Utopian Goals for Pronunciation Teaching

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As has often been noted in recent years, pronunciation instruction has received short shrift from researchers and teachers alike. Although there is a small and committed body of individuals who have worked to encourage the incorporation of pronunciation instruction in English as a second language (ESL) classes, pronunciation still tends to be the neglected component of many language programs. In this talk, some idealistic goals for pronunciation instruction will be laid out, and suggestions for how the TESOL community might work towards achieving those goals will addressed. Changes to teacher education, increased pronunciation research, optimal use of technology, enhancement of listeners' skills, and strategies for increasing students' opportunities to interact with native speakers are identified as potential approaches to meeting students' communication needs.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years several researchers and practitioners have pointed out that pronunciation seems to be the orphan of second language research and teaching (Derwing & Munro, 2005). It tends to be neglected in the second language (L2) classroom, and L2 teachers are somewhat intimidated by the idea of teaching pronunciation (Burgess & Spencer, 2000). However, pronunciation, both segments and prosodic factors (suprasegmentals) have been the subject of study for a very long time, as has pronunciation instruction. In 1665, back in the day of long book titles, Owen Price, master of arts and professor of the art of pedagogy, wrote a volume entitled *The vocal organ*, *or the art of teaching the English orthography, instruments of pronunciation, and the difference between words of like sound whereby any outlander, or mere English man, woman or childe may speedily attend to the exact spelling, reading, writing or pronouncing of any word in the English tongue without the advantage of its fountains, the Greek and the Latin.* Price concentrated primarily on the study of segmentals of English, but in 1787, suprasegmentals were the focus of attention in Walker's book, *The melody of speaking delineated, or elocution taught like music by visible signs, adapted to the tones, inflexions and variations of voice in reading and speaking with directions for modulation and expressing the passions.*

In 1904, Otto Jesperson wrote *How to teach a foreign language,* which was reprinted for the next 50 years. In his manual, Jesperson took language teachers to task for being afraid of the phonetic alphabet and he argued that "The use of phonetics and phonetical transcription in the teaching of modern languages must be considered as one of the most important advances in modern pedagogy, because it ensures both considerable facilitation and an exceedingly large gain in exactness. But these means must be employed immediately from the very beginning" (p. 170). He went on to say that "Just as easy as it is to get a good pronunciation in this way, just as

difficult is it to root out the bad habits which may become inveterate during a very short period of instruction according to a wrong or antiquated method" (p. 176). With the advent of the International Phonetics Association's Alphabet (IPA), Jesperson, along with others, thought that pronunciation of a second language could be scientifically explained and improved. Roughly 50 years later, devoted teacher-educator, Earl Stevick (1957) made some key points with regard to pronunciation teaching: start early – accuracy matters; start big – focus on pitch, stress and rhythm; be consistent; spread your work – 4 sessions of ten minutes are better than 1 session of 60 minutes; teach in terms of contrasts; and practice with connected speech. He called his general approach the Oral Approach – and it had the same basic principles of Audiolingualism, including a strong emphasis on pronunciation and getting it right from the start. Both these methods stressed the importance of good oral productions.

Another method that emphasized the importance of pronunciation was the Silent Way, in which L2 students' exposure to vocabulary was extremely limited in the first month. All their words were represented in wall charts and each letter was colour-coded to provide a visual representation of sound and spelling correspondences. The Silent Way, in its pure form, was not practiced in very many locations because it required considerable training on the part of the teachers. But its founder, Caleb Gattegno (1976), maintained that the method was highly successful in producing L2 speakers who had excellent pronunciation.

