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WHAT'S HOT 2015: INSIGHTS FROM PRONUNCIATION PRACTITIONERS

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What do pronunciation specialists consider to be topics worthy of discussion amongst themselves? As a follow-up to previous studies of "hot topics" on an invitational electronic mailing list (e-list) for pronunciation specialists, this study investigates the issues that international pronunciation specialists elected to discuss during a one-year period. The authors, both members of the e-list, analyzed the e-list discussion strands and threads over the one-year period from August 2014 to August 2015 to determine the four topics that elicited greatest degree of interest, interaction, and in-depth discussion. The hot topics of this year, summarized here, are: 1) techniques for helping Vietnamese speakers learn English pronunciation; 2) stress shifting in British and American English; 3) the respective merits of differing vowel charts; and 4) the value of contrastive analysis for research and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

What do pronunciation specialists consider to be topics worthy of discussion amongst themselves? As a follow-up to previous studies of "hot topics" on an invitational electronic mailing list (e-list) for pronunciation specialists (Brinton & Chan, 2015; Brinton & Goodwin, 2006), this study investigates the issues that international pronunciation specialists elected to discuss during the period August 2014 to August 2015.[1]

To provide a flavor of the type and range of issues discussed on the e-list, we provide the following list of discussion strands, all of which generated healthy interest during the time period in question:

1. When learning an L2 with audio input, is written text a help or a hindrance?
2. To what extent does pronunciation correlate with overall language proficiency?
3. Of what importance is the vowel length distinction?
4. Is it possible for a pronunciation instructor to teach a better pronunciation than his or her own?[2]
5. Can a particular music genre (e.g., jazz) assist in pronunciation learning?

[1] At the time this article was written, the e-list consisted of 182 specialists from 25 countries around the world.

[2] This question referred to whether pronunciation instructors whose first language was colored by a certain dialect could teach the "standard" variant of the language.

Although these topics proved popular based on the number of responses and respondents, we chose not to analyze them due to a mismatch with our selection criteria (see below).

Integral to the invitational e-list discussion is the liberty to discuss issues large and small that pertain to pronunciation research and teaching, and to either participate actively (i.e., by posting questions and responding to queries) or passively (i.e., by "lurking" in an effort to inform oneself about the issues under discussion). As members of the invitational e-list, our goal in this study is to share highlights of those topics that elicited high interest and in-depth discussion over the one-year period. As Brinton and Chan (2015) note, there is great value in the e-list discussion format since "such a forum enables [specialists] to compare, challenge, debate, change and/or confirm ideas" (p. 161). In this article, we share these ideas in the interest of informing and enlightening the larger cohort of those interested in the field of pronunciation teaching and research.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, we were interested in pursuing the following questions:

1. On an invitational e-list discussion amongst English language pronunciation specialists, which topics are of current interest?
2. Of these, which topics elicited the greatest amount of response and in-depth discussion from the pronunciation specialists?

METHODS

In a previous study (Brinton & Chan, 2015) we analyzed discussion strands from the one-year period August 2013 to August 2014, narrowing our selection of topics to analyze based on those that had the greatest number of discussants and the largest number of exchanges. For the current study, our selection criteria included the following:

1. Number of words in the discussion threads
2. Number of exchanges
3. Number of discussants
4. General or global interest*
5. Depth of discussion*

Of these, the last two criteria (marked with an asterisk) are new to this study, and were added post facto after analyzing several strands that we believed, as specialists in the field, did not fit our own criteria (1) as being of sufficient interest[3] or (2) as having adequate depth of discussion to warrant analysis.[4]

[3] As an example, the August 2014-August 2015 exchanges included a rather lengthy discussion of the two possible pronunciations of the place name *Shrewsbury*. We eliminated this from our analysis based on our perception that the topic, while of interest to some, would not be of enough interest for the general reading public.

[4] This was the case with the discussion on the correlation between the attainment of pronunciation skills and general language proficiency. So while the question itself was provocative and queried participants as to any studies that

ANALYSIS

Applying the above criteria, we identified the following four discussion strands:[5]

1. How can we help Vietnamese speakers acquire a "listener friendly" pronunciation?
2. Do speakers of British English and American English shift stress differently?
3. What is your reaction to the proposed new pedagogical vowel chart of English which represents vowel length in concentric rings and vowel quality in radiating spokes?
4. Of what value is the contrastive analysis hypothesis to pronunciation research and/or teaching today?

