

Book Review

Second language pronunciation assessment: Interdisciplinary perspectives

Editors:

Talia Isaacs, Pavel Trofimovich

Publisher:

Multilingual Matters (Second Language Acquisition series), 2017

ISBN:

9781783096848 (hbk), 9781783096831 (pbk),

9781783096855 (pdf), 978783096862 (ebuk)

Pages:

273

As any element of the language system, pronunciation undergoes assessment both in the instructional and naturalistic contexts. Unlike grammar and vocabulary, however, it tends to be perceived as more personal and, consequently, its assessment, both in the instructional and real-life settings, carries a strong socio-psychological burden of identity issues. In the case of English, the existence of numerous native-speaker varieties with varied social prestige (or the level of standardness) is supplemented by a number of standard varieties which differ mostly in pronunciation. For non-native speakers of English, then, the issue of an accent may matter at different levels, beginning with the choice of the target variety, through the assessment of the level of attainment of the target, to the acceptance of "accented" pronunciation, that is, the intelligible version of English affected by previous language experience of the speaker. The key problem in pronunciation assessment in an instructional context can be thus formulated

along the lines of the nativeness versus intelligibility dilemma. If viewed from the perspective of a communicative approach to language teaching, it becomes further complicated by the need to incorporate a complex set of socio-psychological and pragmatic aspects relevant for communication. It is the ambitious task to tackle the issue of second language (L2) assessment within a communicative approach that the reviewed book undertakes. And while the editors make reference to the challenges of language assessment in communicative language teaching as formulated by Michael Canale in the final chapter of the book (p. 259), his statement offers a perfect introductory statement of purpose. Throughout the book, it is evident that a multitude of approaches are invited to provide the basis for further discussion of such aspects of pronunciation as sociolinguistic appropriateness rules, testing based on interpersonal interaction in authentic situations and scoring procedures.

The book is divided into five parts, each of which approaches the main theme from a different perspective. Part One, "Introduction," sets the scene by providing a short state-of-the-art chapter with key concepts and definitions (Chapter 1, Isaacs and Trofimovich) and describing an interesting scale usability study (Chapter 2, Harding) pointing to two major problems in pronunciation assessment: the confusion in the understanding and usage of the terms *accented* and *intelligible*, and the lack of clearly defined criteria of assessment. Part Two looks for insights from the areas of language assessment in which pronunciation is included as a component, as in the assessment of spoken fluency (Chapter 3, Browne and Fulcher) or listening ability (Chapter 5, Wagner and Toth). Chapter 4 (Knoch) provides a brief overview of major assessment-related issues identified and explored in L2 writing studies, including the development of rating scales and their validation, the effect of raters and their training, task effect and classroom-based assessment: diagnostic and peer assessment, all of which could inform pronunciation assessment theory and practice. Part Three employs the perspectives offered by psycholinguistics and speech science, with individual chapters exploring the relationship between successful phonological acquisition and cognitive control in the case of monolingual and bilingual L2 learners (Chapter 6, Mora and Darcy), non-native students' attitudes towards their non-native English speaking teachers (Chapter 7, Ballard and Winke), the role of rater experience in comprehensibility assessment in connection with phonological and lexical correlates (Chapter 8, Saito, Trofimovich, Isaacs and Webb), and a possible connection between the characteristics of the English rhythm of L2 learners and the level of proficiency as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR). Part Four includes four chapters bringing sociolinguistic, cross-cultural and lingua franca issues into the picture. The first contribution in this part (Chapter 10, Davies) brings comments from a distinguished

scholar who is no longer with us, but whose insights into the field are invaluable: We are reminded of problems with the model of pronunciation and the lack of clear-cut answers when the reality of language use in a society is considered. Chapter 11 (Lindemann) continues along similar lines, discussing variability and numerous problems connected with the native speaker in pronunciation assessment, with a clearly stated aim of identifying the sources of unintelligibility and the listener biases. Sociolinguistic considerations are followed by approaches to lingua franca, in the case of French in Canada (Chapter 12, Kennedy, Blanchet and Guenette) and English in Hong Kong (Chapter 13, Sewell). Finally, Chapter 14 (Trofimovich and Isaacs) rounds up the discussion, offering an overview of current trends as represented by contributions to the volume and formulating a set of questions or research agendas for the future.

