachers' own prior L2 learning experiences, rigid institutional curricula, the potential washback effect of assessment tasks, among others, combine to influence what Borg (2003) described as the "cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). Surveys of learner cognition (e.g., Derwing & Rossiter, 2002) reveal that learners are often unable to identify their pronunciation problems, but nevertheless tend to prioritize segmentals, contributing to the persistence of this instructional focus.

A bimodal classroom observation protocol may be helpful in exploring the connections between teachers' cognitions and classroom practices, by determining what the teacher is doing by observing what the students are doing, and assuming that what the teacher is doing reflects the teacher's cognition.

Two case studies are illustrative. With respect to listening instruction, a student teacher in our TESOL Ed.M. program queried his host teacher, noting "I see that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days that I'm here, listening is assessed. Can you tell me when listening is taught?". This prompted the following reply, "Tuesdays and Thursdays I teach listening; the other days we teach reading and writing". Consistent with Mendelsohn (2006), "Much of what is traditionally misnamed *teaching* listening should in fact be called testing listening" (p. 75, italics in the original).

With respect to intonation, production-driven instruction risks unfounded teacher satisfaction with ostensible student mastery based on successful student mimicry. As reported in Reed and Michaud (2015), students in an advanced level pronunciation elective class in an academically-oriented intensive English program rejected the intonation contours they had just practiced in the language lab as "silly" and "ridiculous", asserting that "If [intonation] was really important, someone would have told us by now" (p. 461). This is consistent with the claims of Paunović & Savić (2008) regarding the challenge of processing aural input for speaker intent:

Students often do not have a clear idea of why exactly the 'melody of speech' should be important for communication, and therefore seem to lack the motivation to master it, while

teachers do not seem to be theoretically or practically well-equipped to explain and illustrate its significance (pp. 72-73)

The structural and functional complexity of the intonation system itself may account for the dual learning and teaching challenge. Liu and Reed (2021) refer to intonation as “a multidimensional and multilayered system situated at the intersection of information structure, morphosyntactic structure, phonological phenomena, and pragmatic functions” (p. 37). This complexity reminds us of the interconnectedness of the pronunciation system itself. As noted by Larsen-Freeman (2017), language is a complex dynamic system that “emerges bottom-up from interactions of multiple agents in speech communities” (p. 49). To address structure complexity, a systematic view of intonation is needed; to address functional complexity, guidance is needed to enhance learners’ metalinguistic awareness of the functions of intonation and the variables that influence intonation.

Lingering Challenges, Future Directions

At the curricular level, less effective goal statements can be replaced with measurable student learning outcomes. Applied to the intonation challenge, objectives can be operationalized as students **will be able to** state the syntactic, discourse, emotive, and pragmatic functions of intonation; detect marked intonation, identify the locus of a marked pitch contour, and interpret speaker intent as emphatic, contrastive or corrective, or implicational. Such an approach has the potential to increase learner metalinguistic awareness by providing the metalanguage to facilitate associating features like intonation with functions and meanings.

Technology development for pronunciation teaching continues apace, as delineated by Grantham O’Brien et al. (2018). The website Youglish (2019) provides authentic input as users access original video sources of typed in words or phrases. Collaborations with software developers can bring research advances and theories to the classroom. For example, automated speech recognition (ASR) can be used in pronunciation teaching (Cucchiaroni & Strik, 2018; McCrocklin, 2019) accompanied by using *Google Voice Typing*. Our challenge is twofold: make the tools accessible and incentivize teachers to access the tools.

In addition to tapping the potential of software, increasing access to professional development can be achieved by encouraging hybrid conference venues, bypassing the exclusively in-person tradition which precludes broad attendance without sacrificing networking and other benefits for those who can attend. Practitioner-oriented research sessions will go far to make the conceptual practical, as evidenced by robust attendance at ‘winning strategies’-type ready-to-do sessions.

Bridging the Theory to Practice Divide: The Way Forward

The 12th annual PSLLT conference is the appropriate forum to explore, propose, and implement ways to increase access to teacher training. It is the appropriate venue to encourage us to enhance collaboration with experts in software development to consider the dynamic interplay of real-life communication to address pronunciation holistically.

PSLLT 2021 is the appropriate place to highlight dedicated websites such as Cauldwell’s Speech in Action, and to promote keeping up the good work by sharing our inspiring ideas, teaching tips, videos and more on websites like the one founded by John Levis, pronunciationforteachers.com or the website sla-speech-tools.com, a repository for second language pronunciation research and teaching. The research community and materials writers can be invited to come together to jointly upload and regularly update white papers that explain pronunciation features in accessible language. Such collaborations may contribute to developing a guiding theory addressing the complexity and dynamic nature of pronunciation.

The 2021 Virtual PSLLT conference is just the venue to spotlight exciting new innovations and spur new ones. Why not start a free online course? Get inspired by the one created by John Levis and Tim Kochem with the no-nonsense, straightforward title: English Pronunciation Pedagogy. Or consider volunteering to become a peer reviewer with agencies such as the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) where you can advocate to make intelligibility training a professional requirement. Have an even greater impact by becoming a leader in a local, regional, or (inter)national organization and coordinate sessions with their program management special interest group. Join forces and capitalize on the Intelligibility Principle by advocating to make pronunciation pedagogy—an Intelligibility Training 101-type course—a core MATESOL requirement. For the truly ambitious and boldly visionary, come together to start a professional organization comparable in reach to TESOL or AAAL, but concentrated in scope to improve empirically-supported pronunciation pedagogy through strategic cultivation and application of the L2 phonology knowledgebase.

What Allen (1971) asserted with respect to intonation is relevant to all aspects of pronunciation pedagogy: “give the students a cognitive grasp of the system” (p. 73). In the intervening half-century since she noted, again with respect to intonation, “the essential features of the system can be learned” (p. 81), we have acquired the knowledge and established the means to disseminate it. Fifty years after Virginia Allen’s clarion call is the time to expand and build upon the existing infrastructure, and to bring knowledge from the ivory tower to teachers in the field. We have never been better positioned to bridge the theory to practice gap.

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