

## **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN PRONUNCIATION RESEARCH AND PROFICIENCY-BASED TEACHING**

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Although many studies have shown that explicit instruction is effective in increasing learners' L2 pronunciation skills (Aliaga-García, 2007; Lord, 2005; Sturm, 2013), lack of phonetic preparation in language education programs and logistical challenges inherent to oral assessments are often cited as possible obstacles to its inclusion (Derwing, 2010; Yates, Zielinski, & Pryor, 2011). To investigate those claims, this study reports on an online survey of 120 instructors of French. Results indicated that instructors value pronunciation, deem to have received adequate training, and feel they draw sufficient attention to it in class. However, activities designed to develop correct pronunciation are seldom offered to learners, highlighting conflicts between the instructors' perceived importance of pronunciation and its relative absence. This paper presents current trends and challenges in pronunciation instruction, and discusses possible ways to bridge research and teaching by taking into consideration the proficiency movement of the last two decades (Brooks & Darhower (2014; Kissau, 2014) as well as teachers' and learners' needs.

*Keywords:* proficiency, pronunciation, K12, instruction

### **INTRODUCTION**

While there has been an increased interest in investigating the effects of teaching pronunciation in the past decade (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Lord 2005; Trofimovitch, 2013), and despite the fact that explicit instruction has been shown as effective (Aliaga-García, 2007; Lord, 2005; Miller, 2012; Sturm, 2013), there remains a gap between theory and practice as research findings are not routinely put into practice (Gordon, Darcy, & Ewert, 2013). Reasons for setting aside that component of second language acquisition could be, among possible others, lack of teacher training in that area (Derwing, 2010; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011), challenges related to assessing pronunciation (Yates, Zielinski, & Pryor, 2011), and interferences from current pedagogical practices (Henderson et al., 2012; Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2013). Some scholars have advocated for more communicative components in pronunciation instruction to develop students' intelligibility and comprehensibility (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Hinkel, 2006; Morin, 2007). The widespread proficiency movement of the last two decades (Kissau, 2014), which has shifted the focus toward communicative competence and away from accuracy, may explain why instructors are reluctant to teach pronunciation, a skill that is most effectively taught explicitly, i.e., without apparent communicative authenticity. This investigation examines the current state of pronunciation instruction in introductory French courses to better understand today's pedagogical approaches and what main challenges prevent the inclusion of pronunciation instruction in beginner courses.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The proficiency movement**

The Proficiency Movement is a ubiquitous language teaching technique in American classrooms today, especially at the K-12 Level (Kissau, 2014). Rather than focusing on grammatical correctness, proponents of this approach concentrate on developing their learners' general proficiency and tolerate inaccuracies as long as communication is successful. This shift could be the consequence of the increased use of tests sanctioned by ACTFL in educational and professional contexts since the 1990s, combined with the popularity of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) since the 1980s. Today, 23 states use ACTFL testing for some component of their teacher certification process (NCSSFL). The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) in particular is often a source of stress for the candidates who view it as a difficult challenge (Burke, 2013). In a large-scale study, Glisan, Swender and Surface (2013) found that 54.8% of the teacher candidates tested met the required oral proficiency level. If language education programs want to increase their score in an effort to attract students, they would logically focus on proficiency to better prepare their candidates to the test.

Brooks and Darhower (2014) examined the contexts and practices of the three undergraduate language teacher education programs identified by Glisan et al. (2013) as having the highest passing rates. Among common practices that likely contribute to their success, a crucial finding was that most faculty in those programs had been trained through ACTFL and transferred that knowledge to their courses in order to build awareness of ACTFL guidelines in the student body. In turn, student teachers who have been exposed to it will probably design their own classes using similar approaches and extend the Proficiency Movement.

