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## **ADVANCED ADULT ESL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE BENEFITS OF PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION**

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What do ESL students perceive as the benefits of pronunciation instruction? The answer to this important question is unclear because very few studies on L2 pronunciation teaching have focused on students' perspectives regarding its value. This paper reports on research that replicated and extended Levis, Link, and Sonsaat's (2013) study that investigated students' perspectives on the effects of pronunciation instruction. Participants were 12 university students in an advanced English pronunciation course. The quantitative analysis showed that the students' comprehensibility and accentedness did not change significantly. Nevertheless, despite this apparent lack of progress, the qualitative analysis revealed that students found the course beneficial because it increased their awareness (of general articulatory processes and their own difficulties), built their confidence, improved their listening, and provided them with valuable pronunciation-improvement strategies.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the history of research on L2 pronunciation teaching, many studies have focused on a variety of issues. For instance, researchers have investigated factors that affect L2 pronunciation accuracy (Piske, MacKay, & Flege 2001; Purcell & Suter 1980; Suter 1976), student achievement of pronunciation course objectives under different instructional conditions (de Bot & Mailfert, 1982; Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Macdonald, Yule, & Powers, 1994; Yule, Hoffman, & Damico, 1987; Yule & Macdonald, 1995), native and non-native English speakers reactions to English learners' pronunciation (Hahn, 2004; Riney, Takagi, & Inutsuka; 2005), and L2 learners' perceptions of their pronunciation needs and strategies (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002).

Nevertheless, very few studies have focused on an important perspective on pronunciation instruction—that of the students receiving it. Exceptions to this trend are studies by Kang (2010), who looked at ESL learners' expectations of pronunciation lessons and their attitudes toward the variety of English spoken by their instructors, and Levis, Link, and Sonsaat (2013), who investigated advanced-proficiency, older learners' confidence resulting from pronunciation instruction. This paper reports on research designed to help fill that gap by replicating and extending Levis, Link, and Sonsaat's (2013) study.

### **Research Questions**

Our research questions were the following:

1. Did the pronunciation course result in measurable improvement in the students' comprehensibility and decrease the accentedness of their speech?
2. How did students' attitudes, knowledge, and confidence regarding English pronunciation change over the course of the semester?
3. What pronunciation-improvement and communication strategies did students learn and use outside of class during this course?

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

The participants were 12 adult students (5 males, 7 females) enrolled in a university-based advanced English pronunciation course that met three times a week for a 15-week semester. They came from various L1 backgrounds—Spanish (6), Korean (3), Chinese (1), German (1), and Japanese (1). While most were university students, some were older professionals desiring to improve their pronunciation. All had chosen to enroll in this elective ESL pronunciation course, which focused on both segmentals and suprasegmentals in communicative contexts and was taught by a TESOL professor and two undergraduate TESOL interns.

### ***Procedures***

The course began with a diagnosis of each individual student's pronunciation, which resulted in a "Personal Pronunciation Improvement Plan" (or "prescription" [Rx]). Course activities included speeches, articulatory explanations and practice, *Pronunciation Matters* (Henrichsen, Green, Nishitani, & Bagley, 1999) units and associated activities (e.g. storytelling, peer practice cards, etc.), poetry, Jazz Chants, video voiceovers (Henrichsen, 2015), and reader's theatre.

### ***Instruments and Analysis***

The measures used in this research were both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative measures assessed participants' degrees of accentedness and comprehensibility as manifest in course-initial and course-final audio recordings. For these recordings, the participants read aloud Prator and Robinett's (1985) accent inventory. Both the accentedness and comprehensibility of each ESL student's pre- and post-course speech samples (presented in random order) were later rated by seven TESOL MA students using a nine-point Likert scale (Derwing & Munro, 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1995).

The qualitative analysis involved students' written responses to ten open-ended questions (given as an end-of-semester "final exam," see Appendix A) based on Levis, Link, and Sonsaat (2013). Participant responses were analyzed by two independent raters using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Key points that emerged from the data were grouped into themes noted by both raters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Because all data collection was done as part of instructional activities that were a regular part of the class, the study was determined to be exempt from informed consent regulations. Nevertheless, the research protocol was still submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board and subsequently approved.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative

The quantitative analysis showed that students' comprehensibility and accentedness did not change significantly over the course of the semester.

