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ESL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN PRONUNCIATION TEACHING: CONFIDENTLY RIGHT OR CONFIDENTLY WRONG?

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This study examines the extent to which English Language Teachers (ELTs) are able to critically evaluate beliefs and teaching practices in the domain of pronunciation instruction. To answer this question, an online survey was administered to 58 teachers, asking them to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements taken from websites and *YouTube* videos belonging to pronunciation, accent reduction and accent modification programs. While respondents generally agreed with the least controversial statements in the survey, there was substantial disagreement about some of the more questionable or even false statements. Results indicate that many ELTs seem not to have the background knowledge, and lack the confidence necessary, to critically assess questionable pronunciation beliefs and practices – beliefs and practices that they may encounter in the materials that they choose to use. This suggests that more language teacher education programs need to offer courses in how to teach pronunciation. Furthermore, such courses should provide not only pedagogical techniques, but the theoretical knowledge necessary to understand how second language pronunciation develops. This will allow teachers to more effectively use commercial materials, while avoiding materials that are based on a faulty understanding of what works.

INTRODUCTION

Although pronunciation instruction was an important feature of many language teaching methods in the 20th century, the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1980s led many teachers to believe that a focus on form, including pronunciation, was unnecessary (Thomson, 2012a). Today, pronunciation instruction is experiencing resurgence. This is evident from the marked increase in the publication of materials on this topic, for both teachers and students (Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2011), and from the popularity of pronunciation workshops at teachers' conferences (Thomson, 2012a). It is also apparent from a rapid growth in the number of individuals offering accent reduction or accent modification services (Thomson, 2013), which some have described as a lucrative and best-kept-secret career (Kuster, 2010; Nemko, 2008).

This renewed interest in pronunciation instruction has occurred during what Richards and Rogers (2001) describe as a post-methods era, characterized by an eclectic approach to language teaching, rather than strict adherence to any prescribed method. Thus, instead of there being a coherent and unified approach to teaching, as was characteristic of the pre-CLT era, there now exists a plethora of competing beliefs and practices, many of which are not evidence-based (see Thomson, 2012a). Coupled with an emerging but unregulated marketplace for stand-alone pronunciation programs (often referred to as 'accent reduction' or 'accent modification'), the dissemination of questionable beliefs and practices, especially on the Internet, is rapidly increasing (see Thomson, 2013).

The proliferation of unregulated stand-alone pronunciation programs has led some to debate who is most qualified to teach pronunciation (Derwing, 2008; Lippi-Green, 2012; Thomson, 2012b).

Derwing (2008) argues that English Language Teachers (ELTs) possess the best foundation, because they have a more holistic understanding of the process of second language (L2) acquisition, and are also more likely to have the cross-cultural communication skills necessary to effectively serve this population. This does not preclude the possibility that non-ELTs may also acquire appropriate training, but it seems to imply that such training should be broad-based, rather than comprising only a brief course focused only on pronunciation teaching.

Paradoxically, while ELTs may have the best educational foundation, it is also clear that many are unqualified to teach pronunciation. A decade ago, several surveys of ELTs in Canada, Britain and Australia investigated the training and beliefs of ELTs with respect to pronunciation teaching (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Macdonald, 2002). While these studies clearly indicated a growing awareness of the importance of teaching pronunciation, some ELTs cited a lack of adequate training as a reason for avoiding pronunciation instruction in their language classes.

More encouraging, Breitkreutz et al's (2001) study also found that some ELTs in the Canadian context had taken university courses in how to teach pronunciation, and that classroom practices were beginning to reflect knowledge of recent pronunciation research, and advice found in reputable teacher resources. For example, many teachers were aware that accurate suprasegmental features of pronunciation (e.g., word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, intonation, etc) are considered more important to communication than are segmental features (i.e., vowels and consonants). Despite these positive findings, Breitkreutz et al. still called for better access to training in how to teach pronunciation.

Ten years after Breitkreutz et al's study, Foote et al. (2011) conducted a follow-up survey in order to determine if pronunciation teacher training opportunities had further advanced, and whether teaching practices by ELTs in the Canadian context had continued to improve. They found that little had changed. Particularly concerning was an indication that access to university-based credit courses dedicated to the topic of teaching pronunciation remained very limited. Instead, most ELTs continue to rely on presentations and workshops at teachers' conferences, where the expertise of those presenting is sometimes uncertain.

