

Learner Pronunciation Profile:

A Survey of Learner Background vis à vis Pronunciation Development

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Abstract

Second language (L2) learners of English have shown great variability in terms of pronunciation development. Researchers hypothesize that learner background factors can be responsible in part for this variation. Although research has mentioned these learner factors and sometimes even measured them individually, a comprehensive measure of learner factors vis à vis pronunciation development has yet to be created. The present study pilots a questionnaire incorporating research-informed operationalizations of major learner characteristics discussed in the literature. These include past pronunciation training, learner motivation towards pronunciation learning, learner attitudes towards the second language community and accent varieties, and learner identity. Data was collected from 20 second language learners enrolled in an Intensive English Program (IEP). Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated in order to respond to the research questions. Reliability was also verified in order to ensure internal consistency of the instrument. Overall findings suggest that although respondents are motivated and have positive attitudes towards the L2 community, they lack pronunciation training and fail to identify themselves with the L2 people and culture. Implications are discussed in light of curriculum development at this IEP.

Keywords: pronunciation training, motivation, attitude, identity

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Background

In the pronunciation literature, researchers often speak of the variability of pronunciation development by second language speakers of English, attributing such a phenomenon to diverse learner factors such as attitudes (Kang, 2010), identity (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005); motivation (Flege, 1987; Levis, 2005); and pronunciation training (Levis, 2005). These learner variables are often discussed or measured individually, yet a representation of these measures in a single instrument has not yet been created in the pronunciation literature. Such a questionnaire can be implemented parallel to other data collection measures in order to answer more in depth research questions about this learner variance in regards to pronunciation development. In this respect, the present study attempts to create and pilot a reliable instrument which simultaneously measures four major learner background characteristics (pronunciation training, motivation, attitudes, and identity) and responds to the respective research questions.

Pronunciation Training

The amount and focus of pronunciation training has been known to affect the development of learners' pronunciation skills (Levis, 2005). This pronunciation training may be integrated into other mainstream English courses or it could take the form of focused-pronunciation courses in which only pronunciation is studied. The consensus holds that more training leads to more awareness of pronunciation errors, and thus greater pronunciation development.

Motivation

With Dornyei's (2005, 2009) tri-partite "L2 motivational self system," motivation is spoken of in respect to its three sub-dimensions including the Ideal L2 self, the Ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The Ideal L2 self represents motivation from the ideal language user that one hopes to be in the future. The Ought-to L2 Self refers to the motivation a language user has based on outside pressures and responsibilities. Finally, the L2 learning experience concerns the motivation learners have towards their immediate language learning environment. These different dimensions are responsible in part for a learner's motivation to learn a second language and can also have an effect on their pronunciation development.

Attitudes

Learner attitude is often discussed in terms of the opinion one makes of the L2 community in which one lives and more positive attitudes are also thought to influence the extent to which one develops his/her pronunciation. In the pronunciation literature, L2 attitudes is further spoken of in reference to learner opinions about L2 varieties of English. Although a very wide construct, similarities in measurement emerge from the literature that positive attitudes towards the L2 community and its accent varieties can influence the extent to which learners improve their pronunciation.

Identity

Language learners are often exposed to certain pressures when integrating into their L2 communities which constantly attempt to renegotiate their identities as members of their target culture and home culture (Gatbonton *et al.*, 2005). With these pressure comes the choice to yield to one of these stronger identities which can in turn affect learner pronunciation (Gatbonton *et al.*, 2005). Identity in this case is the personal belonging to a certain ethnic group, and because

language is a symbol of identity, pronunciation development can be affected by the ways in which learners identify themselves in the target culture.

Research Questions

Influenced by the prior literature of established constructs and measures, the present study describes the creation of an instrument used to measure pronunciation training, motivation, attitudes, and identity in relation to pronunciation development. The study responds to research questions resulting from this data collection. To this end, the following research questions (RQ) are answered:

RQ1: In how many classes have learners practiced pronunciation features (including vowels, consonants, word stress, intonation, and rhythm)?

RQ2: Do learners know their pronunciation errors?

RQ2a: If learners know their pronunciation problems, how were they alerted of them?

