

Zielinski, B. (2012). The social impact of pronunciation difficulties: Confidence and willingness to speak. In. J. Levis & K. LeVelle (Eds.). *Proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, Sept. 2011. (pp.18-26). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

## **THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES: CONFIDENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK**

**Beth Zielinski**, Macquarie University

In this paper I focus on the social impact of pronunciation difficulties by exploring English learners' perceptions of the impact of their pronunciation on their interactions in English and investigating how these perceptions relate to the extent to which they speak English in their everyday lives. I draw on interview data collected from 26 participants who were part of a larger longitudinal study in the Australian context that followed the progress of migrants as they studied English in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), and then continued on to study or work in the community. As a group, the participants (14 beginner and 12 intermediate level learners) were overwhelmingly negative about their pronunciation skills and most indicated that they felt their pronunciation affected their ability to be understood when they spoke English. Although negative perceptions about pronunciation influenced English use for some participants, other factors seemed to be involved for others, and the relationship between perceptions about pronunciation skills and the extent of English use is somewhat unclear from the findings presented here.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Being able to interact and communicate comfortably and effectively in spoken English is of considerable importance for adult migrants settling in English-speaking countries, and an inability to do so may limit their educational, career and social opportunities (Derwing, Thomson, & Munro, 2006; Schellenberg & Maheux, 2007, Yates, 2011). Migrants themselves have indicated that developing speaking skills (Yates, 2010) and being able to pronounce English well (Derwing, 2003) is very important to them. Yet it seems that being able to speak with pronunciation that allows them to be understood by a range of people in a variety of different situations might be a particular stumbling block for many migrants learning English. Derwing et al. (2006) followed the progress of 40 migrants over a 10 month period as they attended beginner level English classes in Canada, and found that even after 10 months of full time English lessons, the majority of the participants were dissatisfied with their pronunciation skills. Zielinski (2010) found that developing pronunciation skills was also challenging for many migrants learning English in the Australian context. She reported that over half (54%) of the participants in a longitudinal study of migrants attending English classes in the AMEP expressed negative perceptions about their pronunciation skills.

Research by Derwing and Rossiter (2002) highlights the impact of pronunciation difficulties on communication. They interviewed 100 migrants attending full time intermediate level classes in an ESL program in Canada, and found that over half (55%) reported that pronunciation problems contributed to difficulties they had when communicating in English, and 42% reported that pronunciation problems were the main cause of these difficulties. Such perceptions about the impact of pronunciation difficulties on interactions in spoken English have the potential to undermine confidence and willingness to speak, and ultimately to affect the amount of English spoken in everyday life.

MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) in their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model surmise that a range of potential influences can undermine a person's willingness to

speak at any one time in a particular situation (see also Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008 for a description of WTC model). However, they argue that the most immediate determinants are the desire to communicate with a specific person and self-confidence in the ability to communicate effectively at a particular time. The aim of this study was to investigate the latter by exploring migrants' perceptions of the impact of their pronunciation skills on their ability to communicate effectively in English, and to see how these perceptions are related to the extent to which they speak English in their everyday lives. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the participants' perceptions of the impact of pronunciation difficulties on their interactions in spoken English?
2. How do these perceptions relate to their reports of how much they speak English in their everyday lives?

## METHOD

### Data collection and analysis

The data analysed here were drawn from interviews conducted as part of a larger longitudinal study that followed the progress of 152 adult migrants from 53 different language backgrounds over a 12 month period as they studied English in the AMEP, and then continued on to study or work in the community (see Yates, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. The participants were interviewed four times during the course of the study, and on each occasion were asked about their use of English.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then coded using NVivo8<sup>2</sup>. Comments related to the impact of pronunciation skills on interactions in English were coded as either positive or negative in the following way:

**Positive comments** included comments that indicated that pronunciation was not a problem for them and did not impact on them being understood when they spoke English, or that they were aware of their pronunciation difficulties but these did not have an impact on their interactions in spoken English.

**Negative comments** included comments that indicated they were not happy with their pronunciation or that they found pronunciation difficult AND this had a negative impact on their interactions in spoken English.

