

Foreign Accents: Suggested Competencies for Improving Communicative Pronunciation

Lorna D. Sikorski, M.A.¹

ABSTRACT

In the past 20 years, many speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have joined their English as a Second Language (ESL) colleagues to address the pronunciation skills of second language speakers of English. This paper introduces SLPs to the ESL term "communicative pronunciation" as the underpinning for the commonly accepted terms "accent modification" or "accent reduction." Initially, professionals in both speech pathology and ESL felt that accent intervention was outside the scope of speech pathology practice, though that stance is softening. If an essential part of our mission as speech pathologists is to improve communicative competence for all persons, then making pronunciation more intelligible falls under that heading. This article on foreign accents limits discussion to: (1) the rationale for intervening with foreign accented adults; (2) an outline of a broader scope and definition of effective instruction for this population; (3) suggestions for trainer preparation; (4) recommendations for productive literature searches; and (5) a brief discussion of principles guiding assessment and instruction planning. The article includes relevant research and references outside the field of speech pathology that should stimulate future productive research efforts as well as more in-depth papers on specific instruction and assessment issues. While this article is intended to stand alone, readers may benefit from the content and references in another article in this issue by the same author.

KEYWORDS: Accent, foreign accent, English as a Second Language (ESL), pronunciation, accent modification, accent reduction, L2

Learning Outcomes: As a result of this activity, the participant will be able to (1) review and critique his or her training readiness against a suggested criteria list; (2) construct a definition of foreign accent; and (3) organize testing components that will generate a valid accent assessment.

Subclinical Communication Problems; Editors in Chief, Audrey L. Holland, Ph.D., and Nan Bernstein Ratner, Ed.D.; Guest Editor, Lisa K. Breakey, M.A. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, volume 26, number 2, 2005. Address for correspondence and reprint requests: Lorna D. Sikorski, M.A., PMB #354, LDS & Associates, LCC, 13681 Newport Avenue, Suite 8, Tustin, CA 92780, E-mail: lornasikorski@ldsassoc.com. ¹LDS & Associates, LCC, Tustin, California. Copyright © 2005 by Thieme Medical Publishers, Inc., 333 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001, USA. Tel: +1(212) 584-4662. 0734-0478,p.2005,26,02,126,130,fx,enssl00234x.

126

Historically, speech pathologists have not been a strong source of research concerning how to teach pronunciation. Our teaching footprint on the verbal communication skills of second language learners is (realistically) only 20 years old. Yet, structured movements in teaching verbal second language skills go back to the 1940s and 1950s, and some even earlier contributory language training approaches can be found.¹ For the past 25 years, linguists have considered second language acquisition to be an independent field with its own clearly defined research directives.² Interestingly, a limited body of pronunciation research has begun to come from the discipline of speech pathology although these efforts are unfamiliar to or not cited by mainstream researchers in linguistics, second language acquisition, and ESL. Similarly, SLP research does not typically recognize the contributions or projects that come from outside its own discipline. Although Gass and Selinker consider second language pronunciation research to be an interdisciplinary endeavor, speech pathology is not on the list of recognized contributors: "Scholars approach the field from a wide range of backgrounds: sociology, psychology, education, and linguistics, to name a few."³ Certainly, this opinion may not represent an intentional snub, but a literature review suggests that the view is commonly held.

One would assume that interdisciplinary involvement should enrich the research process. However, as Gass and Selinker also suggest, that there is a downside to diversified perspectives: each field brings its own approach, research methodology, and so on, and they are often exclusionary and not "user friendly" to those in related fields.

The purpose of this article is to (1) position the speech pathologist as a viable and effective trainer for foreign accent improvement; (2) suggest areas that require additional professional continuing education; (3) provide an initial reference list that is eclectic enough to introduce the working speech pathologist to an interdisciplinary perspective; and (4) introduce some guiding training principles for the assessment and instruction of foreign accents. (It should be noted that the companion piece by Sikorski in this issue explores compatible

themes in relationship to regional accents and should complement the present article as well.)

CURRENT TERMINOLOGY AND THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

One of the most significant trends in the ESL literature since 1970 is its use of a communicative approach model. This model contends that if the essential purpose of language is to *communicate*, then using language to foster dialogue should be at the core of all classroom second language teaching. In this model, pronunciation skills are not critiqued in favor of fostering freer (less effortful or deliberately planned) communication flow. Second, pronunciation as a concrete focus in second language classrooms is typically downplayed. Although the benefits to language building are obvious, the downside is equally obvious: an impressive vocabulary and sophisticated command of grammar are moot if the listener cannot "read through" the accented English. This "accent" can be thought of as "darkly tinted glass": one may generally make out objects that can be seen through the glass, but it is difficult to describe them definitively.

