

## **PRESENTATION/POSTER**

### **PRONUNCIATION TEACHING: WHOSE ETHICAL DOMAIN IS IT ANYWAYS?**

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Several recent articles and book chapters have raised ethical concerns about practices within the field of second language (L2) pronunciation teaching. In this paper, we propose a preliminary set of ethical guidelines for teaching L2 pronunciation, based on a review of related research, and from relevant ethics and standards documents developed by professional associations for North American English Language Teachers (ELTs) (e.g., TESOL and TESL Canada) and Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) (e.g., ASHA and SAC). We then apply these ethical guidelines to archived data from a survey of 60 ELTs, and 71 SLPs, who offer what they describe as pronunciation instruction or accent modification/accent reduction services. The survey examined instructor qualifications, and teacher knowledge about L2 pronunciation and its teaching. Mixed results indicate that while some ELTs and SLPs appear to adhere to reasonably defined ethical guidelines and standards, many do not. We conclude with recommendations for positive change in this area.

## **INTRODUCTION**

To the extent that ethical standards and codes of conduct should be viewed as a hallmark of a profession's maturity, English language teaching for adult learners remains in its infancy. Not even TESOL International, the largest professional association of English language teachers (ELTs), has an official ethical code of conduct. TESL Canada, a Canadian association of English language teachers, does have a set of ethical guidelines, but it is unknown to what extent they are recognized or taught as a component of TESL Canada recognized teacher training programs. Furthermore, because they are guidelines, and not official policy, there is no enforcement mechanism. Universities are also rarely under any obligation to introduce ethics, and when they do so, it is often in cases where the degree being sought results in licensure by professional associations that have already adopted their own particular code of ethics (e.g. law, medicine, etc.) (Davis, Hildt, & Laas, 2016).

While the absence of a professional and enforceable code of ethics for language teachers of adult learners should, itself, be deeply concerning to the wider language teaching profession, we are particularly interested in ethical practice as it pertains to a subset of language teachers of adults – those who teach second language (L2) pronunciation. This area is of particular interest because relative to teaching of the primary language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking), there is far less of an evidence-base to which instructors and learners can turn to determine if pronunciation instruction is warranted or effective (Thomson & Derwing, 2015). The pronunciation sub-domain is also of interest because it is unregulated (Lippi-Green, 2012), and known to often blur the professional boundaries of ELTs, speech language pathologists (SLPs) and entrepreneurs (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Foote, 2018). In addition, consumers of such services

comprise a highly vulnerable population (see Thomson, 2014). Many have come to believe that their foreign accent is to blame for communication difficulties, whether this is actually the case or not (Derwing, Fraser, Kang, & Thomson, 2014). While it is true that foreign and even regional first language accents may be the subject of negative evaluation by listeners, resulting discrimination cannot be easily disentangled from discrimination based on other talker characteristics (e.g., race, socio-economic status, etc.). Yet, because foreign accent is so salient, it often becomes the focus of false promises by individuals claiming to be able to quickly eliminate learners' accents and in doing so, improve communication, job prospects and relationship skills (Thomson, 2014).

Previous literature examining the ethics of pronunciation instruction is limited (see Foote, 2018 for a detailed overview), but the literature that does exist expresses similar concerns about a lack of regulation. The purpose of this paper is to propose a preliminary set of ethical guidelines for pronunciation instruction, and then to use existing survey data to determine the extent to which ELTs and SLPs are currently practicing ethical pronunciation instruction. We chose to focus on these two types of practitioners because they provide the overwhelming majority of pronunciation instruction to L2 learners. Further, we are only addressing the teaching of English pronunciation, although the same principles may apply to pronunciation instruction for other L2s.

## **METHODS**

### **Establishing a set of ethical guidelines for pronunciation instruction**

To create a set of ethical guidelines for pronunciation instruction we consulted two data sources: 1) literature that provides evidence-based best practice suggestions for pronunciation instruction and 2) documentation from associations that govern and/or represent ELTs and SLPs. Since TESOL International has no code of ethics, we relied on TESL Canada (2018) to identify ethical statements that we felt were particularly relevant to teaching pronunciation in the North American context. Similarly, we consulted materials from the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) (2011) and Speech-Language and Audiology Canada (SAC) (2018), both of which have explicit ethical codes published on their websites. Unlike TESL Canada, ASHA (2011) and SAC (2018) materials make it clear that their members are required to uphold their Codes of Conduct.