### Participants

Because of the way the interviews were conducted, not all participants were asked directly about their pronunciation skills, so this topic was not discussed in some interviews. Similarly, there was variation amongst interviewers as to how information about the participants' use of English was collected. The 26 participants included in the present analysis were those who had commented on the impact of their pronunciation on their interactions in English *and* who had also indicated at some stage in the interview the percentage of time they spoke English, as opposed to other languages, in their everyday lives. Information about the percentage of time English was spoken was either: (a) represented in the data by a pie chart drawn by the

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<sup>1</sup> The longitudinal study, entitled 'Language training and settlement success: Are they related?' was conducted by the AMEP Research Centre which was funded by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). I would like to acknowledge the support of DIAC in their funding of this project through the AMEP Research Centre in 2008 and 2009, and my colleagues on the project team for their involvement in collecting and analysing the data. The views expressed in this article are mine and do not necessarily represent the views of either DIAC or other members of the research team.

<sup>2</sup> NVivo8 is research software that assists in the coding and classification of qualitative data.

participant (see Figure 1), or (2) provided by the participant at some stage during the interview without a pie chart being drawn. There were 14 beginner and 12 intermediate level<sup>3</sup> learners, most were female (21 female and 5 male), and there were 11 language backgrounds represented: Mandarin (n = 9), Arabic (n = 3), Vietnamese (n = 3), Korean (n = 3), Japanese (n = 2), and one each for Cantonese, Susu, Chin Haka, Spanish, Somali and Thai.

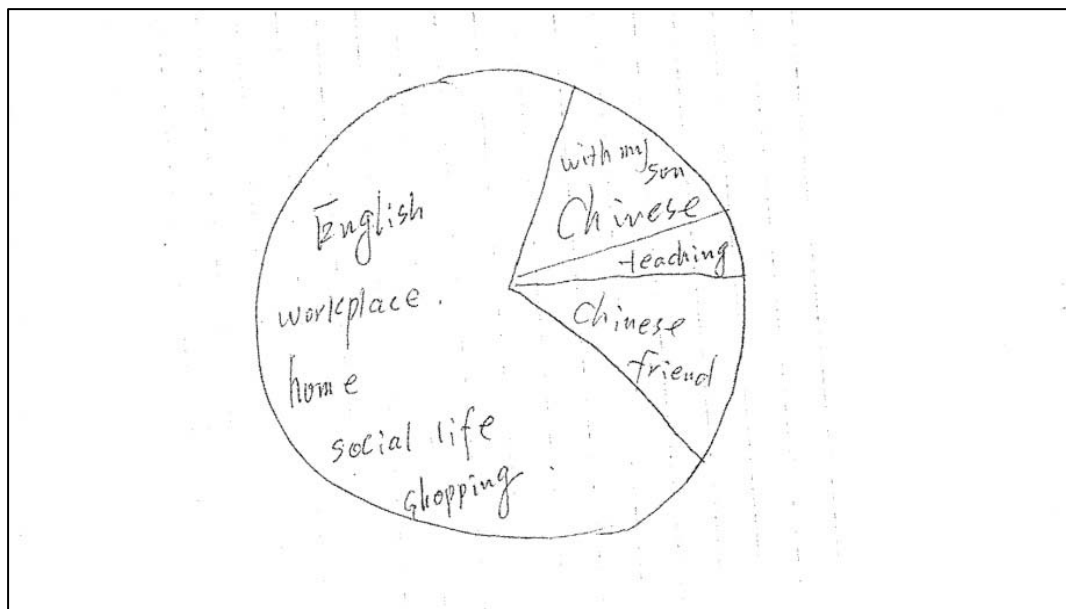


Figure 1. Example of a participant's report of how much English is spoken in everyday life

Note: Percentage values were sometimes written on the diagram itself, but if not, only those where these were clarified in the interview were included in the analysis. In this case, the participant indicated in the interview that she spoke English about 75% of the time.