It is somewhat ironic that there could be an approach to teaching pronunciation that emphasized silence on the part of the teacher, but it is similarly puzzling that the communicative approach, which became widespread in the 1980s and is still very influential, would have so little to say about accent. ESL instructors who learned to teach using the communicative approach had little guidance when faced with students whose speech was almost completely unintelligible. There were some materials available, primarily minimal pairs contrasts such as Nilsen and Nilsen (1971), which were thought to help speakers of other languages to improve their productions. All conceivable contrasts that students might have difficulty with were listed in Nilsen and Nilsen's volume, even the contrast between voiced and voiceless TH, despite the fact that practically no one confuses these two sounds. It is far more likely that speakers would substitute a 't' or an 's' for theta and a 'd' or a 'z' for thorn. There was a general consensus in the 1980s among many teachers that pronunciation instruction was ineffective, and that the only activity one could employ was repetition. It is not altogether surprising that this skepticism existed. In the first place, very few ESL instructors at that time had any TESL or linguistics background. There was limited access to good materials, with a few exceptions such as *Jazz Chants* (Graham, 1978). The only available technology was the language master machine, which could read computer cards. A student would record a sentence and feed it into the machine to compare his or her productions with those of a model.

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It was during this period, the early 1980s, that significant numbers of Vietnamese speakers arrived at the school where I taught ESL. Several students had an excellent grasp of English syntax and vocabulary but had great difficulty making themselves understood when they spoke. The phonology of Vietnamese, a tone language, differs dramatically from that of English. For example, in Vietnamese there are only six contrasting final consonants and no consonant clusters, compared to the over 200 word final consonants and clusters in English (Hultzén, 1965). My fellow ESL teachers and I learned how to teach pronunciation by trial and error; and, although our students ultimately benefited, it wasn't an ideal situation. This raises the question of what would be ideal. What would effective and efficient pronunciation teaching for L2 learners look like in a Utopia? The following nine characteristics would surely be included: increased attention from researchers; a focus on teacher education; appropriate curriculum choices; improved assessment; focus on intelligibility/comprehensibility; more useful software and other technology; a focus on enhancing native speakers' listening; no scapegoating of accents; and better strategies for integrating newcomers into the community. Let us go through these goals for our field one by one.

1.   Increased Pronunciation Research

There are competing views as to the usefulness of applied linguistics research to the language classroom teacher, but when it comes to pronunciation, I am firmly of the belief that such research can be valuable. Take, for example, Hahn's (2004) study, which showed that primary stress makes a difference in how well people can understand utterances. This is helpful to know. However, how much attention does pronunciation get from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers? Adam Brown (1991) surveyed four journals between 1975-1988 and found that very few articles on pronunciation were published during that time. There is still a very small percentage of articles devoted to our field in the general ESL/SLA research journals, with a range of 2.7% to 7.4% from 1999-2008 (Deng et al., 2009). Some would argue that research isn't that useful; indeed recently there was a comment on a pronunciation listserv from an experienced practitioner that was quite disparaging of research, and which suggested that intuition is all that is necessary to design activities that will meet students' needs. Unfortunately, that isn't the case. Although there may be some individuals who are capable of determining what is best for the students and then implementing appropriate classroom procedures, more people are likely to avoid dealing with pronunciation altogether. Studies by Breitkreutz, Derwing & Munro (2002), Burgess & Spencer (2000), and MacDonald (2002) conducted in Canada, Britain and Australia respectively, all show that the phenomenon noted by Otto Jesperson in 1904 is still going strong. L2 teachers are often worried that they aren't well prepared to teach pronunciation, or even to incorporate some pronunciation activities into their regular language classrooms. They feel as though they don't know where to start.

This is where research comes in. Practical research can help instructors to determine where to put the focus. Flege (1988) showed that most of the phonological changes that immigrants make in acquiring their L2 occur during the first year in the L2 environment. That is not to say that there aren't any changes after that, for Trofimovich and Baker (2006) demonstrated that there surely are, but the first year is when the most progress is made in the absence of pronunciation instruction. If that is the case, wouldn't it be helpful to have some longitudinal studies to know which aspects of pronunciation will likely take care of themselves over time? Such information would allow teachers to focus on more intransigent problems.