Individual chapters adopt one of two ways of supporting the arguments they put forth: They either report on a study conducted in order to investigate a selected aspect or present an overview of major issues relevant to the topic. The latter include the introductory and concluding chapters, authored by the editors to the volume (Chapter 1, Isaacs and Trofimovich; Chapter 14, Trofimovich and Isaacs), Chapter 4 (Knoch), which provides insights into the way in which the development of research into L2 writing can inform L2 pronunciation research, Chapter 10 (Davies), an expert "Commentary on the Native Speaker Status in Pronunciation Research" and Chapter 11 (Lindemann), which continues the variability theme from the previous chapter by discussing the difference in the attitudes towards native and non-native pronunciation ("Variation or 'Error'?" summarizes the main theme). Yet another look at native-speaker norm, nativeness versus intelligibility and English as a lingua franca is taken by Sewell (Chapter 13), who explores the situation of pronunciation assessment in Hong Kong and wonders whether the lingua franca approach could be introduced in this situated context. Finally, the two editor-authored chapters need to be mentioned, the initial and final one, which provide a general frame for the volume. These concise, informative chapters offer an integrated view of L2 pronunciation assessment, in which L2 pronunciation research forms the basis for the development of pronunciation assessment both in terms of research and its practical application. Thus, the authors call for research on the processes and outcomes of pronunciation testing, new testing instruments and procedures, the role of holistic constructs, such as intelligibility, in pronunciation assessment on the basis of discrete measures of L2 speech, and, more generally, for "more theory building" (p. 267). The book closes with a list of questions, ideas and guidelines for future work in pronunciation assessment.

In fact, several studies presented in the book provide excellent examples of the scope of primary research that can expand the field of pronunciation assessment. Most studies adopt rigid methodologies, they are clearly described

and, consequently, easy to follow and, if needed, to replicate. This is certainly true in the case of the first study (Chapter 2, Harding), which aims to uncover problems in the usability of a rating scale: A focus-group discussion methods provides key themes making it possible to discuss and show ways to improve the scale chosen for the study as well as any other scale for which the same methods of the study can be used. The study refers to the Phonological Control Component of the CEFR, used and discussed by 9 experienced raters (6 native and 3 non-native speakers of English). The two studies that follow use questionnaires and tests. The study reported in Chapter 3 (Browne and Fulcher) investigates the effect of L2 accent familiarity (L2 English spoken by Japanese L1 speakers) on pronunciation test scores and intelligibility success rates. A 3-part test was applied in which raters self-reported their familiarity with Japanese-English, completed the gaps in the transcripts of recorded Japanese-English speakers and assessed their pronunciation on the basis of a set of descriptors, and finally, commented on the instrument and the tasks. The results show a positive effect of accent familiarity on both pronunciation and intelligibility ratings, and while the analysis is neither comprehensive nor fully convincing, especially in connection with the construct of fluency as confounded with comprehensibility, the study can be certainly inspirational both in methods and findings. Chapter 5 (Wagner and Toth) employs a listening comprehension test and a written questionnaire to investigate the attitudes of L2 learners to scripted versus unscripted (authentic) texts. The results show that, predictably, the scripted text was easier in terms of the listening comprehension test, and the learners could identify the difference between the texts, with the group which listened to the scripted text noticing that it was not natural and had clearly formal pronunciation (the L2 was Spanish in this case). The results and implications do not seem in any way surprising; however, an empirical verification of the fact that learners can indeed tell the difference between authentic and modified (scripted) spoken language can be useful.