Once the topics had been identified, we then downloaded the discussants' comments into separate documents to facilitate our task in compiling the data and summarizing the main ideas; we also created a separate document to capture the references shared by the discussants on the four topics (see Appendix).

As shown in Table 1, there is considerable variation in the number of words, discussants, and exchanges among the topics that we chose to analyze. The number of total words of the four strands varies from 5042 (Vietnamese speakers) to 1007 (contrastive analysis hypothesis, while the number of discussants ranges from 13 (Vietnamese speakers and vowel charts) to 8 (contrastive analysis hypothesis). As for number of exchanges, the strands range from 29 on the high end (vowel charts) to 9 on the low end (contrastive analysis hypothesis). A clear outlier among the topics is the contrastive analysis hypothesis, which exhibited the lowest value in terms of number of words, discussants, and exchanges. As noted above, this topic was selected on the basis of the additional criteria of general/global interest and depth of discussion, both of which the exchanges exhibited to a higher degree than alternative topics we could have selected such as that of vowel length distinction or the correlation of pronunciation skills with overall language proficiency.[6] The synthesis of each topic follows.

Table 1

E-list Topics Analyzed According to the Selection Criteria

Topic	# of Words	# of Discussants	# of Exchanges
Vietnamese speakers	5042	13	23
Stress shifting in British and American English	2245	12	25

supported or refuted the correlation between the two, respondents tended to simply state their own opinions on the importance of learners acquiring pronunciation skills and not delve more deeply into the topic or cite related research.

[5] The questions have been slightly rephrased to clarify the author's original intent.

[6] These two topics were clearly of global/general interest. However, they were rejected due to their failure to fulfill the criteria of depth of discussion.

Vowel charts	3401	13	29
The contrastive analysis hypothesis	1007	8	9

Topic 1: Vietnamese Speakers of English

This thread was initiated when a practitioner teaching at university level queried the community on how to help Vietnamese speakers acquire a "listener friendly" pronunciation. The discussant, who hadn't worked with many Vietnamese speakers, referred to a "prevailing wisdom" of focusing on segmentals and word stress as well as addressing the airstream mechanism and using songs. Although one respondent opined that most of the Vietnamese speakers' segmental problems are phonotactically or syllabically based and downplayed prosody as secondary, several discussants with considerable experience teaching Vietnamese learners of English emphasized other aspects as being of equal or greater importance. Our analysis revealed three general categories of commentary: preparatory elements, perceptual elements, and productive elements. For each category, we summarize the recommendations from the e-list participants.

Preparatory Elements

1. Focus on breathing and breath control, and on explosion rather than implosion. Time spent on the airstream mechanism is particularly valuable, as the implosive nature of Vietnamese is in direct contrast to the explosive nature of English.
2. Recognize and address the glottal stop, a common phonemic feature of Vietnamese, which is embedded in two of its six tones. The glottal stop interferes with English pronunciation, particularly in the enunciation of syllable-final consonants as well as with the connected speech features of English. This tendency for glottal stop insertion in English distracts listeners from the message. Understanding and gaining awareness of the occurrence of glottal stops is fundamental to helping learners avoid them.

Perceptual Elements

3. Focus on auditory perception before oral production. Discussion ensued about how to get students to *hear* the correct pronunciation, no matter whether segmental sounds or pitch patterns. Strategies include telling listeners what to listen for, modeling the target pronunciation feature, getting learners' own speaking output to converge on the target, and forming a closed-circuit auditory feedback loop.
4. Lead students to *hear* the "correct" pronunciation by *producing* the target pronunciation through a variety of means, such as singing, sagittal images of the articulators, verbal description, modeling.
5. Encourage students to hear English without looking at the written text to focus their attention on the actual sounds of the language. Sound-symbol correspondence is extremely strong in Vietnamese and therefore helpful, but considerably weaker in English and often misleading. Considering English an *ear* language as opposed to Vietnamese as an *eye* language may aid learners in framing their listening.
6. Have students sing as a means of aiding auditory perception. (See expansion below.)

