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


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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1 background</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of residence in Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cantonese</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>26 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Italian</td>
<td>39 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Germany</td>
<td>38 years</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Russia</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pakistani</td>
<td>43 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lithuania</td>
<td>88 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Vietnamese</td>
<td>47 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Quebec French</td>
<td>50 years</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 think in-your native language and-then-you translate it-into English

(Urdu L1)

Accented feature 1

Vowels

“because in Chinese” /aj/ → /a/ (Cantonese L1)
“you, so” monophthong (Lithuanian L1)
“It’s good living in a country” /ɪ/ → /i/ (Russian L1)

Accented feature 2

Rhotic /r/

“dinner, are, before, learning”
“real, grammar, probably, right”

Accented feature 3

Dark /l/

“struggle, formal, school, learning” (Vietnamese L1)
“people, culture” (Italian L1)
“school, real!” (German L1)

Accented feature 4

Interdental fricatives

“put in the effort” (Cantonese L1)
“and then, of course” (Lithuanian L1)
“these 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 activities clubs” (Lithuanian L1)
“I was struggling, go to places” (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 interesting to try to apply” (Quebec French L1)

Results in sum

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