Section Three of the volume reports on four studies, all of which use advanced methods. The first study in this series (Chapter 6, Mora and Darcy) investigates the relationship between cognitive factors (attention control, phonological short-term memory [PSTM] and inhibitory control) and pronunciation measures for L2 English (tense vs. lax high front vowel and palato-alveolar fricative vs. affricate distinction) among native monolingual Spanish or bilingual Spanish-Catalan speakers. A multi-layered analysis reveals a complex system of relationship between variables and no clear patterns in the relationship between individual differences in cognitive control and pronunciation accuracy measure either instrumentally or holistically. A number of interesting implications have been formulated by the authors, but, most importantly, the study offers many further paths to follow. The same is true for the next contribution:

In Chapter 7, Ballard and Winke employ an online survey to investigate non-native speaker students' attitudes to English teachers' accents. They find a generally positive attitude but conclude that further studies using classroom-based mixed-methods and non-native speaker (NNS) adaptation would be needed to clarify a complex issue of "cognitive processes and social beliefs tied to NNS accents" (p. 138). The study by Saito, Trofimovich, Isaacs and Webb (Chapter 8) employs a comprehensibility scalar measure to investigate the relationship between pronunciation features (segmental errors, syllable structure, word stress, intonation, articulation rate) and lexical aspects (frequency, diversity, polysemy, hypernymy, text length, lexical appropriateness and lexical accuracy) among experienced versus inexperienced raters. The main finding that experienced raters tend to be more lenient than inexperienced ones is supplemented by interesting observations referring to the shared tendency for word-stress to be used as a major pronunciation variable predicting comprehensibility score among the raters and the tendency for experienced raters to rely on a larger set of lexical variables in comprehensibility. The key aspect of rater experience and linguistic aspects of speech invite further research, and the operationalisation of linguistic variables found in the study sets a perfect example for this type of investigation. The last study in this section is most technical in the sense of employing acoustically derived rhythm metrics in an attempt to find correspondences between those measures and L2 proficiency levels across speakers with different L1s. The analysis involved 20 speech samples from speakers representing three L1s (German, Spanish and Korean) at six different CEFR levels (only the Spanish groups had representatives of all levels [12 participants], with German and Korean L1 speakers at B1 and B2 levels only [two speakers in each category]); the results show that the higher the proficiency level, the more stress-timed characteristics of the English rhythm tend to be used, and that the stress-timed characteristics of the L1 facilitate the use of this feature in L2. Predictable as the results are, the methodology has been carefully described and the variables precisely operationalized. The final primary research paper in the volume, reported in Chapter 12 (Kennedy, Blanchet and Guenette), concentrates on a different L2: This time it is not English but French, which is discussed from the lingua franca perspective (a lingua franca is defined as the language used among speakers whose L1 is other than French). The study is qualitative in nature and explores the teachers' process of decision making in their rating of students' pronunciation by analyzing recorded comments teachers made during the assessment. The study uses an interesting procedure, with teachers recording their comments in the presence of the researchers. The results call for more discussion of the assessment process with the teachers and, naturally, for further studies of the same type.

The area of study and the interdisciplinary approach represented by the volume are definitely worthy of interest and further exploration; the book addresses issues of major importance for L2 pronunciation and L2 pronunciation assessment research. These two areas, so closely related both in theory and practice, need to continue to integrate and to seek information from related branches and approaches. The approaches followed by individual contributions to the book set a good example of complimentary studies, exploring a complex area of pronunciation assessment in its linguistic, social and psycholinguistic complexity; what is missing are classroom-based studies that would shed more light on the role of pronunciation assessment in everyday teaching practice. The reality of the assessment system calls for more interest in the instructional setting. It is for this reason that I stress the methodology employed in the studies presented in the volume. Even when they do not reach expected results or their results are largely predictable on the basis of previous studies (or teaching experience), their merit is in a clear description of the motivation and methodology; both of these factors are certain to make them inspirational and instrumental in the promotion of further studies. Naturally, the inspirational role is not limited to the primary research chapters; however, the care taken to reach a high level of precision in the description of the studies and varied methodologies may be treated as an added value and a special feature of the book. As it is freely available online (<https://zenodo.org/record/165465#.W0Wvd8lyW1s>), the book can exert a considerable impact on the development of the field of L2 pronunciation and encourage scholars to design and conduct more studies in L2 pronunciation assessment.

Reviewed by
Ewa Waniek-Klimczak
University of Łódź, Poland
ewa.waniek.klimczak@gmail.com