Given that professional development opportunities related to pronunciation teaching are limited, many ELTs are left to determine their own approach; reliance on commercially published and online sources is one obvious strategy. Thus, while the recent increase in pronunciation materials indicates progress, to provide appropriate instruction, teachers must be capable of discriminating materials and techniques that are evidence-based from those that are not. For example, Derwing (2008) reports that one 'accent reduction' program asks learners to recite "Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers" with a marshmallow placed between their lips. This technique seems to be based on the faulty assumption that lips need to be strengthened in order to produce a /p/. Even more unorthodox, J. Thompson's (2011) pronunciation text 'English is Stupid' indicates that the difference between /p/ and /b/ is that to produce the first sound one must breathe out, while to produce the second sound one must breathe in. While it is safe to assume that most ELTs would recognize how these particular suggestions conflict with what is known about English pronunciation, other debatable beliefs and techniques may not be as easy to recognize.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which ELTs are able to critically evaluate beliefs and practices about pronunciation instruction found on the Internet and in some self-published materials. If teachers have adequate preparation for teaching this skill, and can thereby

accurately assess the quality of materials they encounter, they should be less susceptible to adopting the inaccurate beliefs and practices that are increasingly prevalent in the marketplace.

METHODS

Survey instrument

The survey largely followed the format used by Foote et al. (2011), and contained some of the same demographic questions. However, most items were new, and required respondents to evaluate belief statements or techniques taken verbatim from pronunciation teaching materials found on websites and in *YouTube* videos promoting pronunciation, accent reduction or accent modification services. In a few cases, statements were taken from self-published texts. The 24 items reported in this study are a subset of a much larger survey, which included 131 items related to pronunciation beliefs and practices[1]. While a few open-ended questions were used, the majority of questions were either multiple-choice or asked participants to indicate the degree to which they agreed with particular statements. The entire larger survey took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

Participants

To recruit respondents, I posted invitations to participate in relevant pronunciation interest groups on the social media site LinkedIn. I also asked colleagues at Canadian English language programs to forward my invitation to teachers in their institutions.

RESULTS

A total of 58 ELTs responded to the survey, including 43 from Canada and 15 from the United States (12 male; 46 female). Most (86%) were native speakers, with the rest having a variety of L1 backgrounds.

The majority of participants had a Master's (62%) or undergraduate degree (30%) in TESL or Linguistics, while the rest (8%) had a degree in an unrelated field. Nearly a quarter (23%) reported having taken an entire course in pronunciation teaching, while 66% reported attending workshops and presentations on the topic at teachers' conferences. Although all indicated that they had taught pronunciation, only 75% reported feeling qualified to do so; 67% indicated a desire for more training in this area.

Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements in four broad categories: 1) the nature of a foreign accent, 2) general instructional strategies, 3) descriptions of English sounds, and 4) specific teaching techniques. Although the respondents indicated their agreement using the labels 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree', and 'unsure', for ease of presentation, results are collapsed into three categories: 'agree', 'disagree' and 'unsure'.

Teachers generally agreed with the least controversial statements regarding the nature of a foreign accent (see Table 1). For example, there was strong consensus (93%) that transfer from a learner's first language is a significant cause of foreign accent. Similarly, most teachers (96%) agreed that learning to perceive sounds is important for developing accurate pronunciation.

The responses to the more questionable statements were more varied. A total of 75% agreed that pronunciation errors are due to weak speech muscles, while 41% agreed that a foreign accent

[1] The larger survey investigated the educational background, beliefs and practices of ELTs and Speech Language Pathologists who have an interest in pronunciation instruction.

stems from improper airflow. Most of the remaining teachers indicated that they were unsure about the accuracy of these statements. While very few teachers agreed that a foreign accent is like a communication disorder, nearly half were unsure if this was the case.

Table 1
Percentage agreement with statements regarding the nature of a foreign accent.

Statement	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Unsure*
1. Accents are caused by carrying over the sound systems from students' native languages to their second language.	93	--	7
2. A key to good pronunciation is learning to hear the sound accurately.	96	2	2
3. Errors in pronunciation result from not having speech muscles that are properly toned for English sounds.	75	6	19
4. Improper airflow is a common cause of a foreign accent.	41	15	44
5. A foreign accent is not unlike other communication disorders	3	50	47

Table 2
Percentage agreement with statements regarding general instructional strategies.

Statement	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Unsure*
1. Recording your voice allows you to monitor how you are producing your sounds.	88	2	10
2. Using a mirror to watch your mouth will help train your brain in a new habit.	66	6	28
3. Observing the mouth movements of NSs and trying to imitate them improves pronunciation.	61	10	29
4. Comparative sounds, alliteration, and tongue twisters can be used as drills to help improve your pronunciation.	77	5	17
5. Stretching sounds out will help learners to feel how their lips and tongue are supposed to feel while producing the sound.	62	11	27
6. Exercises will give you more control over your articulators so that you can make the sounds required in North American speech.	50	19	31
7. Some English sounds are difficult or impossible to create until you teach your speech muscles to relax and move in a particular way.	71	9	20

The first five statements in Table 2 relate to general strategies for raising learners' awareness about pronunciation. While most ELTs (71%) agreed with these relatively common practices, a large number (22%) were unsure. The final two statements in the table reflect a belief that exercising speech articulators is necessary in order to improve pronunciation. Again, the majority of teachers (61%) agreed, while many others (26%) were unsure.