### **Survey data**

The survey data used to determine the extent to which ELTs and SLPs apply ethical principles to the teaching of English pronunciation or in the provision of what SLPs often term foreign accent modification (FAM) services were extracted from a much larger study of ELTs and SLPs (see Thomson, 2013 which examined SLP and ELTs background knowledge regarding second language pronunciation and its instruction). While this survey largely followed the format developed by Foote et al. (2011), most of the items were new, and required respondents to agree or disagree with statements taken verbatim from pronunciation and FAM materials found in written texts and on the web. After answering questions about their background qualifications, participants were asked to respond to a series of statements concerning the nature of a foreign accent and instructional strategies and techniques. Although they indicated their agreement using the labels 'strongly agree',

‘agree’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’, and ‘unsure’, we have collapsed these into three categories: ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘unsure’, in order to be more succinct.

Participants were recruited via targeted messages to colleagues, via email lists of relevant interest groups, and through social media forums (e.g., relevant LinkedIn groups). Data used for the purpose of the current study were limited to respondents who self-identified as ELTs or SLPs and who indicated that they taught pronunciation or provided accent modification/reduction services. The ELT group comprised 60 respondents (45 in Canada; 15 in the United States) and 71 SLPs (49 in Canada; 21 in the United States; one with work experience in both). Most respondents were female (80% of ELTs; 94% of SLPs). Most were also native speakers of English (85% of ELTs; 100% of SLPs). Respondents were highly educated. For ELTs, 62% had master’s degrees in ELT, with most of the rest (30%) having related bachelor’s degrees (e.g., TESL, linguistics, etc.). For SLPs, 94% had a master’s degree (the expected credential for licensure), while one had a PhD in the field, and one a bachelor’s. Many respondents (60% of ELTs; 72% of SLPs) reported having taken courses related to pronunciation instruction during their university programs. However, only 19% of ELTs and 3% of SLPs reported taking an entire university course directly related to L2 pronunciation instruction and/or FAM. Many respondents had attended related workshops offered at professional conferences (66% of ELTs and 34% of SLPs).

## RESULTS

Our evaluation of peer-reviewed pronunciation teaching and learning literature, and professional guidelines and ethical codes for ELTs and SLPs lead us to propose the following set of eight ethical guidelines that we feel are most applicable to contexts where intensive pronunciation instruction is provided, with relevant citations. These guidelines are not applicable to incidental pronunciation instruction as part of traditional language classes. Further, it is important to note that these eight guidelines are not meant to replace the broader ethical guidelines and codes that exist for these professions. Rather, they are intended to add to and elaborate upon them in ways that are of concern to the domain of pronunciation instruction.

### **Ethical guidelines for L2 English pronunciation instruction**

1. Pronunciation instruction should primarily focus on intelligibility, rather than reduction of accent (Derwing, Fraser, Kang & Thomson, 2014; Foote, 2018; Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012; Levis, 2005; Levis, 2018; Kang, Thomson, & Moran, 2018).
2. When teaching pronunciation, an L2 accent should be viewed as a natural part of L2 speech development; an L2 accent is not a speech disorder (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Foote, 2018; Thomson, 2014).
3. Individuals offering instruction should not make exaggerated claims about the efficacy of the instruction they offer, or the results of services or products offered (ASHA, 2016; Derwing et al., 2014; Thomson, 2014).
4. Individuals or organizations offering pronunciation instruction should not use fear-based advertising that demonizes an L2 accent. Advertisements should be honest and appropriate (Foote, 2018; SAC, 2016; Thomson, 2014).
5. Pronunciation instruction should not be continued if such instruction is unnecessary or ineffective (ASHA, 2016; SAC, 2016).

6. Individuals offering pronunciation instruction should have specialized training in pronunciation; a degree in TESL or speech-language-pathology may not be sufficient to qualify someone as an expert of pronunciation (Derwing et al. 2014; Foote, 2018; Thomson, 2014).
7. Professionals offering pronunciation instruction should continue to seek professional development and be aware of new research developments in pronunciation research (TESL Canada, 2018).
8. Professionals offering pronunciation instruction should respect the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, sex, gender identity/gender expression, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical characteristics (ASHA, 2016; SAC, 2016; TESL Canada, 2018).

