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PRONUNCIATION AND INTELLIGIBILITY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE

[John Levis](#), Iowa State University

[Kimberly LeVelle](#), Iowa State University

A generally accepted goal of pronunciation pedagogy is to help learners achieve a comfortably intelligible pronunciation rather than a native-like one. But what should this goal look like in the kinds of research studies we conduct, in our classroom practice, and in the creation of self-study and computer assisted pronunciation materials? Which elements of pronunciation are most important in achieving a comfortably intelligible pronunciation? What principles can help teachers make decisions regarding intelligibility?

The 2nd Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference was held at Iowa State University on September 10-11, 2010 with the goal of exploring some of these questions. Research was presented that concerned not only English pronunciation, but also Spanish, French and Chinese pronunciation, providing a valuable forum for bringing together researchers in different areas who have common concerns. To give a flavor of the overall variety of the conference sessions, the conference schedule is reproduced below. Those sessions that are in bold are included in the Proceedings.

2010 Conference Schedule

Friday, September 10

9:00 a.m.	<i>Intelligibility tales</i> Laura Hahn and Patricia Watts (University of Illinois)
9:30 a.m.	<i>The interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit: The case of Arabic-accented English</i> Ghazi Algethami (University of York, UK)
10:00 a.m.	<i>Integrated pronunciation: Listening comprehension and intelligibility in theory and practice</i> Marnie Reed (Boston University)
10:30 a.m.	Break
10:50 a.m.	<i>The pronunciation of /z/ in coda clusters in Somali-accented English</i> Ettien Koffi (St. Cloud State University)
11:20 a.m.	<i>The role of word familiarity and word context on English vowel intelligibility</i> Ron Thomson (Brock University, Canada)
11:50 a.m.	<i>Don't take that tone: Critical errors in lexical tone acquisition</i> Alina Twist, Alison Blodgett, Jessica Bauman, Melissa Fox, Anton Ritting, Matt Winn (University of Maryland CASL)

12:20 p.m.	<i>Pronunciation learning strategies that improve ESL learners' linking</i> Veronica Sardegna (University of Texas at Austin)
12:50 p.m.	Lunch
2:15 p.m.	[Plenary] <i>Intelligibility: Buzzword or buzzworthy?</i> Murray Munro (Simon Fraser University, Canada)
3:30 p.m.	<i>Destressing: Another step toward natural speech</i> Wayne Dickerson (University of Illinois)
4:00 p.m.	<i>Pronunciation pedagogy: An exploration of teacher learning and classroom practices</i> Amanda Baker (Georgia State University)
4:30 p.m.	<i>Towards more effective L2 pronunciation instruction: Maximizing accuracy and oral fluency</i> Bertha Chela-Flores (Universidad Simon Bolivar, Venezuela)
6:30-9:00 p.m.	Conference dinner

Saturday, September 11

9:00 a.m.	<i>The role of technology in pronunciation teaching: The use of biovisual feedback in improving Vietnamese learners' production of English syllable margins</i> Lucy Pickering (Texas A & M), Pamela Pearson & Rachel Da Silva (Georgia State University)
9:30 a.m.	<i>Where is intelligibility in machine recognition of non-native speech?</i> Brian Teaman (Osaka JoGakuin College, Japan)
10:00 a.m.	<i>Computer-assisted pronunciation learning of French /u/ and /y/ at the intermediate level</i> Viviane Ruellot (Western Michigan University)
10:30 a.m.	Break
10:50 a.m.	<i>L2 speakers' impressions of the roles of accent and intelligibility after seven years in an ESL environment</i> Tracey Derwing (University of Alberta, Canada)
11:20 a.m.	<i>Acquisition of L2 phonology in advanced learners: Does instruction make a difference?</i> Anita Saalfeld (University of Nebraska-Omaha)