Productive Elements

7. Tackle consonants, particularly finals (e.g., /l/-/w/ *feel–few*, /l/-/n/ *fall–fawn*, /t/-/s/ *pat–pass*) along with the deletion of consonants and insertion of glottal stops, as in /kɔʔ ən ɪfɛʔ/ for "cause and effect". The omission or inaccurate articulation of consonant clusters–which do not exist in spoken Vietnamese–is particularly problematic in English and worthy of attention.
8. Focus on English word stress, phrase stress, and pitch patterns.
9. Avoid techniques that may backfire with learners. For example, telling a student to simply "Repeat after me" or "Say it the way I say it" may result in the student replying, "But I *am* saying it that way," illustrating an inability on the part of the student to perceive the intended target.
10. Refrain from pointing out the specific shortcomings of a learner's speech, as this may lead to hyper-correction; instead focus on the learners' hearing the "correct" pronunciation.[7]

The Use of Singing to Improve Learners' Pronunciation

Overlapping the three general categories and woven throughout this thread was a discussion of the efficacy of singing to improve pronunciation.[8] Songs can enable learners to gain a feel for English, create a motor memory, and enhance prosodic elements of spoken language. The discussant with a large proportion of Vietnamese learners of English shared a link to student recordings of a song used in teaching stress, rhythm, linking, and selected segmentals.[9] Along with an explanation of the task, she also provided a brief commentary on 10 Vietnamese students' renditions of the song, making observations on their insertion of glottal stops and nasals, their overall stress, rhythm, intonation, articulation of consonants, and linking to connect words in phrases. The initiator of this thread recounted how the intelligibility of one Vietnamese speaker improved after she had him sing part of a song and then speak the lyrics, focusing on the airstream mechanism. She closed with an expression of appreciation for the helpful discussion on her initial posting.

Topic 2: Stress Shifting in British and American English

British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) often stress the same printed word differently. Are there any patterns or trends? This thread began when a North American discussant who had been watching a historical documentary on the ancient Germanic tribes observed that the British female narrator of the series repeatedly placed stress on the second

[7] As previously mentioned, relying on the written form was noted as a deterrent, as English orthography can confuse rather than promote proper pronunciation.

[8] Circling back to an earlier comment that native speakers of a tone language have a higher incidence of perfect/relative pitch–from the perfect vs. relative pitch "hot topic" from last year's study (Chan & Brinton 2015)–the teachers of English to Vietnamese speakers in this group stated that, in their experience, speakers of Vietnamese, a tone language, do not have better L2 prosody or better comprehensibility than speakers of non-tonal languages.

[9] See http://www.voxopop.com/topic/34a6866f-7d31-4126-a114-07e2117f1f19.

syllable of the word *priestess*: **pries`TESS**, yet she did not stress all words with this suffix on the final syllable; curious, he posted this for discussion.

Priestess-Princess

1. ***Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*** (Wells, 2008) gives stress on the second syllable of *priestess* as the preferred pronunciation for BrE (but not for AmE). Both this source and the ***English Pronouncing Dictionary*** (Jones, 2011) show stress on the suffix as the preferred pronunciation in BrE, but not for AmE.[10]
2. Younger people have a greater tendency than older people to stress the first syllable, suggesting that this is an ongoing sound change; still, 60% in a 1998 poll preferred **prin`CESS** over **`PRIN-cess**. Thus, the argument continued, if the trends of *princess* and *priestess* are similar, the first syllable of both will eventually predominate in Britain, representing a generational shift. (BrE practitioner in Southeast Asia)
3. The stress on *princess* depends on context: She's a **prin`CESS**, but when followed by a stressed word, such as a name, the stress shifts to the first syllable: **`PRIN-cess Di-AN-a**. (BrE practitioner in Britain)