Consider the development of L2 vowels. Munro & Derwing (2008) collected speech samples six times in the first year that two groups of adult ESL learners were in Canada. They were speakers of Mandarin and Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian and one Serbo-Croatian). We extracted vowels from the samples and conducted identification tests with human listeners who classified the vowels as belonging to an English vowel category, or Other, and then we determined how many productions were classified as the intended vowel. After one year, the identification scores for the vowel in the word 'beat' were very high. The Mandarins' productions received a score of 97% and the Slavic language speakers had a score of 90%; in other words, the vowel in the word 'beat' was interpreted by listeners as the intended vowel most of the time. It would have been a waste of precious classroom time to work on this vowel with these learners. However, the vowel in the word 'bit' presented quite a different story. The Mandarin speakers' correct identification score went from 31% to 41% in their first year; the Slavic language speakers' scores on this vowel also improved fairly dramatically, going from 20% to 48%, but neither group was able to produce this vowel accurately even half the time. This vowel is therefore an ideal candidate for instruction. It has a high functional load, which means that it differentiates a large number of words, and learners, at least from these two language groups, aren't going to make sufficient improvement on their own. We have conducted a similar study with consonants and consonant clusters in word-initial and word-final position (Munro & Derwing, forthcoming), and again, we found that many segments and combinations of segments did not require any intervention. These are just a few examples to show that research does have something to contribute to what teachers do in the classroom.

2.   Focus on Pronunciation in Teacher Education

My second utopian goal is an increased focus on pronunciation in teacher education. Things have improved since I first taught pronunciation, as Gilbert (2005), Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996) and others have published very useful resources for teachers. There are also good student resources now available for use such as Hahn & Dickerson (1999), Grant (2001), Reed and Michaud (2006) and others. Although this not an exhaustive list, we still have a long way to go. First, there is a definite need for more courses for ESL teachers. In Canada, for instance, there are very few TESL programs that offer a full course in teaching pronunciation. Not only are there not enough courses in pronunciation pedagogy, there are TESL programs that

have no requirement for even an introductory course in Linguistics, which is surprising indeed. In addition to initial training for all ESL teachers, there is also a role for ongoing professional development. Our colleagues Lynda Yates and Beth Zielinski in Australia are developing a web resource to do just that, and I hope that other universities will emulate this initiative. I've already mentioned some studies that indicate that many ESL teachers don't feel comfortable dealing with pronunciation, but what about teachers in content classes? An increased focus on pronunciation should extend to K-12 classroom teachers as well, even though they are not necessarily designated as language teachers per se. Consider this advice from a teacher publication to social studies teachers for helping their immigrant L2 students. "Adjust speech rate and enunciation. While English is a stress-timed language, many other languages, including Spanish, are syllable-timed languages. English tends to stress one or two syllables and slur the rest of the word or sentence. This means that English sounds are often unclear to some speakers of other languages. *Thus, pronouncing equally stressed words or sentences may increase students' comprehension along with adjusted speech rate"* (Cho & Reich, 2008, p. 239) (italics added). This is a case where a little knowledge can be a bad thing. Regardless of what you think about the stress-timed vs. syllable timed debate, the kind of language advocated by Cho and Reich is not what students from a diverse set of language backgrounds need to hear. Teachers should be modelling accurate pronunciation, not trying to imitate their L2 students by putting equal stress on every syllable. We want our students to be able to communicate with other people in the community; in an immigrant setting that means adopting the local version of English. They need to hear which syllables have reduced vowels and which do not. All teachers would benefit from an increased understanding of L2 pronunciation.

3.   Appropriate Curriculum Choices

The next goal has to do with appropriate curriculum choices. Sometimes stand-alone pronunciation classes can be helpful, particularly if there are large numbers of students who share similar difficulties – many people from different L1s will have problems with rhythm for example. However, programs may not have sufficient numbers to run stand-alone classes, or students may need to be working on other things, as well, and so need pronunciation to be integrated into general listening and speaking classes. Students should be exposed to multiple voices from a range of ages and dialects. Levis and Grant (2003) point to the lack of systematicity in the inclusion of pronunciation in general ESL classes and provide some suggestions for ways to incorporate pronunciation. It should naturally be a part of a speaking and listening class, and yet it often isn't.