## RESULTS

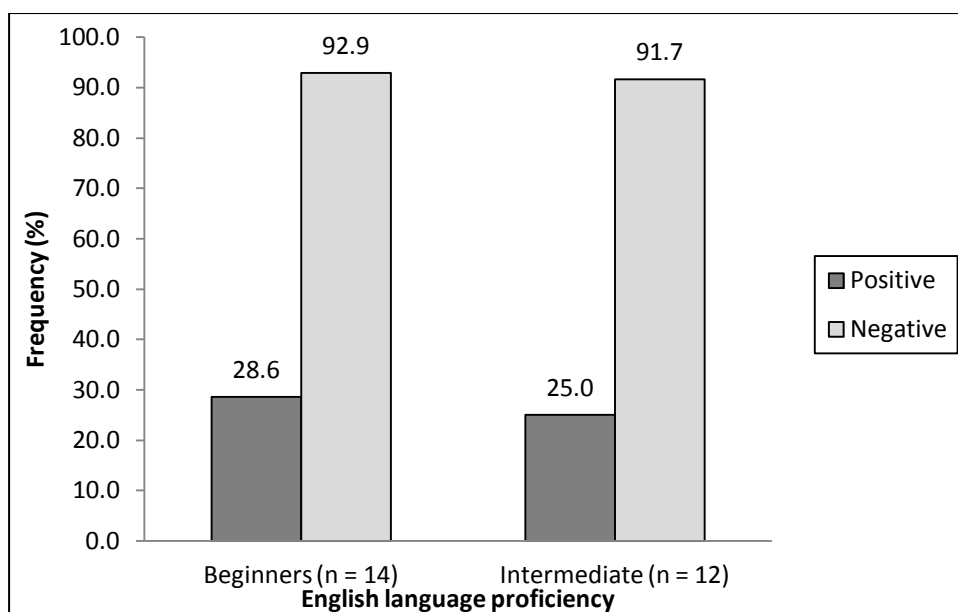
### Impact of pronunciation difficulties on interactions in spoken English

The group as a whole were more negative than positive about the impact of their pronunciation on their interactions in spoken English. Negative comments were made by 24 of the 26 participants (92.3%) while positive ones were made by only 7 (26.9%)<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, as can be seen from Figure 2, the tendency to make negative comments was similar for both beginner and intermediate level learners. Only 28.6% (n = 4) of beginners and 25.0% (n = 3) of intermediate level learners made positive comments while all but one participant in each group made negative comments (beginners: 92.9%; n = 13; intermediate: 91.7%, n = 11).

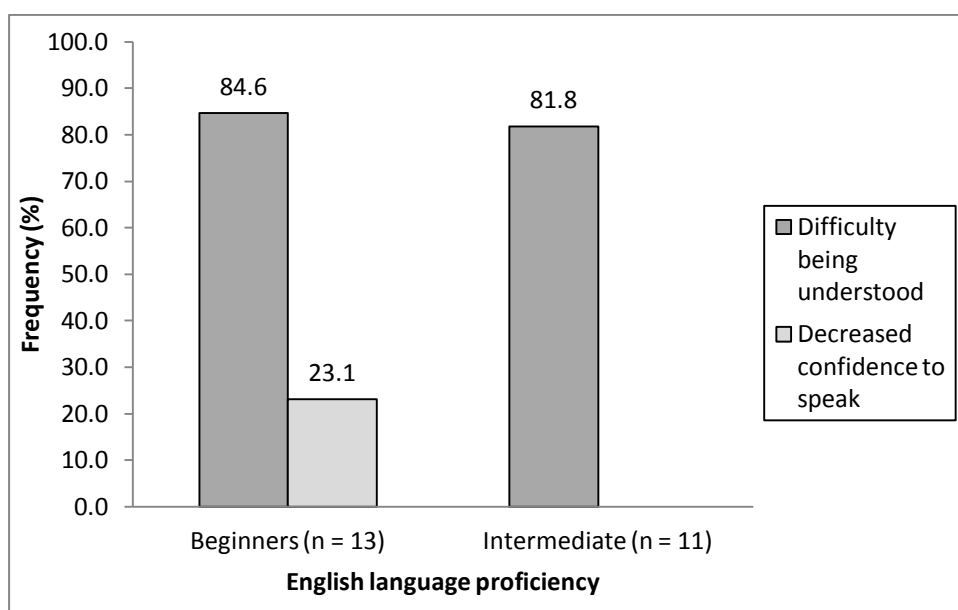
<sup>3</sup> According to the curriculum framework used by the AMEP – Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) - the beginner level learners were CSWE I level and the intermediate level learners were CSWE III.

