

Editor's Column

Lorna Sikorski

Addressing the 'spoken word' in all forms is one of the main goals of our profession. As speech-language pathologists and audiologists, we strive to offer our clients the opportunity to take control of their environment successfully and in new ways. (Martinez & Bridges-Bond, 2012, pp. 69–70)

Accent Modification is all about the “spoken word” and it is rapidly becoming part of the professional repertoire of speech-language pathologists (SLPs). They join their colleagues across the aisle who address communication via the filter of second and foreign language teaching (CLT) via their professional perspectives in English as a Second Language (ESL) and linguistics. Both professional groups bring their unique skillsets to the field, as well as points of view that color the terminology preferred, the goals they feel are appropriate and even the merits of intervening in the process of improving one's accent in a language. While newer on the scene, SLPs are beginning to add to the historically impressive body of research easily accessible by those in ESL/Linguistics.

The goal of *Accent Modification: Viewpoint Diversity*, in this issue of SIG 14 *Perspectives*, was to swing the door wide on topics pertinent to service delivery for accented adults and to issues that SLPs working with adult ESL learners are vitally interested in. The authors in this issue have come together to give an impressive display of statistical underpinnings, cogent references for future review and pragmatic content. They represent professionals in unusual venues, deliver cross-disciplinary perspectives and open windows on laser-focused applications and language groups.

In their article entitled, “Pronunciation Training Needs for Chinese and Korean Interpreters-in-Training,” Jean Turner and Audrey Gutierrez examine pronunciation training in the context of rigorous graduate programs in both interpretation studies and in translation. Far removed from traditional venues of SLPs, they developed an in-house pronunciation improvement program for graduate students who were already extremely proficient in the language (a highly unusual participant group). Utilizing surveys and in-depth personal interviews of faculty and current and former students around the world, they present a fascinating portrait of the diversity of opinion on the merits of the course work, perspectives on the methodologies used, and some interesting student descriptions of “accent”. One of the interviewees gave one of the best, albeit blunt, descriptions of when it's time to look into accent improvement training: “Pronunciation is not a problem until it is — until there is a breakdown in communication.”

Catherine Ojakangas, Ph.D., is a speech-language pathologist who spent a significant portion of her career in clinical and research neuroscience. Her professional involvement with accent modification evolved from her familiar medical settings to wide-ranging venues in United States business. In “Viewpoint: What Brain Research Can Tell Us About Accent Modification,” Ojakangas discusses numerous, very current research findings that are vitally relevant to how adults learn. She then organizes these study findings into practical instructional guidelines that will: (a) help adult accent learners to understand the rationale of the instruction strategies, (b) allow instructors to review their programs against this information, and (c) point future researchers in interesting new directions for relevant efficacy studies.

Lynda Wilner and Marjorie Whittaker present a fairly common client pool in accent training: adult, ESL speakers who are working professionals within the corporate milieu (services are paid for by the individuals or by the corporate entity that employs them). Yet, the focus is on a very specific professional group with highly critical communication needs: medical interpreters. In “Improving Communication Skills in Health Care,” these authors present a thorough and current statistical portrait of the changing demographics that affect the United States health care environment. Further, they resent the resulting actions taken by governmental agencies and health care professional bodies to address these demographics (i.e., specific details on mandates, guidelines and recommendations we should be aware of, statistical evidence documenting health care financial impacts of poor communication, etc.). They rightly suggest that future efficacy studies of accent improvement programs in health care require some strong preliminary data: concrete information on the presence of communication programs, support for these programs by management and participants, as well as a clearer understanding of what communication skills interpreters feel they are lacking. As the first to probe this group on these issues, the authors present their findings, as well as focused instructional targets that meet learning needs expressed by medical interpreters.

Dana Fritz and Lorna Sikorski present a portrait of another typical venue for accent modification services in the United States: university level programs typically under the auspices of the communicative disorders departments. However, this study describes a distinctly rare opportunity in accent research: a long range, larger scale, single subject perspective. In “Efficacy in Accent Modification Services: Quantitative and Qualitative Outcomes for Korean Speakers of American English,” the authors examine quantitative efficacy data from a longstanding program for foreign students exclusively from Korea. Equally important, they set forward current perspectives on the process of speech improvement by addressing the issues of “comprehensibility” and “intelligibility” that highlight differing perspectives presented by speech-language pathology and ESL research. They include data on the qualitative perspectives of participants, which historically, has rarely been factored into program success criteria, presenting interesting avenues for future research.

The final paper added to this issue, “Effectiveness of Two Different Approaches to Accent Modification Services for non-native English Speakers of Korean Background,” examines the efficacy of specific instructional strategies. In their study, Sue Ann Lee and Sherry Sancibrian weigh the outcomes of focusing on sound drills for consonants and vowels versus what is labeled a “contrastive approach.” They suggest that the latter approach strategy may ultimately be more efficient for remediating vowels. Their initial exploration contributes to current vowel instructional studies that clearly suggest that vowel targets should be a high priority in building better speech rhythm intelligibility (Setter, 2006, p. 765).

Just as we began this article with this quote, we end with it. Our mandate with all our rehabilitative and non-rehabilitative clients remains the same: “. . .we strive to offer our clients the opportunity to take control of their environment successfully and in new ways” (Martinez & Bridges-Bond, 2012). Being able to confidently take charge of one’s environment is an overriding wish of all our adult professionals in our current (tough) economic environment. The information gleaned from these papers should advance your skillsets to confidently meet this need.

References

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