4.   Assessment

In the USA, there are assessments for international teaching assistants, but in other types of language programs, and certainly in Canada, people tend to avoid assessing pronunciation. However, as with so many other areas of language proficiency, if pronunciation were tested, it would be taught. I understand that there may be a concern about what assessments could be used

for, but I doubt that any problems assessment may cause would be any worse than what happens to L2 speakers in the real world without assessment. I am in favour of the development of assessment tools for pronunciation. We know there will be washback if there are tests, so it is important to design good ones.

5.   A Focus on Intelligibility and Comprehensibility

The next goal is a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility, rather than accentedness. These terms have distinct meanings. Accentedness is a judgment of how much one's speech differs phonologically from the local variety. It is often measured on a Likert-like scale (e.g., 1 = no accent; 9 = extremely heavy accent). Comprehensibility is a judgment of how easy or difficult an individual's pronunciation is to understand, and it can also be measured on a scale (e.g., 1 = very easy to understand; 9 = extremely difficult to understand). Intelligibility is the degree to which a listener understands a speaker; this can be measured in several different ways, including transcriptions, comprehension questions, and listener summaries of productions. In other words, accent is difference, comprehensibility is effort, and intelligibility is actual understanding.

In his special issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, Levis (2005) described two approaches to teaching pronunciation: one of these follows the nativist principle, which holds that L2 speakers should try as best they can to replicate a native-like accent. The intelligibility principle is the basis of the other approach, which holds that L2 speakers should be comfortably understandable. Recently, Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam published an extensive study in *Language Learning* (2009), in which they examined the "nativeness" of nearly 200 individuals who spoke Swedish as a second language. Spanish was the L1 of all the participants, who started learning Swedish between the ages of 1 and 47 years. These people were selected because they self-identified as being native-like in Swedish and all were extremely high proficiency. However, when compared to native speakers in a battery of tests, none of the late learners (over the age of 11 when they started speaking Swedish) had equivalent scores. Thus, despite their exceptional language skills, these high proficiency L2 speakers were still not comparable to native speakers.

Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam's finding suggests that native speaker performance should not be the goal of L2 learners, but rather to aspire to the status of highly intelligible, easily comprehensible bilingual speakers. However, as Levis (2007) noted, many ESL teachers are still clinging to the nativist principle. Over the years, I have given many talks about intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedess, and very often someone will tell me that his/her students want help with aspects of their accent that don't interfere with intelligibility – such as the interdental fricatives, which is invariably the prime example used. They say that their students are compromised socially because they can't make these sounds. I seriously doubt that the TH sounds are the only problem those individuals have. Many L2 users of English who don't make those sounds, and who have no other pronunciation difficulties are accepted for who they are: articulate, fluent speakers.

6.   Useful User-friendly Software

My next utopian goal would be to see more development of easy-to-use and useful software. We have some very good researchers in our field who have worked with technology, and there are some good programs, but nowhere near enough. Teachers have been encouraged to use resources such as PRAAT more than they do. This is unrealistic, however, because PRAAT was designed for researchers, not for classroom teachers. Only the most conscientious pronunciation teacher is going to tread in that territory, so it is necessary that more teacher-friendly resources be developed. The key benefit of computer assisted pronunciation training is that it can be individualized to the student's needs, but as Levis indicated (2007), by and large, this hasn't happened. Most commercial programs are still of the one-size-fits all variety, which means that inevitably, students are going to waste considerable time if they go through them in lockstep fashion. The problem here is that the market, with some notable exceptions, has focused on the look of programs – the bells and whistles, rather than the linguistic needs of the learners. Ideally, software should be developed that the teacher could easily customize to his or her students' specific needs for individual practice.

Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, could be ideal places for learners to go to get practice listening if they are a bit intimidated by real life circumstances. There are places in Second Life where people can go now, but it would be more beneficial if there were places designed specifically to expose learners to particular aspects of pronunciation that give them the most difficulty.   In a utopian world, automatic speech recognition would give learners the feedback they need, but unfortunately, it is unlikely to reach an accurate enough level for some time. There are current technologies, such as Skype and iChat, that have great promise for opportunities to practice speaking comprehensibly with real listeners, but the extent to which the average ESL teacher utilizes these resources to enhance pronunciation is a question in my mind.

7.   A Focus on the Native Listener

In a utopian world, at least an ESL, immigrant–receiving world, we would put more emphasis on helping native speakers to understand accented English. It is ironic that we expect L2 learners from many linguistic backgrounds to understand each other, as well as a full range of English dialects, while at the same time, some native speakers make no adjustments for their L2 interlocutors.

A study of major impact in this area is that of Rubin (1992), who had two classes of psychology students listen to a mini-lecture recorded by a woman whose own dialect of American English was the same as that of the undergraduate students. However, in one class the students were shown a photo of a Chinese woman and were told that she was the lecturer, and in the other class, the listeners saw a picture of a Caucasian woman. The students in the class who saw the Chinese photo actually understood less of the lecture than the students who saw the Caucasian

woman, and they complained about her accent! Yet the researcher had used the same recording in both classes. This tells us that expectations can have a major impact on listeners.

There are people in this world who are biased against immigrants, biased against people of another race, biased against accents and essentially biased against difference of all types. There is probably not much one can do about those individuals, but there are also many people who are not anti-immigrant and not racist, but who are afraid to talk to L2 speakers because they don't think they have the skills to understand accented speech. In a study that my colleagues and I conducted (Derwing, Rossiter & Munro, 2002), we trained social work students to listen more carefully to L2 speech. The participants changed their attitudes towards their own ability to understand accents. By the end of a term, several reported a willingness to interact with L2 speakers that they hadn't felt before, and they also indicated having experienced success in real life encounters, which they attributed to the training.

In a more recent study, Kang, Rubin and Pickering (2008) designed an intervention in which university students met with international teaching assistants to do a puzzle together and share a pizza. Members of this group were more empathetic towards the teaching assistants after this intervention.

So what can native speakers do to improve communication with a nonnative speaker? Not only can they make more efforts to listen to accented speech, but they can follow the suggestions from the Københavns Sprogcenter, Dansk for Udlaendinge (Danish for foreigners). The Sprogcenter produced posters that are distributed to workplaces all over Denmark, with the following 10 tips for encouraging successful interaction of native speakers with nonnative speakers:

> 1. Imagine what it's like to be in your colleague's shoes.
> 2. Involve your colleague in conversation.
> 3. Take time to listen.
> 4. Look at the person you're speaking to.
> 5. Say it in a different way if you are not understood.
> 6. Helping find the missing words.
> 7. Speak straightforwardly (e.g., don't use much slang).
> 8. Speak in a suitable tempo.
> 9. Don't mumble.
> 10. Give only a few instructions at a time.

8.   No More Scapegoating of Accent

The next goal is no more scapegoating of accent. A couple of years ago, the University Teaching Services (UTS) unit at my university had several distressed international teaching assistants and professors who were devastated by the very poor teaching evaluations they had

received, all of which blamed their L2 accents. These individuals came to UTS for help, and UTS approached me and two of my colleagues, one from Drama and one from Speech Pathology, to see if we could assist them.