Hearsay evidence from adult accent clients who have learned their American English (AE) overseas indicates that the communicative approach model remains the dominant one. Additionally, the majority of ESL teachers who model the language in those worldwide classrooms are not native speakers. Both factors contribute to L2 (English as a second language) adults' justifiable perceptions that they are at a distinct disadvantage in the American workplace. In recent years, this need has been translated into the consumer's search for advanced ESL training that specifically targets "accent." It is likely that this L2 consumer dissatisfaction with traditional approaches led working adults to seek out the more structured approach to intelligibility offered by speech pathology.

Morley (an eminent ESL researcher) has noted an increasing ESL interest in a more proactive and structured approach to pronunciation skill building. Morley describes

a growing trend within her field that repositions pronunciation training as a specific component of second language training, with a clear mandate: "Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence."⁴ Within our field, communicative competence is the resounding theme of all speech and language rehabilitation efforts. Our ultimate rehabilitation goal is to empower the communicatively impaired to participate as fully as possible within the community. From this perspective, speech pathologists are in an ideal position to design and implement effective accent programs. Although pronunciation training is typically referred to as "accent improvement" or "accent reduction" in the private sector, Morley's thematic term "communicative pronunciation" captures the spirit and intent of our training efforts with this population (pp. 1–3).⁴ The term is perhaps too cumbersome for routine use in PR material, but it is an excellent descriptor to use as a talking point with potential consumers and with colleagues who may feel that accent training does not fall within the scope of the field.

HOW FOREIGN ACCENT IS DEFINED DETERMINES THE BREADTH OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

ESL frequently defines non-native pronunciation (accent) as "interlanguage": the varieties of speech produced by non-native learners.⁵ Speech pathologists, though concerned with a client's overall communicative competence, tend to view effective communication (intelligibility) as primarily a function of articulatory competence. Further, our rehabilitation background supports the notion that we typically evaluate speech output primarily as a function of consonant clarity. Traditional articulation batteries reinforce that belief by surveying consonant accuracy, with only minimal structured exploration of vowel accuracy. However, I believe it is essential to do an in-depth exploration of AE vowels as well as its consonants if one wishes to perform comprehensive foreign accent assessment.⁶ According to Swan (pp. 2, 187),⁵ there is considerable vowel variability among languages and linguists spend a great deal of time specifying that variability.

In addition, the interplay of AE spelling and pronunciation is specifically troublesome for second language learners: in essence, what you see in print is not what you say. Shemesh and Waller wryly describe the relationship between spoken and written English as "an awesome mess ... of too many sounds for too few letters."⁷

A thorough exploration of the key vowel issues as they affect assessment and instruction is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is crucial to point out that most speech pathologists who work with accent clients must augment their phonology background to include the following essential information about vowels: (1) a thorough understanding of AE vowel production elements; (2) awareness of all allophonic variation rules unique to AE; and (3) spelling interference issues as they affect pronunciation. Because they address vowel issues from the essential perspective of second language acquisition, Celce-Murcia and associates (pp. 93–130)¹ and others provide a productive exploration of these topics.^{8,9} Speech pathologists may also need to focus their assessment of consonant accuracy to include allophonic variation rules that are unique to AE. For example, there are numerous rules for altering the normal voicing of consonants as demanded by sound-to-sound context as well as word-to-word linking.¹⁰

Perhaps the most significant "gap" in training speech pathologists is their (typically) limited knowledge base, testing strategies, and instructional techniques for the intonation (prosodic features) of AE. I believe this is the single most important element of intelligible communication for non-native AE speakers.¹¹ Gilbert supports this position, suggesting that current pronunciation teaching must be enhanced by "emphasizing the 'musical' aspects of pronunciation more than the individual sounds."¹² Speech pathologists who are accent trainers are not the only instructors weak in this area. There is substantial research on prosody in second language acquisition research, although classroom-based ESL instructors unevenly apply it. Within our own field, Hargrove and McGarr compiled an impressive work on therapeutic applications of prosodic features and, incidentally, accent instruction.¹³ Any speech

pathologist addressing speech intelligibility issues for motor speech disorders should find it an excellent introduction to intonation that has crossover benefits to the traditional patient base. Again, an in-depth exploration of both theory and application of intonation on communicative pronunciation is the subject of future articles. In addition to Gilbert and Hargrove and McGarr, supplementary references^{14,15} including Celce-Murcia and associates (pp. 118–246)¹ and Major (pp. 12–19)² are available for both practical application and theoretical background information.