### Extent to which survey data from ELTs and SLPs reflects ethical practice

From the existing survey data, we identified items that we feel best reflect examples of adherence to or conflict with our proposed set of ethical guidelines for L2 English pronunciation instruction and report responses to each item in the tables that follow.

Below we provide separate tables to evaluate each guideline. Statements in Table 1 suggest that most ELTs and SLPs hold the appropriate view that the focus of instruction should be on improving intelligibility, not accent. Nevertheless, many SLPs (42%) felt that they were able to eliminate/nearly eliminate a client's accent. Combined with SLPs' greater acceptance of the terms *accent reduction* and *accent modification*, this suggests that SLPs may be more likely than ELTs to offer prospective clients services that are unnecessary, and to place foreign accent in a negative light.

Table 1

*Pronunciation instruction should primarily focus on intelligibility, rather than reduction of accent.  
Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. The goal of a pronunciation program should be to eliminate, as much as possible, foreign accents.	12% (ELTs) 11% (SLPs)	75% (ELTs) 75% (SLPs)	13% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)
2. Language teachers are able to eliminate or nearly eliminate a learner's accent.	8% (ELTs) 8% (SLPs)	82% (ELTs) 72% (SLPs)	10% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)
3. Accent modification/reduction specialists are able to eliminate/nearly eliminate a client's accent.	15% (ELTs) 42% (SLPs)	57% (ELTs) 44% (SLPs)	28% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)
4. The goal of pronunciation teaching should be to help make students comfortably intelligible to their listeners, even if they still have a strong accent.	87% (ELTs) 82% (SLPs)	2% (ELTs) 10% (SLPs)	12% (ELTs) 8% (SLPs)

5. The goal of pronunciation or accent modification training is not to erase an accent but rather to learn a new accent that will improve communication ability.	75% (ELTs) 80% (SLPs)	7% (ELTs) 7% (SLPs)	18% (ELTs) 13% (SLPs)
6. Someone can have a very strong accent and still be highly intelligible and comprehensible.	82% (ELTs) 72% (SLPs)	15% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)	3% (ELTs) 8% (SLPs)
7. How comfortable are you with the term ‘Accent reduction?’	38% (ELTs) 72% (SLPs)	43% (ELTs) 21% (SLPs)	18% (ELTs) 7% (SLPs)
8. How comfortable are you with the term ‘Accent therapy’	13% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)	70% (ELTs) 66% (SLPs)	17% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)

While not in the majority, a sizeable percentage of SLPs (24%) explicitly view a foreign accent as analogous to disordered speech (see Table 2). While not as many ELTs (8%) are explicit in this acknowledgment, more ELTs than SLPs tend to implicitly view foreign accent as a pathology. For example, many ELTs feel that pronunciation difficulty is related to muscle weakness or airflow, with far fewer SLPs sharing similar beliefs.

Table 2

*When teaching pronunciation, an L2 accent should be viewed as a natural part of L2 speech development; an L2 accent is not a speech disorder. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. A foreign accent is not unlike other communication disorders.	8% (ELTs) 24% (SLPs)	62% (ELTs) 68% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 8% (SLPs)
2. Errors in pronunciation result from not having speech muscles that are properly toned for English sounds. Articulation exercises are critical.	73% (ELTs) 28% (SLPs)	10% (ELTs) 49% (SLPs)	17% (ELTs) 23% (SLPs)
3. Increase your range of motion by moving your chin from side to side and up and down.	27% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)	25% (ELTs) 63% (SLPs)	48% (ELTs) 17% (SLPs)
4. Instruments placed in your mouth that position the tongue correctly can be used to correctly pronounce words with an American accent.	12% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)	43% (ELTs) 63% (SLPs)	45% (ELTs) 23% (SLPs)
5. Improper air-flow is a common cause of a foreign accent.	40% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)	18% (ELTs) 61% (SLPs)	42% (ELTs) 20% (SLPs)

Many ELTs and SLPs agree with exaggerated claims about the efficacy of pronunciation instruction (see Table 3), but SLPs agree with such beliefs more frequently. Only a minority disagree with

these exaggerated claims, but many more are unsure, suggesting that they may be susceptible to adopting such beliefs.