French-English influences

4. Britons tend to stress words that look French on the last syllable while AmE tends to shift the stress forward. Examples (BrE/AmE): **em-plo`YEE/em`PLOY-ee, lem-on`ADE/ `LEM-on-ade, prin`CESS/`PRIN-cess. (**BrE practitioner in France)
5. BrE speakers may change more French words to conform to English stress than AmE speakers do. Examples: **`GARage/ga`RAGE, `MASsage/mas`SAGE.** (AmE practitioner in the US)
6. Some borrowed vocabulary items from French are given different stress patterns in BrE and AmE. This may reveal more about these two varieties of English than it does about French, which gives more or less equal stress to each syllable. (BrE practitioner in Britain)
7. As French words become Anglicized, the stress moves to the first syllable.
   Example Set A: **`VIL-lage, `MARriage, `CAR-riage,** and **`VOY-age** all now have initial stress (except in **Bon vo`YAGE**, a set phrase).
   Example Set B: **col`LAGE** and **mas`SAGE** still have final stress.
   Example Set C: the stress patterns in **gar`AGE/`GARage** are variable.
   One would predict that, over time, all of these nouns will have initial stress. An additional factor and exception to this prediction: a long vowel or otherwise "heavy" syllable may prevail.
   Example Set D: **mas`SAGE, u`NIQUE**, which have a long vowel in the second syllable, and **pictur`ESQUE**, which ends in /sk/, a consonant cluster, retain final syllable stress. (BrE practitioner in Southeast Asia)

[10] *Dictionary.com* (©2016 Dictionary.com LLC) and *Merriam-Webster.com* (©2015 Merriam-Webster, Inc.) give only one pronunciation with the stress on the root: **`PRIES-tess**.

Noun/Verb distinctions

A third category of stress shifts discussed in this thread revolves around nouns and verbs that have the same spelling, e.g., *permit*.

8. *Permit*: The LPD shows BrE **PER-mit** for the noun and **per`MIT** for the verb; the same is true for AmE, but it also shows that for some Americans **per`MIT** is also used for the noun.
9. Language change has occurred over the centuries, and *permit* is following a trend affecting a wide range of other words.[11] Aitchison (2013) states that in 1570 a dictionary listed just three words for which the stress on the noun had shifted to the first syllable, while the verb retained stress on the second syllable: **`REB-el/re`BEL**, **`REC-ord/re`CORD**, and **`OUT-law/out`LAW**. By 1582, a further five items were added, and by 1932, the number was 150. Aitchison gives *recess* as an example of a noun that has recently undergone this stress shift for nearly everyone in America but not everyone in Britain.
10. *Address*: BrE does not generally have a noun/verb distinction; both are pronounced **ad`DRESS**. On the other hand, AmE prefers **`AD-dress** for the noun and **ad`DRESS** for the verb.
11. *Research* is another word undergoing a change. AmE and Estuary English (a variety of English widely spoken in Southeast England), both tend to follow this noun/verb distinction: **`RE-search/re`SEARCH**. Estuary English is more porous of AmE pronunciation influences than the more standard type of BrE speech.

Concluding this thread, several participants predicted that with AmE leading the way, other varieties will follow this trend of shifting stress from the final to the initial syllable to create a distinction between noun and verb pairs.

Topic 3: Vowel Charts

This exchange originated with a query from a pronunciation specialist proposing and seeking feedback on a new vowel sound chart. Still in its prototype version, as described by its originator the chart sought to "represent vowel length in concentric rings and vowel quality in radiating spokes" (see Figure 1).

Reactions and suggestions to the chart varied, with some participants providing concrete feedback, some suggesting references to consult, others providing a global assessment (either positive or negative), and yet others questioning the rationale behind the new chart:

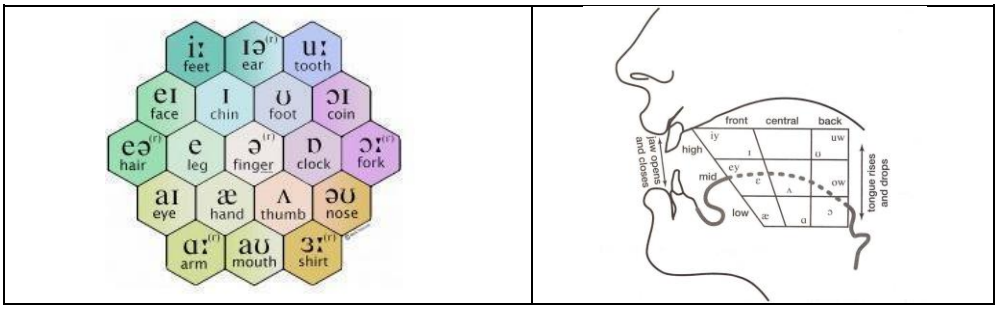
1. "My intro linguistics students would have found it wildly confusing."

