

Re-examining what constitutes intelligible pronunciation: the case of eight experienced non-native speakers of English in Canada

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Pronunciation teaching

- Foreign accent is a normal aspect of adult L2 speech production (i.e., age of acquisition > 7 years old; Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995)
- It is important to teach only those pronunciation features that are crucial for intelligible pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Levis, 2005; Setter & Jenkins, 2005)

Current Study

Collaboration with the ALC publication company in Japan

- Saito, K., & MacKay, D. (2011). What characterizes intelligible pronunciation?: The case of 10 experienced non-native speakers in Canada. *The English Journal*, 41(3), 22-35.



Research Questions

1. Which pronunciation features did these highly comprehensible second-language speakers adopt with high accuracy?
2. Which pronunciation features remained accented in the speech of these highly comprehensible second-language speakers?

Method

Qualitative analysis approach

Recruited *experienced* non-native speakers of English in Toronto, Canada whose speech is highly intelligible

Criteria

1. Many years residing and working in Canada
2. Highly comprehensible pronunciation despite detectable accents
3. An *optimal* model of comprehensible L2 pronunciation

Participants

L1 background	Age	Length of residence in Canada
1. Cantonese	33 years	26 years
2. Italian	39 years	12 years
3. Germany	38 years	13 years
4. Russia	24 years	7 years
5. Pakistani	43 years	14 years
6. Lithuania	88 years	10 years
7. Vietnamese	47 years	30 years
8. Quebec French	50 years	n.a.

Speech Samples

Location

Each participant's house

Interview

Q1: What have your struggles with learning a foreign language been?

Q2: What is your favourite activity here?

Q3: What is your dream?

Analyses

1. Intelligibility judgment

Two researchers (1 NS, 1NNS) listened to all speech samples and discussed how easy they were to understand.

2. Qualitative phonetic analyses

Two researchers separately listened to all speech samples and analyzed phonetic profiles. Subsequently, they discussed in depth what characterized each learner's speech production.

Audio samples

Sample 1 (German L1)



Sample 2 (Italian L1)



Two groups of results

1. Accurate features (4)
2. Accented features (7)

Accurate feature 1

Most consonants

- (except 'th', final: /z/, final /r/, dark /l/)

"And I was struggling there with basically understanding the people." (German L1)

Accurate feature 2

Sentence stress

"I find the struggle with learning English is the GRAMMAR, // cuz in CHINESE, uh, // we don't really HAVE a grammar." (Cantonese L1)

Accurate feature 3

Intonation

“And **also**, I find **in English**, they make many rules in the language that, um, they **break** – **you know?** in different **circumstances?**” (Russian L1)

Accurate feature 4

Rhythm

So-when-you	t h i n k
in-your	n a t i v e
	l a n g u a g e
and-then-you	t r a n s l a t e
it-into	E n g l i s h

(Urdu L1)

Accented feature 1

Vowels

“because in **Ch**inese” /aj/ → /a/ (Cantonese L1)
 “**y**ou, **s**o” monophthong (Lithuanian L1)
 “it’s good **l**iving in a country” /i/ → /i/ (Russian L1)

Accented feature 2

Rhotic /r/

“dinner, **a**re, before, lea**r**ning”
 “**r**real, **g**rammar, **p**robably, **r**ight”

Accented feature 3

Dark /l/

“struggle, forma**l**, school, learning” (Vietnamese L1)
 “peop**l**e, cu**l**ture” (Italian L1)
 “school, rea**l**” (German L1)

Accented feature 4

Interdental fricatives

“put in **th**e effort” (Cantonese L1)
 “and **th**en, of course” (Lithuanian L1)
 “**th**ese people” (Quebec French L1)

Accented feature 5

Liaison

"... has been **on a** daily basis, like if someone"
(Vietnamese L1)

"but **in English**, we **do it** like" (Cantonese L1)

Accented feature 6

Devoicing of final /z/ to /s/

"the children's **s** activities **s** clubs" (Lithuanian L1)

"I **was** struggling, go to places **s**" (German L1)

Accented feature 7

Word stress

"OK, my **favourite activities in Canada** is... we can do anything differently..." (Cantonese L1)

"So when I came to **Canada**... You know, to **educate** my children..." (Lithuanian L1)

"It's always in**ter**esting to try to apply" (Quebec French L1)

Results in sum

ACCURATE	ACCENTED
1. Most consonants	1. Vowels
2. Sentence stress	2. Final /r/
3. Intonation	3. Dark /l/
4. Rhythm	4. Interdental fricatives (th)
	5. Liaison
	6. Devoicing final /z/
	7. Word stress

Discussion Question 1

For those aspects of second-language pronunciation that were not consistently accurate: Does this suggest that we should de-prioritize instruction of those features, given that the speech nonetheless remained highly comprehensible?

Discussion Question 2

For those aspects of pronunciation that were highly accurate: Is it possible that the reason that these speakers uniformly adopted these features is precisely because they are important qualities that help to make speech comprehensible?

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