11:50 a.m.	<i>Empowering students to develop their own voice: An achievable goal</i> Joanna Smith (Unitec, New Zealand)
12:45 p.m.	Lunch
1:45 p.m.	Posters
	<i>The perception and production of English word-final alveo-palatals by Korean L1 learners of English</i> Amanda Huensch (University of Illinois)
	<i>Funny marks in French? C-cédilles and first semester learners</i> Jessica Sturm (Purdue University)
	<i>Vowel production abilities of Haitian-American children</i> Stacy Wallen (Georgia State University) & Robert Fox (Ohio State University)
	<i>Students' awareness of Spanish spirantization allophonic rule</i> Manuela Gonzalez-Bueno & Marcela Quintana-Lara (University of Kansas)
	<i>Intelligibility in second language communication: A two-way street</i> Nicole Eustice (University of Iowa)
	<i>Nonlanguage factors affecting nonnative undergraduate students' reaction to ITAs</i> Edna Lima (Iowa State University)
	<i>The acquisition of aspiration in Serbian EFL learners</i> Biljana Cubrovic (University of Belgrade, Serbia)
	<i>Using mobile technologies for synchronous CMC to develop L2 oral proficiency</i> Sarah Huffman (Iowa State University)
3:00-4:30 p.m.	Interactive panel discussion <i>What really affects and improves intelligibility?</i> <i>Moderated by John Levis</i>
5:45-8:30	Reception

The papers in the proceedings are divided into three sections that have broadly similar themes. There are five papers in the first section, all generally related to *Listener Reactions to Accented Speech*, including discussions of intelligibility and sociolinguistic reactions such as irritation. The second section also includes 5 papers and is titled *Pedagogical Approaches*. Finally, the last section includes six papers on the general theme of *Pronunciation Acquisition and Description*.

Listener Reactions to Accented Speech

The first section, *Listener Reactions to Accented Speech*, starts with the plenary address by **Murray Munro** of Simon Fraser University. “Intelligibility: Buzzword or buzzworthy?” examines the contention put forth in an opinion article in *Applied Linguistics* (Rajogopalan, 2010) that intelligibility is a politically charged concept that sounds good but is ultimately counterproductive in relation to research and teaching. Munro provides evidence that intelligibility has a long history both in and outside of linguistics, and that intelligibility is also an issue that has real-world implications in fields as diverse as aviation and public service encounters.

In “(Un)Intelligibility Tales,” **Laura Hahn and Patricia Watts** discuss narratives provided by teachers and students about times they experienced loss of intelligibility. Most described exchanges involving NS-NNS interactions or those between two NSs. They analyze the exchanges according to the features of the speech exchange that caused the loss of intelligibility, how the confusion was repaired, and the role context played in remedying the loss.

Ghazi Algethami, John Ingram, and Thu Nguyen, in “The interlanguage speech intelligibility benefit: the case of Arabic-accented English,” looked at the Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit, the hypothesized intelligibility advantage L2 listeners have over native listeners when they listen to speakers who share their native language. They found no significant difference between L1 Arabic speakers and native English speaking listeners when listening to Arabic accented speech. They interpret these findings in light of previous findings and suggest that phonetic features of L2 speech more strongly influence listeners’ perceptions than native language.

In “Language and Nonlanguage Factors Affecting Nonnative Undergraduate Students’ Reaction to ITAs,” **Edna Lima** investigated the perceptions of international undergraduate students toward international teaching assistants (ITAs). In a matched-guise study, students enrolled in first-year composition classes watched a short video-taped lecture with three guises. Significant results were found for accent and speaker likeability.

Finally, **John Levis** provides a collection of themes that arose during a panel discussion of pronunciation experts from around the world in “Assessing Speech Intelligibility: Experts Listen to Two Students.” The panel and audience listened to recordings of the English free speech and read speech of two students, a Spanish speaker and a Korean speaker. Panelists discussed the issues that affected the speech intelligibility of the two students. Four themes are examined: The role of listeners’ experience, the features that most impacted intelligibility, the tendency to attribute loss of understanding to accent regardless of the true cause, and the problems with assessing using tasks that employ read speech.

Pedagogical Approaches

The second section of the proceedings includes a variety of papers that address pedagogical concerns. In “Upstream Destressing,” **Wayne Dickerson** argues that destressing, a well-attested feature of English pronunciation after the sentence focus, also occurs in phrases in which two or

more strongly stressed syllables precede the sentence focus. He discusses how de-stressing the strongly stressed syllable immediately preceding the focus provides an environment in which the focused syllable can be heard more clearly and provides pedagogical suggestions for making use of this pattern in teaching focus.

Amanda Baker discusses how teachers' knowledge and beliefs develop and the ways in which those beliefs affect their classroom practice in "ESL Teachers and Pronunciation Pedagogy: Exploring the Development of Teachers' Cognitions and Classroom Practices." She examines the cognitions and practices of five experienced ESL teachers and finds that training in pronunciation pedagogy strongly affects not what they know but their confidence. In addition, their own language learning background, teaching experience and work with other teachers influence their approach to pronunciation.