<sup>4</sup> These percentages do not add to 100% because some participants commented on their pronunciation in more than one interview. Their comments were not always the same across the different interviews, so some participants had both positive and negative comments included in the analysis.



*Figure 2.* Comments about the impact of pronunciation on interactions in spoken English  
*Note:* Percentages do not add to 100%. See footnote 4.

The most commonly perceived negative impact of pronunciation difficulties was difficulty being understood; this was the case for 20 (83.3%) of the 24 participants who commented negatively. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, both beginner and intermediate level participants who commented negatively felt they were hard to understand, with over 80% of the participants in each group feeling this way (beginners: 84.6%, n = 11; intermediate: 81.8%, n = 9). From Figure 3 we can also see that it was only beginners who indicated that their pronunciation difficulties affected their confidence to speak (23.1%, n = 3).



*Figure 3.* Comments about the negative impact of pronunciation on interactions in spoken English

*Note:* Percentages do not add to 100% for the beginners group because one participant included both categories in her comments.

However, three intermediate level learners did mention that their pronunciation difficulties had a negative impact in other ways; one mentioned a decreased ability to have a conversation, another decreased confidence in the ability to learn, and a third, being laughed at by her husband.

### Impact of pronunciation difficulties on the extent to which English is spoken in everyday life

The extent to which the group as a whole spoke English in their everyday lives ranged from speaking no English at all to speaking English 90% of the time. Furthermore, there was a wide range of English use regardless of whether the participants were positive or negative about their pronunciation: a range of 25-80% for those who were positive and 0-90% for those who were negative. The average extent to which English was used, however, was a little less for those who were negative (negative: average 45.4% vs. positive: average 51.4%).

In Figure 4 we can see that there were some differences between the beginner and intermediate level learners regarding the relationship between perceptions and English use. As was the case with the group as a whole, beginner level learners with negative perceptions about their pronunciation, on average, spoke English a little less than those with positive perceptions (negative: average 31.2%; positive: average 37.5%). However, for intermediate level learners it was the other way around; those with negative perceptions spoke English a little *more* than their more positive counterparts (negative: average 62.3% vs. positive: average 51.7%). Furthermore, from Figure 4 we can also see that the group who spoke English most were the intermediate level learners with negative perceptions about their pronunciation (average 62.3%).