[11] Stockwell and Minkova (2001) refer to this as a systemic exception to the general tendency in English for two-syllable words to be stressed on the first syllable. They note over 130 pairs of words in English which have different stress patterns depending on whether they are functioning as nouns or verbs (with additional instances of adjectives which have the same stress pattern as the corresponding noun). Compare: pre`SENT (verb), `PREsent (noun), `PREsent (adjective).

2. Revise the chart in accordance with the 8th edition of *Gimson's Pronunciation of English* (Cruttenden, 2014) to eliminate vowels (e.g., /æ/) which are disappearing from General British. Also, it would need to be radically revised for American English.
3. What is gained by moving away from the conventional mouth formation related (MFR) chart (see Figure 1), which signals the general locations in the mouth where sound formation begins?
4. The assignment of color in the chart appears random. Why use color? It is not useful for those who are color blind and potentially confusing for those who have synesthesia.[12]
5. Why is /ɛ/ not used to represent the vowel in *leg*? The vowel at 8 o'clock should read *eye*, not *ye*. The diphthong in *tourist* is missing. Also absent from the chart is the movement associated with diphthongs.
6. It's confusing to have so many vowels represented with /r/. Why not use postvocalic /n/ or some other coda?

In response to the suggestions, the originator of the chart responded as follows:

1. To avoid confusion, students could be introduced to the chart on a need-to-know basis.
2. The chart is meant to be compatible with British learner dictionaries; hence /æ/ is retained and /e/ is used in place of /ɛ/. Admittedly, it would require substantial revision of the chart for it to represent American English.
3. The MFR chart does *not* capture the six long/short vowel pairs. The proposed chart *does*; in addition to vowel length, it captures the idea of vowel quality.
4. Currently, I am just "experimenting" with the color aspects of the chart. It could potentially be used to reinforce the patterning of the chart.
5. Postvocalic /r/ is crucial in British English long vowels such as *shirt* and *hair*; other codas are not possible.
6. The diphthong in *tourist* was intentionally omitted as it has coalesced in General British with the vowel in *fork*.
7. The proposed vowel sound chart allows for regional variability. This is an advantage over the MFR chart, which situates the vowel in a fixed location and thereby implies precision of articulation.



[12] In fact, a side discussion about the condition of *synesthesia* (the involuntary co-occurrence of a second sensory perception in conjunction with a first; for example, hearing a sound and visualizing an associated color) occurred as a result of one of the discussants describing his personal experiences with this condition. We've opted not to synthesize that portion of the discussion, in which several participants cited references on synesthesia.

Figure 1. A comparison of the proposed vowel sound chart and the MFR vowel chart

In addition to the suggestions and responses summarized above, the strand contained additional discussion of Gattegno's original sound color chart (1985) and recently revised versions of his chart (Teaching the Silent Way, n.d.), Underhill's (n.d.) interactive phonemic chart, and Taylor and Thompson's color vowel chart (English Language Training Solutions, n.d.), with various discussants extolling the merits or describing the challenges of using each.

Topic 4: The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The e-list posting which initiated this discussion strand posed the question of whether the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) (Lado, 1957)[13] has current value as a research framework or if, instead, it "may be somewhat helpful for a teacher but is simply too inexact for research." By way of general comments, discussants noted that it is important to keep in mind the distinction between the "weak" and "strong" versions of CAH (Wardaugh, 1970)[14] and whether the model is being applied to production or perception (the original model was intended to describe perceptual processes).