We recruited six volunteers from the group that had approached UTS and videoed them in their own classes at the beginning of term, then worked with them once a week for 10 weeks. We videoed them again at the end of term, and compared their teaching evaluations pre and post intervention. The results were overwhelmingly positive (Derwing, Moulton, Campbell & Dumas, forthcoming). What is important, though, is that we did very little work on the participants' pronunciation. When we analysed the initial videos, we determined that most of the speakers were actually quite comprehensible from the outset. With one exception (an individual who had a persistent stutter in both L1 and L2) their problems had more to do with limited teaching skills. We focused on presentation skills (such as making eye contact with the students), and pedagogical skills (such as using a handout instead of the blackboard). At the end of the term, one of our participants received a teaching award; the change in his performance was amazing. We regret that we didn't apply for ethical clearance to show the videos publically, because overall, the before and after differences were so dramatic. But there was very little change in pronunciation, because we didn't work on that, other than focusing on projection, and ensuring that the participants knew the appropriate word stress patterns for the key vocabulary in their fields. Our participants' own undergraduate students had blamed L2 accent in their course evaluations, because accent was so salient, and it blinded them to what the real problems were.

There are two other aspects of language that contribute to a lay listener's sense that an L2 speaker has a difficult-to-understand accent. One of these is pragmatics, or knowing what is appropriate to say in a particular context. If someone uses unexpected phrases or lexical items, they may not be understood, because of the generally high predictability of much of our everyday language. The listener expects to hear one thing, and when something else comes along, he or she can't understand it. Unexpected grammatical patterns, too, can cause problems that will be blamed on pronunciation (Varonis & Gass, 1982). Work on appropriate use of language (e.g., Yates, 2004) may well result in a perception of improvement in pronunciation.

9.   Better Strategies for Integrating Newcomers into the Community

Some may question what integration strategies have to do with pronunciation teaching, but the extent and quality of exposure that speakers have to their L2 affects their comprehensibility (Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008). So how can we help newcomers increase their opportunities for speaking? Certainly in the ESL programs in Canada, we could concentrate more on conversational strategies while people are in their language classes. The focus right now is heavily weighted to grammar, reading and writing, but if people came out of those courses with stronger speaking skills, they may have a heightened willingness to communicate. ESL courses could have built-in supports, such as ethical volunteering opportunities, as recommended by Dudley (2007), which would benefit L2 learners and cooperating institutions

alike. The workplace, too, could become more L2-friendly and forward-looking companies already realize that it is in their best interests to encourage good communication among employees. If we consider the Mandarin and Slavic language speakers in our longitudinal study (Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008), a major difference between the two groups was the amount of exposure they had to English on a daily basis, including conversations at work and with neighbours, TV viewing, radio and movies. The Slavic language speakers showed improved comprehensibility and fluency over time, in the absence of instruction, whereas the Mandarin speakers did not improve. Clearly more interaction can enhance comprehensibility and fluency. For one thing, it provides for more opportunities for noticing, just as in other aspects of L2 acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps in setting these utopian goals, I was aiming a little low. The goals I have laid out are actually less than utopian, and ultimately achievable. I think that our field is poised to make a significant and lasting difference right now. There have been more PhD students studying L2 pronunciation in the last three years than I can remember in the 15 years before that. It is conceivable that most teacher preparation programs could introduce at least some focus on L2 pronunciation issues, and that pronunciation could be better incorporated into L2 curricula, and better assessed. We are now at a point where most L2 teachers recognize that there is nothing wrong with having an accent, and that intelligibility and comprehensibility should be the goals of L2 speakers, not native-like status. Technology is advancing; there is a real role for virtual worlds and other sorts of practice opportunities, informed by research. Finally, there are always at least two people involved in real communication and both sides should be striving to achieve communicative success, rather than putting all the responsibility on the shoulders of the L2 speaker. Here I am addressing an ESL reality, as opposed to English as an international language. Native speakers need to loosen up a little, and make a bit more effort. We in the field of pronunciation teaching and research are the people best equipped to help them. For those of us who teach at universities and colleges, we can start with our own students. We are on the verge of a major shift in attitudes and it is our job to speed up change. In conclusion, perhaps this talk was wrongly titled after all. Instead of "Utopian Goals for Pronunciation Teaching," perhaps it should simply have been called "Our To-Do List."

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