The overall class average comprehensibility rating was 4.04 at the beginning of the course, and the post-course rating was 4.03. This very slight change—even though it moved in the direction of improved comprehensibility—indicated that at the end of the course the learners were not significantly easier to understand. The results of a *t*-test run on these data showed a probability of .99 that the two means would not be significantly different if the test were repeated. A calculation of effect size (with Cohen's *d* equaling .003) further confirmed the conclusion that the two means were not different.

Likewise, the average accentedness rating for all students was 5.12 at the beginning of the course and 5.10 at the end. This slight drop indicated a general, but very slight, move toward being less accented. In this case, the *t*-test results showed a probability of .96 that the means would not be different if the tests were repeated. Confirming this conclusion, the effect size calculation resulted in a Cohen's *d* of .01.

These findings, which were not shared with the students, were consistent with the results of numerous previous studies on instruction and pronunciation improvement (Levis, Link & Sonsaat, 2013; Macdonald, Yule, & Powers, 1994; Madden, 1983; Purcell & Suter, 1980; Suter, 1976). In fact, results like these led many people to give up on pronunciation instruction a few decades ago (Morley, 1991). Nevertheless, the message of our research findings is a different one—Don't give up! Changing learners' ingrained, subconscious pronunciation behaviors is a long, complex process. In a relatively short period of time (one 15-week semester), learners often do not make enough progress for the improvement in their pronunciation to be statistically significant—especially if they are advanced-level learners who have been using English for years and have passed their “window of maximal opportunity” (Derwing & Munro, 2014). Also, lack of measurable improvement may be due to problems with instrument validity or sensitivity.

### Qualitative

Despite students' apparent lack of progress, the qualitative analysis revealed that they still found the course beneficial. Overall, four general themes emerged. The course increased students' (1) awareness, (2) confidence, and (3) listening comprehension, and students also valued (4) the pronunciation-improvement (and communication) strategies that they learned. Nevertheless, this overall analysis masked a number of more specific yet important points since many of the questions examined different aspects of the course and led in different directions. Therefore, we conducted ten qualitative analyses, one for each question. The themes that emerged from the analysis of student responses to each question are discussed below.<sup>4</sup> Themes are listed in frequency order within each question, from the most frequently mentioned to the least. Actual frequencies are indicated parenthetically “(N=f).” Selected, representative student comments follow each theme.

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<sup>4</sup> Because of space limitations, responses to questions 7 and 9 (which are not so relevant to the focus of this paper) are not discussed here. Please contact the authors if you are interested in them.

### **1. In what ways was this pronunciation class *valuable* to you? In what ways do you feel you have *improved* this semester because of this class?**

The two most frequently mentioned themes that emerged from the students' responses had to do with increased awareness. The first was increased articulatory awareness (N=7), as shown in this comment: "I was able to improve my pronunciation by learning how to make certain pronunciations...I trained my mouth muscles [sic]<sup>5</sup> to make those pronunciations more naturally." One student noted that it was helpful for him to learn "...how to pronounce specific vowel with specific mouth shape..."

Students also increased their awareness of their individual pronunciation problems (N=6). One example of this response type was, "I have been studied mostly grammar, writing, reading in Korea. But through this class I could know the actual problem I have about English pronunciation."

Some students felt that the class had been valuable because they perceived pronunciation improvement (N=4). One student said, "My pronunciation has improved with this class because I learned many things that helped to communicate better. Such as the 's' and 'z' sounds."

### **2. Did this class *meet your expectations* of what a pronunciation class should be? Why or why not? What else would you have included in the class?**

The dominant theme that emerged from the analysis of responses to this question was that the class had met students' expectations. An overwhelming majority (10 of 12) felt that it had. One wrote, "Yes, this class was amazing for me because I learned a lot. I was so excited to be in the class." Another response was, "I learned more than I thought I could."