Comments arguing for the value of the CAH in pronunciation teaching and research included the following:

1. Contrastive analysis is needed and valuable, if underestimated.
2. It may not explain all errors (e.g., those due to the developmental processes of interlanguage), but to a large extent it reliably predicts features of a foreign accent.
3. Flege's speech learning model (SLM) (Flege, 1995)[15] is more credible than the CAH because it adds a third (i.e., "similar") category to the binary "same" vs. "different" categories of the CAH; however, it relies on experimental verification of the same/similar/different categories and is therefore more demanding than CA.
4. CA is a useful way of looking at the issue of transfer. There are many useful works written that apply CA cross linguistically, including work on prosody (e.g., Hirst & Di Cristo, 1998).

[13] The CAH claims that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is interference from the first language system with the second language system (Lado, 1957). As an example, German final stop consonants are devoiced; hence the CAH would claim that German speakers learning English would have difficulty voicing final stop consonants.

[14] In his influential 1970 article, Wardaugh distinguishes between a "strong" version of CAH, applied to predict areas of learner difficulty in the L2 and a "weak" version wherein CA is seen to have explanatory power (i.e., it can be applied after the fact to help explain learner difficulties) but lacks predictive power.

[15] Flege's SLM proposes that the more distant a second language sound (phonetic segment) is from the closest first language speech sound, the more learnable the second language sound will be.

In addition to Flege's SLM, several other hypotheses were proposed as alternatives to the CAH. These included: Eckman's (1977) markedness differential hypothesis;[16] Best's (1994) perceptual assimilation model; Kuhl & Iverson's (1995) perceptual magnet effect; and MacWhinney's (2008) unified model.[17] All of the above models (including the SLM), it was noted, require a satisfactory operationalization of what it means for sounds in two languages to be the same, similar, or different.

The consensus of this discussion strand is best summarized by the following comment from an e-list participant who had not been otherwise active in this discussion strand: "There was a time when CAH was considered 'politically incorrect,' but a contrastive study of the phonologies of different languages yields very valuable information for the linguist and the teacher. I was not particularly interested in absolute accuracy of FL pronunciation, but in intelligibility, and what interferes with intelligible pronunciation/perception. CA (if not CAH) provides invaluable information."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In determining the "hot" topics discussed in this article, we have taken into account not only the quantity of responses (i.e., number of discussants and exchanges) but also the quality (i.e., general or global interest and depth of discussion). Thus, while not all the most voluminous in the discussion thread, the four topics we chose as having the greatest global interest, depth of discussion, and/or relationship to teaching pronunciation in this one-year period are Vietnamese speakers, British English and American English stress patterns, vowel charts for learners, and contrastive analysis.

E-list participation by pronunciation specialists can yield edifying discussions. For one, such a discussion forum allows practitioners to post queries and receive feedback from a worldwide network of members with a variety of teaching environments and experience researching different aspects of pronunciation. The forum also allows for open discussion among professionals, providing a relatively safe place to propose a new or different concept or interpretation and to critique each other's ideas. In addition, it brings heretofore unheard of ideas to some, while confirming and reassuring familiar ideas to others. As in our previous work, this article demonstrates the value of communication amongst practitioners on the chosen e-list.

[16] The markedness differential hypothesis represents Eckman's revision of the CAH. He proposes that those aspects of the second language that are more marked (less dominant or regular) than the first language will be the most difficult for learners to acquire (i.e., with the degree of difficulty depending on the degree of markedness). On the other hand, those aspects which are different but not marked will be easier to acquire. As an example, the syllable structure consonant + vowel (CV) is the most common (or unmarked) universally. Adding a consonant (e.g., CVC) or consonants (e.g., CVCCC) adds a degree of markedness and hence difficulty to the syllable structure for learners from a CV language. Hence English *bee* (CV) is unmarked; however, the plural form *bees* (CVC) is marked. In increasing degrees of markedness (and therefore difficulty) we would predict that the more marked forms *beast* (CVCC) and *beasts* (CVCCC) would be even more difficult for a learner from a CV language to pronounce.

[17] For an explanation of the perceptual assimilation model, the perceptual magnet effect; and the unified model, readers are referred to the original sources as an explanation of these theories is beyond the scope of this paper.

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APPENDIX

Sources Provided by E-list Participants

Vietnamese Speakers

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