### **Pronunciation instruction**

Given the importance of oral communication within the Proficiency Movement, it seems vital for instructors to emphasize the role of correct pronunciation and to give learners opportunities for oral practice. However, research has shown that speaking causes learners more anxiety than other language skills, especially in front of the entire class (Phillips, 1992). This decreases their Willingness to Communicate (WTC), defined by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998, p. 547) for second language learning as a "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2." Baran-Łucarz (2014) has shown a correlation between students' WTC and their level of pronunciation anxiety, which often comes from a negative self-perception of their oral skills and a fear of negative judgment, regardless of their proficiency level. The author suggests that pronunciation involves the highest range of emotions in learners, which makes it challenging to teach and to learn.

For instructors to overcome the challenge of engaging students in emotionally-loaded oral practice, one might assume education programs include substantial training in that domain. Research indicates that may not be the case (Foote et al., 2011; Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2013; Murphy, 1997). Foote et al. (2011) posit that lack of training may negatively affect teachers' self-confidence in their ability to tackle pronunciation instruction, possibly discouraging them from trying. Kirkova-Naskova et al. (2013) found that teachers' pronunciation training in Europe is largely phonetic, not pedagogical. They also showed that European instructors generally don't transfer their phonetic training to their classrooms. They hypothesize that this could be due to

lack of pedagogical preparation, assessments not testing pronunciation, lack of time and other resources, or dominance of the CLT approach in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which favors authentic situations.

### **Research questions**

Several studies indicate the need for a more systematic inclusion of pronunciation instruction in language courses (Derwing, 2010; Kendrick, 1997; Hardison, 2010; Mompean, 2005; Saalfeld, 2011). Explicit lessons have also shown to be effective (Aliaga-García, 2007; Lord, 2005; Miller, 2012, Sturm, 2013), but proficiency-based approaches value authentic communicative tasks over explicit instruction, which may explain why pronunciation instruction has long been neglected (Morin, 2007; Saalfeld, 2011). In order to reconcile research and practice, this study seeks to gain knowledge on the current state of pronunciation instruction in introductory French courses. This broad interrogation is broken down into smaller questions:

1. What teaching strategies are currently employed to teach pronunciation?
2. What impact does their training have on pronunciation instruction?
3. How do teachers view pronunciation instruction compared to other skills?
4. What challenges do they currently face?

## **METHODS**

### ***Procedure and participants***

The author-researcher created an anonymous electronic questionnaire with Qualtrics and distributed to a North-American online network of teachers of French. Completion required approximately eight minutes. Each section included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. A total of 162 respondents initiated the online questionnaire and 120 completed it fully. A vast majority (90%) were K-12 instructors, with most (61%) being high school teachers. Among them 43% have been teaching 10 years or less.

### ***Analyses***

Frequency statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data collected through the survey. The qualitative information was coded following a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992). As responses were examined in a Word document produced by Qualtrics, emerging recurrent themes were tagged with unique codes. The Find feature of Word helped quantify those occurrences and turn them into percentages.

## **RESULTS**

### **Teaching strategies**

When asked if they teach or draw students' attention to pronunciation, almost all (97%) answered positively. Among a choice of four explicit teaching strategies, the most commonly selected was explaining spelling-to-sound correspondences (90%), followed by providing articulatory tips (78%). Given a choice of four implicit teaching strategies, a majority opted for modeling pronunciation and having learners repeat after them (94%), followed with giving immediate corrective feedback via recasting (82%). Encouraging learners to figure out pronunciation rules on their own was also a popular choice (44%). Approaches that hadn't been proposed earlier

emerged in open comments: focusing on sounds that can create communication difficulties, using English letters and sounds to help learners understand or memorize French pronunciation, as well as using the Accelerative Integrated Method hand signs.

### **Assessment**

Three fourths (74%) of participants reported assessing learners' pronunciation. The types of assessments used vary widely. Most seemed to consist of oral interviews (68%) and in-class presentations, either in groups (62%) or individually (51%). Pronunciation also seemed to often be assessed during regular class activities (43%). But assessing does not automatically mean grading. One third of respondents (30%) reported not grading their learners' pronunciation. When they do grade pronunciation in an introductory French course, most instructors indicated taking off points only when mispronunciation interfered with the speaker's intended message: "It's always a component of comprehensibility. If you can't be understood, it needs improvement."