Statements in Table 3 reflect ways in which some teachers describe specific English sounds to students. On average, only 14% agreed with these statements, while 35% were unsure. Although some of these statements are clearly difficult to interpret, some are not. For example, the first statement is unquestionably false. To know this, one only needs to attempt to follow this advice. Still, 10% agreed with the statement, while 14% were unsure.

Table 3
Percentage agreement with statements regarding descriptions of English sounds.

Statement	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Unsure*
1. The difference between /p/ and /b/ is that for the first sound you breathe out, while for the second sound, you breathe in.	10	76	14
2. The difference between /ej/ and /ɛ/ is that one is tense and the other is relaxed or neutral.	26	17	57
3. To say the /ae/ sound keep your chin falling down and then bring it up to say an /ɪ/, the combination of these two sounds is the American /ae/ sound.	9	32	59
4. Just open your mouth to say the /a/ sound. It's like you are afraid "ahhhh".	24	40	36
5. The /r/ sound comes from your stomach. Your stomach moves in and you can feel it in your stomach.	14	62	24
6. When you say a word all you need to focus on is hitting and smashing the beginning. So, in this kind of speaking you have no syllables, in this language of accent reduction there are no syllables, in American English there are no syllables.	2	77	21

Regarding specific techniques that are recommended to improve pronunciation (see Table 4), there was also substantial disagreement. The first three statements recommend activities aimed at raising learners' awareness of articulation. Many disagreed with these techniques (31%), and even more (45%) were unsure. While most teachers also disagreed with the statement suggesting that students should practice speaking with marbles in their mouth, a large percentage (34%) were unsure if this was a good technique.

In response to earlier statements, the majority of respondents seemed to share a belief that weak speech muscles are a cause of mispronunciation. Yet, when it comes to what activities are useful for strengthening those muscles, there was greater disagreement. Most either disagreed (33%) or were unsure (44%) about the techniques suggested in the fifth and sixth statements in Table 4.

Table 4
Percentage agreement with statements regarding specific techniques.

Statement	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Unsure*
1. Practicing speaking with a pencil in your mouth will help direct your attention to your articulators.	23	34	43
2. Stick your fingers in your mouth when you say the /r/ sound to help you feel the difference, as well as to keep you from lifting your tongue up.	11	44	45
3. Instruments placed in your mouth that position the tongue correctly can be used to correctly pronounce words with an American Accent.	12	41	47
4. Practice speaking with marbles in your mouth while reading. Take out the marbles and you will speak clearly.	4	62	34
5. Reading aloud in English for 15 to 20 minutes each day can improve your accent by strengthening the muscles of your mouth.	36	31	33
6. Strengthen your tongue by placing it on the roof of your mouth apply suction, and release making a popping sound.	16	29	55

When responses to statements are grouped in terms of those that seem least controversial (Table 1, statements 1-3; and Table 2 statements 1-4), and those that seem somewhat or very controversial (Table 1, statements 4 & 5; Table 2, statements 5-7; and all of Tables 3 & 4), an interesting pattern emerges. For the least controversial statements, teachers agreed in all instances (mean agreement 77%). Conversely, for the more questionable or unclear statements, teachers disagreed in only 29% of cases (mean disagreement 38%), although they were also more likely to be unsure (31%).

When responses made by ELTs who had taken an entire university credit course in teaching pronunciation were isolated from the rest of the sample, there was no evidence that they were better equipped to recognize the more questionable statements. For example, 57% of these more qualified teachers agreed that pronunciation errors result from having speech muscles that are not properly toned, while 36% agreed that improper airflow caused a foreign accent. A total of 14% agreed that learners can strengthen their tongue by placing it on the roof of their mouth applying suction and releasing it to make a popping sound; 14 % also agreed that an English /b/ is produced while breathing in.

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey reveal that ELT teachers who provide pronunciation instruction do not share a cohesive understanding of 1) the source of foreign accent, 2) general instructional strategies, 3) descriptions of English sounds, or 4) appropriate instructional techniques. Admittedly, some of the statements teachers were asked to evaluate are difficult to interpret, and may explain some of the disagreement found. Responses to other statements, however, suggest that many teachers' lack the ability to critically evaluate faulty beliefs and practices.