RQ2b: If learners know their pronunciation problems, what are they?

RQ3: How do learners rate their pronunciation?

RQ4: Are learners highly motivated to learn English?

RQ5: Do learners have positive or negative attitudes towards the L2 speech community and accent varieties?

RQ6: Do learners identify themselves with the American speech community (people and culture)?

Methods

Participants

In total, twenty participants (15 males and 5 females) were recruited from the Program in Intensive English (PIE), an Intensive English Program in the Southwestern United States.

Participants' age range was from 18-25 years (although one participant failed to report age). The speakers came from China, ($n=6$), Kuwait ($n=7$), and Saudi Arabia ($n=5$) (two participants failed to provide their country of origin). Eight participants were enrolled in Level 4, eight participants in Level 5, and four participants were enrolled in Level 6.

Instrument

The survey instrument used in this study was a questionnaire made up of 37 questions and five parts. The first part was made up of five questions and collected background information from the respondents, such as age, sex, and country of origin. The remaining parts were dedicated to each construct being measured: pronunciation training (7 items), motivation (15 items), attitudes (5 items), and identity (5 items). (A copy of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix.) Each construct was built on research and informed by any existing surveys. For Motivation, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for internal consistency. All sub-scales had high reliability (Ideal L2 Self, $\alpha = .78$; Ought-to L2 Self, $\alpha = .92$; and L2 Learning Experience, $\alpha = .85$). Finally, one larger multi-item scale was created to measure the overall construct of "motivation" by using the mean of all 15 items from the three subscales, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated ($\alpha = .83$). Attitudes also had high reliability: Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .83. Finally, Identity had acceptable reliability: Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .66.

Analyses

Frequencies and descriptive statistics were collected in order to respond to the research questions. For the pronunciation training scale, frequencies were collected to describe the amount of pronunciation training learners had. This included frequency statistics for how many learners had pronunciation errors, how many learners knew their pronunciation errors, what the pronunciation errors were, how learners were alerted of their pronunciation errors, and in how

many classes pronunciation features were practiced. For the three remaining parts (i.e., motivation, attitudes, and identity) means and standard deviations were calculated.

Results

The present study measured the extent to which learners are trained in pronunciation, motivated to learn and improve their pronunciation, open to their L2 community and varieties of English, and able to identify with the L2 people and culture.

In regards to pronunciation training, although learners self-rated their pronunciation to be fairly good, at the same time the majority of learners reported having pronunciation problems and little training across pronunciation features (including consonants, vowels, word stress, rhythm, and intonation). The problems that they could identify mostly included vowels and consonants, similar to the results found in Derwing (2003) and were told to them mostly by teachers and friends.

For the questions regarding motivation, results show that overall learners slightly agree to having strong motivation towards learning English pronunciation. More specifically looking at the sub-dimensions of motivation, on average learners slightly agreed to their Ideal L2 Self, or using English in the future. They slightly agreed to being motivated because of outside pressures from family or friends, and they slightly agreed to enjoying learning pronunciation.

For attitudes, and identity, learners mostly agreed to being open to the L2 community and accent varieties. However, participants, on average, slightly disagreed to identifying themselves with the L2 people and culture.

Overall, the results indicated that although these learners seemed to be motivated and have positive attitudes towards living in their current American community, they still did not identify themselves with this L2 culture and had little pronunciation training.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

For the IEP in which this study was conducted, suggestions for curriculum development can be gleaned from this study. More specifically, results from the pronunciation training part of the questionnaire suggest that learners have little training in pronunciation development. At the same time, results from the Motivation part of the questionnaire suggest that learners are motivated and enjoy learning pronunciation. Combining these two results, it would seem that learners at this IEP would be open to improving their pronunciation skills. Perhaps more integrated training or focused pronunciation classes can be considered for curriculum development.

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Appendix: Learner Pronunciation Profile

I would like to ask you how your pronunciation training, motivation, attitude, and identity have helped to develop your pronunciation skills in English. This survey should take you about 10-15 minutes to complete. Thank you for your participation!

Part I: Background

Provide the following information by checking (✓) the boxes or writing your response in the spaces provided.