In "An Integrated Approach to Pronunciation: Listening Comprehension and Intelligibility in Theory and Practice," **Marnie Reed** and **Christina Michaud** argue that the relationship between speaking and listening should be understood in terms of an auditory feedback loop, in which production facilitates perception. Four components are proposed for pronunciation teaching to accompany and reinforce other elements of language teaching: connected speech, suprasegmentals, inflectional morphology, and segmentals. Suggestions are given for what such an approach might look like in the classroom.

Veronica G. Sardegna, in "Pronunciation learning strategies that improve ESL learners' linking," explores how teaching pronunciation learning strategies improved linking within and across words. Teaching strategies led to initial and long-term improvement for all groups of students. The pronunciation learning strategies that were used are examined in detail and pedagogical implications are given for the use of strategies especially in regard to the teaching of linking.

In "Using Mobile Technologies for Synchronous CMC to Develop L2 Oral Proficiency," **Sarah Huffman** moves away from a narrow focus on pronunciation to explore how Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) using mobile technologies can help promote oral proficiency. She explores how multimedia mobile technologies have great promise in helping learners develop their L2 oral proficiency. The researcher also provides points to consider to make the implementation of mobile technologies more successful in teaching L2 oral language and suggests future research avenues.

Pronunciation Acquisition and Description

The last set of papers address descriptions of learner pronunciation and the way pronunciation is acquired. In "The Pronunciation of /s/ in Complex Onset and Coda Clusters in Somali-Accented English," **Ettien Koffi** describes how /s/ in complex onset and coda clusters patterns in the speech of Somali learners of English, a major immigrant population in Minnesota, a midwestern US state. He first describes how /s/ contributes to accentedness, and then explains the patterns using two phonological principles, the Sonority Sequencing Principle and the Coda Condition.

Anita Saalfeld analyzes the acquisition of Spanish stress in “Acquisition of L2 phonology in advanced learners: Does instruction make a difference?” She replicated previous research on the acquisition of Spanish stress with a group of intermediate learners in a Spanish phonetics course and a control group in another non-phonetics oriented Spanish course. Her results suggest that when students can self-enroll in courses focusing on pronunciation, those who need pronunciation instruction the most are more likely to avoid classes that include phonetics instruction.

In “Vowel Spaces in Bilingual Haitian American Kindergartners” **Stacey Wallen** and **Robert Fox** examine the vowels used by monolingual and bilingual Haitian American kindergartners. Because such bilingual speakers are often identified for help with communication disorders when they may simply have a communication difference, it is important to identify whether such help is necessary. They found that vowel production of Haitian American kindergartners differed from bilingual Haitians only in production of /o/, and that there were no significant differences in the vowels of bilingual Haitian American children and native English speaking controls.

In “The impact of computer assisted pronunciation training on the improvement of Vietnamese learner production of English syllable margins,” **Lucy Pickering, Pam Pearson, and Rachel DaSilva** look at how computer assisted pronunciation training can be used to improve the pronunciation of Vietnamese learners of English at syllable margins. Thirteen intermediate Vietnamese students took part in eight 30-minute tutoring sessions where they used spectrograms of their own speech to compare their production to the prerecorded spectrograms. The methodology proposed in the study is put forth as a model for other pedagogical interventions based on the reactions of both teachers and students.

Manuela González-Bueno and **Marcela Quintana-Lara** examine the extent to which L2 Spanish learners who vary in language proficiency are aware of how Spanish voiced stops become fricatives in particular environments in their paper “Students’ Awareness of Spanish Spirantization Allophonic Rules.” The results indicate that proficiency is strongly related to awareness, with intermediate learners beginning to show awareness, and that the development of awareness starts earlier for velars and dentals than for bilabials. In production, the sounds not found in English (velar and bilabial fricatives) were produced more frequently than dental fricatives (a sound found in English).

In “Computer Assisted Pronunciation Learning of French /u/ & /y/,” **Viviane Ruellot** explores how visual feedback improves the pronunciation of French /u/ and /y/ in the intermediate-level adult learners of French. Because /y/ is not an English sound, learners will not acquire it without sufficient exposure. Even though visual reinforcement has been successful for other pronunciation features, this was not the case for these vowels.

References

Rajagopalan, K. (2010). The Soft Ideological Underbelly of the Notion of Intelligibility in Discussions about ‘World Englishes.’ *Applied Linguistics*, 31, 465-470.