### **Training**

Half the participants (51%) reported having received adequate or thorough preparation to help them instruct pronunciation. A few (17%) reported having received none. According to respondents, their preparation either had a positive impact (44%) or no impact (42%) on the way they teach pronunciation in introductory French, with 5% reporting it negatively affected it. Half the respondents (49%) explained that their main exposure to French pronunciation instruction as students was typically through a single corrective pronunciation course as part of their French program's curriculum. The next most frequent answer was that they received no training (20%). A few (17%) wrote that pronunciation was discussed minimally in their methods courses. The rest mentioned professional development such as workshops or mentoring as helpful (14%). One person wrote: "I received training in pronunciation, but not how to teach pronunciation. After learning it myself, though, I realized how much it would have helped me to know earlier on. Therefore, it is a goal to eventually incorporate it in my curriculum so that my students can benefit from it. Just not quite there yet." A few noted that their teacher training courses deemphasized the importance of pronunciation, which is why they do not focus on it in their classes: "[...] we were often told by many professors not to focus too hard on pronunciation, unless it was a big enough problem where the words were either incomprehensible or the meaning was changed when mispronounced. This is in order to create a welcoming and open learning environment where students feel safe to take language risks".

### **Relative importance**

Participants were asked to rate how important it is to them to teach pronunciation in relation to other language skills on a scale from least to most important (1 to 5). Results showed that pronunciation is on average regarded as somewhat more important (2.96) to teach as other skills. When asked to rate how important it is for their students to acquire basic pronunciation skills in relation to other skills, the number increased slightly. Answers indicated that it is on average regarded as a bit more important (3.07) to learn than other skills. A quarter of those who explained their answers in the open comments section (27%) believe that if pronunciation is not taught in introductory courses, fossilization occurs and creates lasting communication problems. But just as many respondents believe that exposing beginner students to oral French without explicit pronunciation tips, i.e., acquisition by osmosis, is sufficient: "As in any language learned naturally, my students will learn to pronounce the words through repetition and with time".

## Challenges

Substantial obstacles (Table 16) are lack of time (16%), fear to lower the learners' WTC (10%), difficulty balancing all language skills (9%), difficulty assessing pronunciation (7%), and perception that instruction is only effective on motivated learners (3%). One respondent wrote: "I think it is incredibly important to teach pronunciation from the beginning so learners develop all skills at an equal pace, rather than having to "correct" their pronunciation down the road. As with everything else, the challenge is dividing class time to address all aspects of communicative competence. An additional challenge is addressing pronunciation adequately without causing frustration or boredom."

## DISCUSSION

### Effects of proficiency-oriented pedagogies

Pronunciation instruction is important to teachers but challenges seem to prevent them from including it systematically in active learning tasks, based on the survey responses and a parallel observation of 30 hours of French instruction in area schools (not reported in this paper but presented at PSLLT 2017). Instead, pronunciation instruction seems to be included reactively, having found its place in corrective feedback and follow-up comments. The role of pronunciation instruction has shifted as demands and constraints evolved in second language teaching and learning. Most participants indicated valuing pronunciation instruction and wishing to incorporate more in class, but being unable to for reasons beyond their control: proficiency tests, college placement exams, and imposed curricula reward the development of vocabulary and grammar. ACTFL guidelines rely on patterns of communication breakdowns and successes to evaluate a speaker's proficiency level. At the novice and intermediate levels, a speaker only needs to be understood by sympathetic listeners accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers. In beginner courses, instructors are likely to understand their learners despite pronunciation inaccuracies because of their experience and training. There is therefore little incentive to work specifically on pronunciation at that stage lest students might be discouraged and drop French. At a time when French programs have become electives and suffer from low enrollment numbers, encouraging students to enroll in their courses is a definite concern for French teachers. The Proficiency Movement emphasizes a natural acquisition of those skills through games, information-gap tasks, and role-plays reflecting authentic situations and cultures. Drills and fill-in-the-blanks exercises may be used as support, but are typically not central to that approach. Developing proficiency-oriented material to boost pronunciation accuracy is possible but time-consuming, and has typically not been modeled and therefore teachers would need to create it from scratch.