Table 3

*Individuals offering instruction should not make exaggerated claims about the efficacy of the instruction they offer, or the results of services or products offered. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. For a significant and permanent reduction in your accent, you need to see a specialist.	23% (ELTs) 58% (SLPs)	47% (ELTs) 17% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 25% (SLPs)
2. Pronunciation/accent instructors can help clients learn to turn on or off many of their accented sounds whenever the need arises.	45% (ELTs) 62% (SLPs)	15% (ELTs) 13% (SLPs)	40% (ELTs) 25% (SLPs)
3. In private classes, students can experience major success in as little as 2 hours.	30% (ELTs) 39% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 25% (SLPs)	40% (ELTs) 35% (SLPs)
4. Internet coaching can make a dramatic change in people's accent.	32% (ELTs) 31% (SLPs)	3% (ELTs) 6% (SLPs)	65% (ELTs) 63% (SLPs)
5. Students need only practice for five minutes every day to experience good results in a month.	27% (ELTs) 11% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 59% (SLPs)	43% (ELTs) 30% (SLPs)

Both ELTs and SLPs seem to agree that using fear-mongering advertising that paints accent in a bad light are inappropriate (e.g., accents limit personal, educational and career success) (see the first two statements in Table 4). Neither, however, seem to object to advertising that suggests *not* speaking with an accent will lead to some competitive advantage, although ELTs approve of this reverse fear-mongering in smaller numbers (see the latter two statements in Table 4).

Table 4

*Individuals or organizations offering pronunciation instruction should not use fear-based advertising that demonizes an L2 accent. Advertisements should be honest and appropriate. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. An accent does not mean you don't know how to speak a language, but it may limit you at work and at home.	82% (ELTs) 85% (SLPs)	12% (ELTs) 11% (SLPs)	7% (ELTs) 4% (SLPs)
2. A foreign accent will limit educational and career choices.	23% (ELTs) 48% (SLPs)	47% (ELTs) 27% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 25% (SLPs)

3. Accent modification training can provide you with a distinct competitive advantage.	68% (ELTs) 82% (SLPs)	5% (ELTs) 1% (SLPs)	27% (ELTs) 17% (SLPs)
4. Employees who have completed accent modification training are more confident, effective communicators who enjoy greater job satisfaction.	47% (ELTs) 73% (SLPs)	3% (ELTs) 1% (SLPs)	50% (ELTs) 25% (SLPs)

The statements in Table 5 reflect what we believe are dubious beliefs about the necessity of ongoing pronunciation instruction and support techniques that have no theoretical or empirical support. Many ELTs and SLPs believe that teaching pronunciation does not result in permanent change and so would offer ongoing instruction. Treatments for which the efficacy is unproven is surely not something that should be continued. Only a small number support the use of unproven designer techniques. Many, however, are unsure about whether such techniques are effective and so may be more likely to use such techniques if suggested by others.

Table 5

*Pronunciation instruction should not be continued if such instruction is unnecessary or ineffective. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. Teaching pronunciation does not usually result in permanent changes; ongoing treatment is necessary.	42% (ELTs) 37% (SLPs)	28% (ELTs) 42% (SLPs)	30% (ELTs) 21% (SLPs)
2. Instruments placed in your mouth that position the tongue correctly can be used to correctly pronounce words with an American accent.	12% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)	43% (ELTs) 63% (SLPs)	45% (ELTs) 23% (SLPs)
3. Practicing speaking with a pencil in your mouth will help you direct your attention to your articulators.	22% (ELTs) 6% (SLPs)	33% (ELTs) 72% (SLPs)	45% (ELTs) 23% (SLPs)
4. Final consonants are very, very, aggressive in America, the final consonant needs to be deleted to not sound angry. For example, you should say "wha" not "what".	10% (ELTs) 6% (SLPs)	75% (ELTs) 92% (SLPs)	15% (ELTs) 3% (SLPs)

Regarding the qualifications necessary to provide pronunciation instruction (see Table 6), both ELTs and SLPs have a relatively high confidence in their ability. Nevertheless, some (approximately 20%) offer pronunciation training despite not feeling that they are qualified to do so. There is less agreement, by both groups, as to whether specialized training in pronunciation instruction should be a prerequisite to offering it.