1. *Name:* _____
2. *Gender:* Male Female
3. *Age:* _____
4. *Country of birth:* _____
5. *The first language you spoke:* _____

Part II: Pronunciation Training

The next questions ask about your English classes.

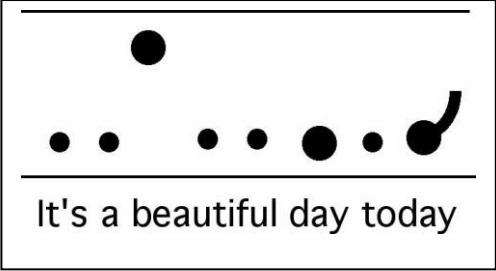
6. In how many English classes have you practiced <u>vowels</u> ? Example: <u>b</u> it / b <u>a</u> t or c <u>u</u> t / c <u>o</u> t	0 1 2 3 4 5 6+
7. In how many English classes have you practiced <u>consonants</u> ? Example: p <u>i</u> g / <u>b</u> ig or l <u>o</u> ck / l <u>o</u> g	0 1 2 3 4 5 6+
8. In how many English classes have you practiced <u>word stress</u> ? Example: uni <u>V</u> ERSity / ST <u>U</u> dent	0 1 2 3 4 5 6+
9. In how many English classes have you practiced <u>intonation</u> ? Mini-dialogue examples:	0 1 2 3 4 5 6+

A. I've just read a good book. B. What? (=What book?)

A. I've just read a good book. B. What? (=I didn't hear you, could you repeat?)

10. In how many English classes have you practiced **rhythm**?

Example:



0 1 2 3 4 5 6+

11. Do you have pronunciation problems?

Yes No

If yes, do you know what your pronunciation problems are?

Yes No

Who told you about these pronunciation problems? Check all that apply.

a teacher a friend other (please specify) _____

What are these problems? Check all that apply.

vowels consonants word stress intonation rhythm

other problems: _____

12. Rate your pronunciation in English:

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

In Parts III, IV, and V, tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling a number from 1 to 6. If the question does not apply to you, circle NA. Please do not leave out any items.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Does not apply
1	2	3	4	5	6	NA

Example: If you slightly disagree with the following statement, write this:

I like skiing very much.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Part III: Motivation

13. <i>I can imagine myself speaking English like a native speaker.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
14. <i>I can imagine myself speaking English with international friends or colleagues.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
15. <i>Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
16. <i>I can imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
17. <i>I can imagine myself living abroad and using English effectively for communicating with the locals.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
18. <i>I try to improve my English pronunciation because close friends of mine think it is important.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
19. <i>Studying English pronunciation is important because the people I respect think that I should do it.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
20. <i>Studying English pronunciation is important to me in order to gain the approval of my friends, teachers, family, or boss.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
21. <i>Studying English pronunciation is necessary because people expect me to sound like a native speaker of English.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
22. <i>Studying English pronunciation is important to me because other people will respect me more if I sound like a native speaker.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
23. <i>I enjoy learning English pronunciation.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
24. <i>It is useful when teachers tell me my pronunciation problems.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
25. <i>Watching video clips in the classroom helps me improve my pronunciation skills.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
26. <i>I like practicing pronunciation with other students in the classroom.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
27. <i>I would like to have more English pronunciation lessons at school.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA

Part IV: Attitudes

28. <i>I like meeting people from English speaking countries.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA
29. <i>I like when my English teacher is a native speaker of English.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	NA

30. <i>I want to sound like a native speaker of English.</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
31. <i>The English accent I prefer to listen to the most is a “standard” variety of English (American, British, Australian, Canadian, etc.)</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
32. <i>The English accent I hope to have is a “standard” variety of English (American, British, Australian, Canadian, etc.)</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>

Part V: Identity

33. <i>I don't have a lot of friends in the U.S. who are from my country:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
34. <i>I don't have a lot of friends in the U.S. who are international students:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
35. <i>Most of my friends in the U.S. are American:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
36. <i>I like the American culture:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>
37. <i>I want to be a part of the American culture:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>NA</i>

This is the end of the survey. Thank you very much for your help!