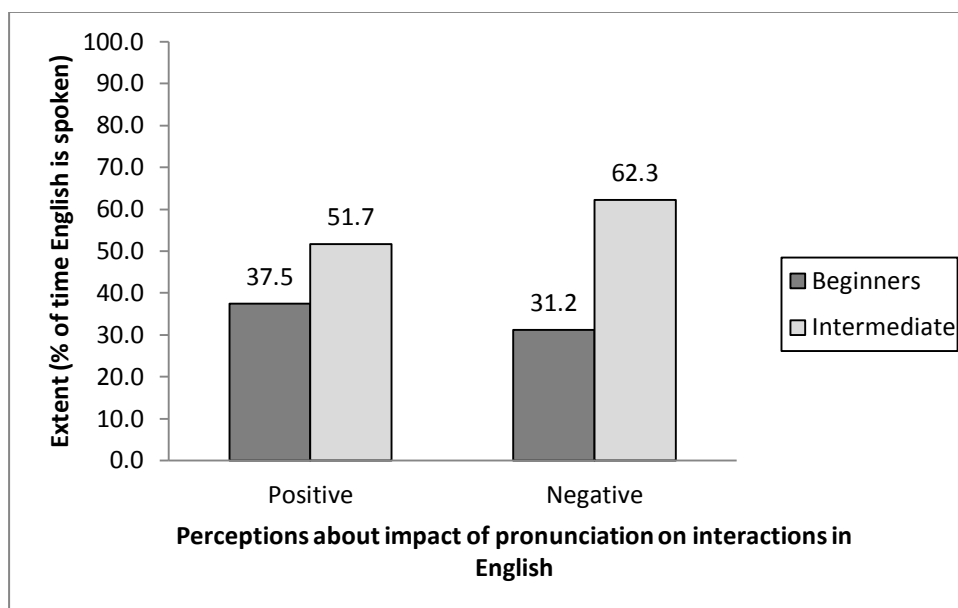


Figure 4. Average extent to which English is spoken in everyday life

Figure 4 also shows that beginner level learners spoke English less than intermediate learners regardless of their perceptions about their pronunciation, and that the group who spoke English the least were the beginner level learners with negative perceptions about their pronunciation (average 31.2%). Within this group of beginner level learners, those who indicated that their pronunciation difficulties affected their ability to be understood ( $n = 11$ ) spoke English on average only 34.1% of the time, while those who felt their pronunciation affected their confidence to speak ( $n = 3$ ) used English even less; their English use ranged from 0%-30% with an average of 18.3%. Comments made by two of these participants

indicated that their confidence had been affected by bad experiences where someone had laughed at their pronunciation. One added that she was now afraid to speak because she was worried that she would make mistakes and people would not be able to understand her, and the other commented that she was now embarrassed to speak. The third commented that she was scared of making mistakes with her pronunciation so avoided speaking English altogether.

As noted above, there was a wide range of English use amongst participants regardless of their perceptions about their pronunciation: a range 25-80% for those with positive perceptions and 0-90% for those with negative ones. A snapshot of the participants at the extremes of these ranges suggests that opportunity or need to speak English might either exacerbate or override perceptions about pronunciation depending on individual circumstances. The participant with negative perceptions who reported speaking no English at all was a beginner level learner who commented through an interpreter that she avoided speaking English because she was afraid her pronunciation was not right. However, this avoidance may have been exacerbated by her lack of opportunity to speak English. She was a young Vietnamese woman in her early twenties who, other than attending the AMEP classes, had very little contact with anyone outside the family home; her husband brought her to class and her father-in-law picked her up afterwards. In contrast, the two participants who reported speaking English 90% of the time, despite negative perceptions about their pronunciation, did not have the option to avoid speaking English. Both intermediate level learners, one was a Thai woman in her thirties who had no choice but to speak English. She was married to an Australian and had no contact with Thai speakers where she lived. The other was a Korean woman in her early thirties who was also married to an Australian and working in an English speaking environment, and although she saw her pronunciation as sometimes problematic, she had to speak English most of the time.

Similarly, of those participants with positive perceptions about their pronunciation, the one who reported speaking English 25% of the time had less opportunity or need to speak English than the one who reported speaking English 80% of the time. Both were beginner level learners, but the one who spoke English less was a male in his thirties from Lebanon whose first language was Arabic. He was quite happy with his English pronunciation and quite confident that most people could understand him. However, his English use was limited because his wife spoke Arabic and he worked in an Arabic speaking environment. The participant who reported speaking English more was a young man in his early twenties from Guinea. He too was happy with his pronunciation, but in contrast to the other participant, he was married to an Australian and worked in local schools and community facilities, so had no choice but to speak English in his day to day life.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study I aimed to explore English learners' perceptions about the effect of their pronunciation skills on their interactions in English, and look at how these perceptions influence the extent to which they spoke English in their everyday lives. The group as a whole were overwhelmingly more negative than positive about their pronunciation skills, and most felt that pronunciation difficulties affected their ability to be understood when they spoke English. This was the case for both beginner and intermediate level learners. These findings are consistent with the findings reported by Derwing et al., (2006) who found that the majority of their beginner level participants were dissatisfied with their pronunciation skills after attending English lessons for 10 months. They are also consistent with the findings reported by Derwing and Rossiter (2002) who found that the majority of their

intermediate level participants reported that pronunciation difficulties contributed to difficulties they had when communicating in English.