ADDITIONAL ACCENT ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to evaluation issues described in the previous section, a thorough foreign accent evaluation should also explore a speaker's English language fluency level and the nature and frequency of grammatical errors in conversational speech. Trainers must assure themselves that potential trainees possess adequate verbal flexibility. That is, participants must be able to manipulate vocal variables easily and promptly, in a variety of voluntary and trainer-suggested contexts, if changes in habitual behavior are to occur. Often the only goal of accent training is the improved accuracy of previous sound errors. Sharpening auditory discrimination skills and shaping oral motor behaviors are useful in this regard and are particularly strong skills of the well-trained SLP. However, successful programs for accent improvement must also include acquisition of the specific, unique pronunciation rules of AE. My own training strategy for vowel and consonant clarity, as well as for AE intonation, is to demand that trainees understand and can articulate the specific verbal production rules for AE speech. The rationale I share with adult L2 speakers is that internalizing the "rules of the AE game" will help them to tackle communication roadblocks without the instructor's feedback. In ESL parlance, this strategic training concept is called "empowerment," and it is the guiding force in most instructional strategies. Dickerson (p. 19)¹⁶ defines "empowerment" as giving students "the resources they need to become lifelong language learners after their classes are finished."

Along with Dickerson (pp. 20–35),¹⁶ I believe that empowerment is underutilized in typical accent improvement programs. Dickerson makes a solid case for acquiring pronunciation rules (what he terms "predictive skills"). He articulates specific applications for vowels, consonants, and prosodic features.

SUMMARY

I am clearly biased in favor of SLPs as effective accent trainers, but only if they augment their traditional expertise with additional knowledge in the areas noted. The references cited in this article represent a fraction of the wealth of interdisciplinary information currently available, but emphasize that segment that is particularly "friendly" to nonacademic clinicians. It is hoped that this introductory article stimulates a lively exchange, leads to improved research navigation guides to cross-disciplinary research, and results in extensive explorations of specific topic areas, such as instruction efficacy studies, predictive factors, and accent intelligibility studies.

REFERENCES

1. Celce-Murcia M, Brinton D, Goodwin M. *Teaching Pronunciation: A Reference for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1996:2–11,93–246
2. Major R. *Foreign Accent: The Ontogeny and Phylogeny of Second Language Phonology*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; 2001:12–28
3. Gass S, Selin L. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2001:xiv
4. Morley J, ed. *Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory: New Views, New Directions*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages; 1994:1–3
5. Swan M. *Learner English*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1987:1x,2,187
6. Sikorski L. *Proficiency in Oral English Communication (POEC)*. Santa Ana, CA: LDS & Associates; 2002:4
7. Shemesh R, Waller S. *Teaching English Spelling: A Practical Guide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2004:3ff
8. Sikorski L. *MEEC: The Vowel System of American English*. 4th ed. Santa Ana, CA: LDS & Associates; 2004:chaps 4–6

9. Yavas M, ed. *First and Second Language Phonology*. San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing; 1994: 267-282
10. Sikorski L. MEEC: The Consonant System of American English. 4th ed. Santa Ana, CA: LDS & Associates; 2004:chaps 4-6
11. Sikorski L. MEEC: The Intonation Patterns of American English. 4th ed. Santa Ana, CA: LDS & Associates; 2004:chap 1
12. Gilbert G. Intonation: A Navigation Guide for the Listener (and Gadgets To Help Teach It). In: Morley J, ed. *Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory: New Views, New Directions*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English To Speakers of Other Languages; 1994:36-48
13. Hargrove P, McGarr N. *Prosody Management of Communication Disorders*. San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing; 1994
14. Johns-Lewis C. *Intonation in Discourse*. San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press, Inc.; 1986
15. Hart J, Collier R, Cohen A. *A Perceptual Study of Intonation: An Experimental Phonetic Approach to Speech Melody*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1990:191-201
16. Dickerson W. Empowering Students with Predictive Skills. In: Morley J, ed. *Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory: New Views, New Directions*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages; 1994: 19, 20-35