### Effects of teacher training

Foote et al. (2011) hypothesized that instructors might lack self-confidence due to inadequate preparation. In this study, a few participants cited self-confidence as a challenge, but most reported having received adequate training. However, the training to which they referred was generally phonetic, not pedagogical, paralleling European findings (Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2013). As noted by some respondents, pronunciation instruction is typically either barely approached in methods courses, if at all, or it is discouraged because its emotional risks outweigh its communicative benefits, as discussed by Baran-Łucarz (2014). Despite the demonstrated

effectiveness of explicit instruction, it remains overlooked in methods courses, possibly because it conflicts with proficiency-based training favoring implicit approaches. That absence of pronunciation in methods courses might send the signal that pronunciation is of little importance.

### **Learners' needs**

This study demonstrates that instructors of French want to infuse more pronunciation instruction in their introductory courses. Some indicated students even request it, echoing previous research findings (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Saalfeld, 2011). While explicit pronunciation instruction could be effective within instructors' time constraints, it seems to go against instructors' pedagogical beliefs; on the other hand, acquisition by osmosis is in accord with their pedagogical practices but is not effective within their time constraints. The most satisfying compromise currently is to reserve pronunciation instruction to reactive remarks, i.e., when explicit clarifications can be rationalized as acceptable. This is supported by numerous comments describing instructors' preferred strategy as seeking opportunities to give learners feedback as the needs arise.

### **Classroom implications**

Researchers, instructors, and learners seem to be in agreement that pronunciation instruction should receive more attention. The types of activities promoting the development of pronunciation skills should (1) make pedagogical sense to today's teachers, (2) be ready to use, support national standards, and comply with local school missions, (3) be effective as demonstrated by research, (4) encourage learners to enroll in French courses. Tasks anchored in authentic and current situations relevant to the learners should be part of the pronunciation arsenal, as well as games that present entertaining ways to elicit and repeat language forms that might not emerge naturally, similar to the function of OPI's role-plays. Since pronunciation instruction may raise negative emotions in learners, teachers understandably may see its inclusion as risky, as one respondent remarked: "Of course I want to encourage my students to the best pronunciation possible, but a teacher [must] respect that fragile balance point between effective communication and self-confidence."

### **Future directions**

What elements would therefore make pronunciation-focused activities more likely to be implemented by proponents of proficiency-based teaching in introductory French courses, and demonstrate effectiveness on learners' proficiency levels? Morin (2007) explored the possibilities for Spanish, but research is needed to identify pronunciation features linked to certain functions of proficiency levels. Once key characteristics have been identified, researchers need to provide concrete teaching ideas and ready-to-use material that will fit the teaching styles of local K12 teachers and match their students' needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Pronunciation instruction has not exactly been neglected in introductory French courses: while it currently seems to rarely be integrated proactively, it remains included reactively in teachers' immediate corrective feedback and follow-up comments. Proficiency-oriented pedagogy combined with constraints beyond instructors' control appear to have contributed to this shift. More research is needed to identify specific pronunciation features correlating to proficiency functions, especially as framed by ACTFL since their standards and oral tests are widely used by

teachers and learners. Investigating pronunciation error types and categorizing them into levels would also help target what phonological items are worthy of inclusion in beginner courses. For example, which errors hinder communication most (Novice), which do sympathetic listeners find acceptable (Intermediate), which are acceptable to listeners not accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers (Advanced), and which have the least impact (Superior).

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