This overwhelmingly positive response was very encouraging. The responses to the follow-up "Why or why not?" question were enlightening. Three students said the class met their expectations because it helped them improve, and three students connected their satisfaction with the class to increased confidence. One student said, "This class...makes me feel more confident when speaking English." Three students mentioned the help that was provided by the teaching assistants. One wrote, "I felt that she understand me and really wanted me to learn and improve. That make me feel more confident to speak more and ask more questions."

### **3. In what ways do you *practice* your English pronunciation (in speaking or listening mode) *outside* of ESL 302 class sessions?**

As might be expected, the thing that students reported doing out of class most frequently was speaking with other people (N=7). One student said, "I had a lot of native English speaking friends outside this class. They helped me regularly to improve my speaking and especially my vocabulary."

Students also said they practiced their pronunciation outside of class reading various materials aloud (N=6), using strategies learned in class (e.g. "tracking," speaking with a mirror, or speaking in slow motion) (N=5), asking native speakers to correct their pronunciation (N=3), using music (N=3), studying with a tutor or "study buddy" (N=2), and paying close attention to problems and correcting them (N=1).

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<sup>5</sup> All student responses are reported here exactly as they were written, without correcting spelling, grammar, or word choice.

**4. Do you still use any of the *pronunciation-improvement strategies* we talked about earlier in the semester? Which ones? How often? When?**

Class instruction early in the semester focused on a variety of pronunciation improvement strategies, and our third research question focused on students' continuing use of them. In their responses to the preceding "final exam" question, five students mentioned using these strategies. Question 4 asked them which strategies students used and when.

Reading aloud emerged as the most frequently mentioned strategy. Almost half of the responses (N=5) mentioned it. One said "At home I choose from my prescription and I read to my kids, they loved when I read to them they have fun helping me out."

Three students mentioned tracking, saying it was "really helpful" and "useful" while two others mentioned using music. One said, "In my kindle I have Pandora's radio and I can sing a song because I can read the words." Other strategies mentioned by only one student each included repeating difficult words aloud, focusing on specific problems, setting personal goals, using kinesthetic devices, asking friends for correction, practicing with the textbook resources, and scheduling frequent practice sessions.

Although these responses were varied, we considered them encouraging. They showed that students had learned to take responsibility for their own pronunciation improvement as recommended by pronunciation experts (Morley, 1991). That meant that they were likely to continue improving even after the class ended.

**5. How often do you speak English with others (native English speakers and non-natives) each day? In what situations? Do you speak English more often now than you did before taking this class?**

Ten of the twelve students responded in a way that fit the theme "Very often." These students reported speaking with native English speakers frequently in various settings.

Encouragingly, four students reported that they spoke with native English speakers "more now than before." One student said, "I speak English more often now than I did before taking the class because I am more confident speaking English now."

**6. How confident are you in speaking English with native speakers? Why?**

The most frequent response to this question was that students were "pretty confident" (N=6). One felt pretty confident when speaking about familiar topics, and another was not afraid of starting a conversation with native speakers anymore. That student noted, "Through this class, I was able to identify my problems with English pronunciation and to train my mouth muscles to produce those sounds that I had problems with. This experience made me not afraid of talking to native speakers."

Three students reported feeling only a bit more confident, but they held out hope for the future. One said, "I feel a little bit more confident. But I need to work more. I need to learn how native speakers express themselves and find more people to practice with. I think the best way to gain more confidence is practicing and practicing and practicing."

### **8. In what ways do you feel your *listening* has improved during the class? Do you hear English speakers more effectively now?**

Student responses revealed a perceived relationship between listening and pronunciation instruction. Apparently, for the majority of students in this class, the instruction they received in the pronunciation of English segmentals and suprasegmentals helped them perceive these sounds more accurately (N=7), validating Gilbert (1987). One said, “Yes. Understanding how pronunciation works helps me to understand when I hear English.” Another noted increased understanding due to learning to pay attention to intonation and stress.