The nature of the relationship between perceptions about pronunciation skills and the extent to which participants use English in everyday life is, however, somewhat unclear from the present findings. However, there are a number of important findings worthy of mention. Firstly, participants reported a wide range of English use whether they had positive or negative perceptions about their pronunciation. A preliminary examination of individual participants suggests that other factors may be at play, and that opportunity or need to speak English may exacerbate or override concerns about pronunciation and its effect on interactions. Derwing et al. (2008) utilised MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC framework to explore the variables that influenced their participants' perceptions of their opportunities to communicate in English. They found that a range of MacIntyre et al.'s variables influenced these perceptions for different participants, including personality, intergroup climate, communicative competence, intergroup attitudes, social situation, self confidence and motivation. The present study, however, did not allow for such an analysis.

Another important finding relates to the group of participants who reported speaking English the least, the beginner level learners with negative perceptions about their pronunciation. For many of these participants, perceptions about their pronunciation may not have been the major factor influencing their use of English. However, for some, bad experiences where someone had laughed at their pronunciation had seriously affected their confidence to speak. If pronunciation difficulties lead to such a loss of confidence to interact in spoken English, it is likely that these participants will have limited opportunities for practice, which in turn can impact their further language development, and ultimately affect many aspects of their lives as noted by Derwing et al. (2006), Schellenberg & Maheux (2007) and Yates (2011).

### **Implications for further research**

Questions raised by the present findings have implications for further research. Firstly, although negative perceptions about pronunciation seemed to affect beginner level learners' use of English, they did not seem to have the same effect on intermediate learners. In fact, the group that used English the most were intermediate level learners with negative perceptions about their pronunciation. Preliminary analysis suggests that other factors such as opportunity or need to speak English might play an important role with some participants, but further investigation is needed to identify these factors and understand how they interact with perceptions about pronunciation to influence English use.

Further research is also needed into the expectations and awareness of pronunciation at different proficiency levels. The findings of the present study indicate that the both beginner and intermediate level participants were overwhelmingly negative about their pronunciation skills, but we need further information about what it is they were concerned about. We also need to know whether these concerns change as learners become more proficient speakers of English. For instance, concern about pronunciation difficulties might be a natural part of learning to speak English at different stages, or there might be some learners or groups of learners where pronunciation is more of an issue, where concern about pronunciation and not being understood affects their confidence or prevents them from speaking.

### **Implications for the classroom**

The present findings highlight the importance of teaching pronunciation from the very beginning. Most of the beginner level participants in the present study were negative about their pronunciation skills and felt they were difficult to understand when they spoke English. Some had lost their confidence to speak because of bad experiences. It is therefore of utmost

importance that these concerns are addressed in the classroom and explicit instruction for pronunciation skills and improved comprehensibility is a normal and necessary part of learning English. The findings also highlight the importance of pronunciation instruction for learners at higher levels of proficiency. Intermediate level participants with negative perceptions about their pronunciation were the group in the present study that used English the most in their everyday lives. Even though they felt that their pronunciation made them difficult to understand, many had no choice but to speak English in their workplace, in their community and in their family. Pronunciation instruction is essential for such learners, not only to improve their comprehensibility but also to maintain their confidence to speak English and to feel that they can be understood easily when they do so. It is also important for those higher level learners who do not use much English in their everyday lives, to boost their confidence by providing opportunities to develop and practice their pronunciation skills in a safe environment.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Beth Zielinski is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University. Her research interests are in the area of pronunciation and intelligibility, and her doctoral thesis investigated the features of pronunciation that have an impact on intelligibility in speakers of English as a second language. She has conducted pronunciation classes for international university students, private consultations for corporate clients, and professional development sessions for teachers, as well as publishing and lecturing in the area. Email: [bethz@bigpond.net.au](mailto:bethz@bigpond.net.au)

#### **Contact information**

Address: Department of Linguistics,  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Building C5A, Room 506,  
Macquarie University,  
Balaclava Rd, North Ryde,  
NSW 2109  
Australia

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