Agreement regarding the nature of a foreign accent

Most teachers were aware of the role that an L1 plays in pronunciation difficulties. They were also aware of the importance of developing speech perception. What is surprising is that agreement with the first two statements regarding the nature of accent was not unanimous - several teachers were unsure L1 transfer and speech perception played a role in pronunciation. This suggests that some practicing teachers lack even the most basic knowledge about pronunciation.

The fact that the majority of ELTs agreed that inaccurate pronunciation stemmed from having weak speech muscles, and that almost half also agreed that foreign accent is caused by improper airflow, is alarming. It seems unlikely that such knowledge would have been gained from most university courses dedicated to pronunciation teaching, since such topics are not discussed in popular pronunciation teacher training texts (e.g., Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin & Griner, 2010). However, this type of description is found in Speech Language Pathology (SLP) settings, where motor speech disorders are commonplace, and where articulation and breathing exercises are used in treatment (see Duffy, 2005). Only half of the ELTs were certain that a foreign accent was not a speech disorder, providing evidence that they may be influenced by beliefs and practices from the SLP profession. In fact, SLPs are the most dominant source of accent reduction and accent modification materials on the internet (see Thomson, 2013).

Contrary to the assertion that muscle weakness is a cause of foreign accent, many experts agree that the primary influences on foreign accent are age, L1-L2 perceptual similarity, and experience (Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). Furthermore, Piske et al's exhaustive literature review does not even mention muscle weakness or airflow as contributing factors. Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model, the most dominant model in the field of L2 speech learning, argues that improvement in perception will lead to improvement in production. R. I. Thomson (2011) demonstrated that at least for vowels, perceptual training can result in improvement in production, without articulation practice. The centrality of perception does not negate the value of production practice, since developing articulatory control and automaticity for L2 speech gestures is also an essential component of pronunciation. However, it is quite clear that emphasizing production practice over perceptual training is unjustified.

Agreement regarding general instructional strategies

Although most teachers agreed with statements regarding strategies for raising learners' awareness, many were still unsure. Since most of these statements were relatively uncontroversial, it is concerning that teachers lack confidence in agreeing that these practices are likely to help students. ELTs with formal education in the field should have some recognition that raising awareness of any linguistic forms (of which pronunciation is one) is an important precursor to acquisition (Schmidt, 2001).

Agreement regarding the description of English sounds

A small minority of teachers agreed with each of the statements concerning how English sounds are produced. This is an encouraging sign, since even relying on intuition should tell most teachers that the statements are unclear and unlikely to benefit learners. Some are even patently false. On the other hand, the fact that some teachers did agree with these statements, including those that are most absurd (e.g., breathing in to produce /b/), suggests that analytic skills may not be a strong suit of some teachers.

Agreement regarding specific instructional techniques

As with the description of English sounds, most teachers did not agree with the series of statements concerning specific instructional techniques. Again, appeal to intuition ought to rule most of them out as recommendable forms of instruction. For example, sticking their fingers or marbles in their mouths will make it very difficult to articulate the sounds that students are instructed to notice. Such practices are also unhygienic and even dangerous.

IMPLICATIONS

While previous studies have sought to uncover ELTs knowledge of pronunciation instruction and their teaching practices (eg., Breitkrutz et al., 2001; Foote et al., 2011), this study reveals the extent to which ELTs can critically evaluate beliefs and practices used by some in the field. On the one hand, it appears from earlier surveys that many ELTs are capable of remembering specific facts that they have been taught about pronunciation, and are able to apply that knowledge. On the other hand, this survey indicates that many ELTs, including those with specific training in pronunciation teaching, are unable to critically evaluate beliefs and practices they have not previously encountered. This makes them susceptible to following dubious advice found on the Internet and in other materials.

The most obvious implication is that TESOL/TESL programs need to do a better job of providing teachers not only with pedagogical knowledge, but also with critical thinking skills. While there may not be a 'correct' response to some of the statements found in this survey, ELTs should at least be able to critically evaluate such statements. They should not be confidently wrong in agreeing with statements that are clearly inaccurate. In contrast, the degree of uncertainty expressed by many of the survey's respondents can be seen in a positive light. It suggests that some teachers are aware that they lack the knowledge necessary to assess the validity of some beliefs and practices.

Universities that offer specific courses in teaching pronunciation should advise students to avoid materials taken from unpublished sources, unless they have strong evidence for the validity of those materials. English language programs can insure teachers are prepared by providing a library of legitimate, peer-reviewed pronunciation teaching resources, so instructors are not left to search on the Internet.

Finally, while I concur with Derwing (2008) that ELTs have the most appropriate foundation to provide pronunciation instruction, much progress is needed if they are to legitimately lay claim to this area of specialization. As disconcerting as some of their responses are, the ELTs in this survey likely reflect the very best of what the profession has to offer; since they self-selected to participate in the survey, they are more likely to have a particular interest in pronunciation than the ELT population at large.

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