Table 6

*Individuals offering pronunciation instruction should have specialized training in pronunciation; a degree in TESL or speech-language-pathology may not be sufficient to qualify someone as an expert of pronunciation. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. I am completely comfortable teaching segmentals	80% (ELTs) 94% (SLPs)	8% (ELTs) 4% (SLPs)	12% (ELTs) 1% (SLPs)
2. I am completely comfortable teaching suprasegmentals	85% (ELTs) 86% (SLPs)	12% (ELTs) 4% (SLPs)	3% (ELTs) 10% (SLPs)
3. Pronunciation instruction should only be offered by instructors who have taken courses specific to pronunciation AND/OR accent modification	43% (ELTs) 68% (SLPs)	48% (ELTs) 18% (SLPs)	14% (ELTs) 14% (SLPs)
4. Do you believe you are qualified to offer pronunciation instruction?	82% (ELTs) 78% (SLPs)	3% (ELTs) 6% (SLPs)	15% (ELTs) 16% (SLPs)

The lack of consensus as to what constitutes adequate preparation in pronunciation instruction is also reflected in Table 7. While the majority of both groups wish that they had more training in how to teach pronunciation, a relatively large number of ELTs (33%) and SLPs (48%) do not.

Table 7

*Professionals offering pronunciation instruction should continue to seek professional development and be aware of new research developments in pronunciation research. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. I wish I had more training in teaching pronunciation	67% (ELTs) 52% (SLPs)	15% (ELTs) 34% (SLPs)	18% (ELTs) 15% (SLPs)

Finally, there is some evidence that some ELTs and SLPs hold views that show a lack of knowledge about their clients. While most rightly agree that the physiology of particular groups (i.e., jaw shape) has nothing to do with a foreign accent, many are unsure or believe that it does. Also connected to the concept of accent and race, a large number of ELTs and SLPs believe that only native speakers should be teaching pronunciation.



Table 8

*Professionals offering pronunciation instruction should respect the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, sex, gender identity/gender expression, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical characteristics. Percentage agreement with relevant statements*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
1. Some ethnic groups have jaw shapes that make learning English pronunciation difficult	12% (ELTs) 4% (SLPs)	55% (ELTs) 77% (SLPs)	33% (ELTs) 18% (SLPs)
2. Only native speakers should teach pronunciation.	20% (ELTs) 38% (SLPs)	62% (ELTs) 35% (SLPs)	18% (ELTs) 27% (SLPs)

## DISCUSSION

As noted in the introduction, professional ethics might reasonably be considered a mark of a profession's maturity. It seems sensible, then, to expect an ethical code of conduct for those providing pronunciation instruction, since the recipients of such instruction represent a population that is particularly susceptible to exploitation in this area. This is particularly true for learners who may themselves believe that eliminating their foreign accent is a realistic goal.

The title of this article asks whose ethical domain is pronunciation instruction? We cannot say with confidence that this domain currently belongs to either ELTs or SLPs. Having proposed what we believe are a reasonable and important set of ethical guidelines for those offering pronunciation instruction, our analysis of ELTs' and SLPs' beliefs and practices reveals that neither group appears to be sufficiently ethical in their practice.

In some cases, ELTs and SLPs might learn from each other. SLPs are more likely than ELTs to treat accent negatively, which may in part be due to their motivation as business people (see Thomson, 2014). ELTs are more likely to hold erroneous beliefs about the underlying source of a foreign accent, believing it to be due to motor-speech difficulty, while SLPs are more likely to understand that this is not the case.

Another common theme in our analysis of ELTs' and SLPs' beliefs and practices related to ethical pronunciation instruction is the high degree of uncertainty many respondents feel in evaluating beliefs that those in their field hold, and practices that many in their field use. This should be taken as evidence that they need more training specific to L2 pronunciation instruction. Yet, most feel that they are qualified, and many do not have a desire for further training to develop their skills. This disconnect, between their lack of certainty in what they do, but confidence in their educational background, needs to be addressed.

## IMPLICATIONS

We hope that the ethical guidelines proposed here will provide the foundation for further work in this area and in particular, promote ethical practice within this domain. Ultimately, given the population that pronunciation instructors serve and evidence that L2 learners are, in many cases, not receiving ethical instruction, it is imperative that formal ethical guidelines be established. Ethical guidelines are the domain of professional associations for ELTs and SLPs, who need to work with content area experts to enforce ethical practice for this subset of the populations that they serve.

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