Three students felt their listening had improved “a lot,” bringing the total number of positive responses to 10 out of 12. One student said, “I think I have improved a lot when listening comes. I feel more confident understanding what people say. Learning the different sounds and how to identify them makes me feel confident.” Another student felt that from the beginning of the class to the end of the class, her listening comprehension went from 50% to 90%. Yet another student noted, “After this class I can hear well. I can understand pronunciation with a different ear.”

### **10. What things that you learned in this class this semester will you *continue to use in the future*?**

Although student responses to this question varied widely, a leading theme that emerged from our analysis was the importance of suprasegmentals (N=4). One student wrote, “I learned super-segmental a lot and I recognize the improvement of intonation or other things. They are relatively easier to fix. So, when I speak I can be more careful about super-segmental.” Another noted, “I will keep working on intonation, stress... For me I think is the most important problem to overcome.”

Several students (N=4) mentioned that they would persistently keep on practicing English and asking for correction to their pronunciation.

Along with developing greater confidence, some students learned not to worry so much about their pronunciation (N=3). One said, “I will use the technique of not worrying so much about myself.... I’ve learned that what is important is to continue and have confidence on myself.”

Some students were committed to continuing self-study using the instructional materials they learned about in this course (N=3).

One very positive student summed up the value of the course by saying that she would continue to use “everything.”

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings have a number of implications for L2 pronunciation teaching. Foremost, even though measurable improvement may not be immediately apparent (due to study length, instrument choice, or other factors), students may still see a pronunciation course as valuable for various reasons, including increased awareness, improved listening skills, motivation, and perceived improvement. Additionally, the findings of this research indicate that the benefits of pronunciation instruction may extend beyond the end of a course—especially in terms of confidence, self-awareness, and strategies for continuing improvement.

This research is not without limitations. Chief among them are the small sample size and the potential for bias in the qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis may have also suffered from instrumentation difficulties; a narrative task rather than reading a diagnostic passage aloud might have produced different results. These limitations can be overcome only by additional, similar studies. Another limitation to the generalizability of this study is that it was conducted in an ESL setting; English language learners in EFL settings would likely give different responses to many of the questions. In sum, only by comparing the results of future studies involving more students at different levels and in different settings will we be able to draw solid conclusions regarding the student-perceived benefits of pronunciation instruction.

Despite these limitations, the study reported here offers encouragement and reassurance to students in, and teachers of, ESL pronunciation classes—especially when improvement is not immediate or significant. Real pronunciation improvement is a long, complex, and difficult process. Nevertheless, our results indicate that formal instruction in pronunciation—particularly when it is communicative, enjoyable, and focused on individuals’ actual difficulties; includes strategy instruction; and places responsibility for improvement on students’ shoulders—is a valuable and beneficial from the students’ perspective.

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## APPENDIX A

### ESL 302, “Final Examination”

**Instructions:** Write a thoughtful response to each of the following questions. Do not worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. This is *not* a test of writing mechanics. For this examination, your *ideas, experiences, and feelings* are what count. Please respond freely and openly, as if you were talking to someone. As long as you answer honestly and adequately, your responses will be correct.

1. In what ways was this pronunciation class *valuable* to you? In what ways do you feel you have *improved* this semester because of this class?
2. Did this class *meet your expectations* of what a pronunciation class should be? Why or why not? What else would you have included in the class?
3. In what ways do you *practice* your English pronunciation (in speaking or listening mode) *outside* of ESL 302 class sessions?
4. Do you still use any of the *pronunciation-improvement strategies* we talked about earlier in the semester? Which ones? How often? When?
5. *How often* do you speak English with others (native English speakers and non-natives) each day? In what situations? Do you speak English more often now than you did before taking this class?
6. How *confident* are you in speaking English with native speakers? Why? What would help you gain more confidence?
7. What do you do in situations where you have a chance to speak with native English speakers and you are *uncertain they will understand* your pronunciation?
8. In what ways do you feel your *listening* has improved during the class? Do you hear English speakers more effectively now?
9. Describe a time recently when you were speaking with a native English speaker and experienced a *pronunciation challenge*. What happened? Was the communication successful? Why?
10. What things that you learned in this class this semester will you *continue to use in the future*?