IN OTHER PEOPLE'S WORDS: LANGUAGE LEARNERS' IMITATION OF PROFESSIONAL SPEECH

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This paper explores international graduate student language learners' (LLs) (N=17) enjoyment and perceptions of improvement when using voiceovers of TED Talks as a pronunciation-improvement tool in an academic communications course through a survey (see *Appendix A*). One major finding is that the majority of the LLs contrasted themselves to native speakers and make statements of dissatisfaction with their oral proficiency or pronunciation even though the majority of LLs enjoyed the activity and felt they had improved their pronunciation. A discussion of how these findings of dissatisfaction fit into LLs "noticing the gap" (Schmidt, 1990) or raising awareness of their pronunciation needs follows. Implications for LLs' identities are also explored.

INTRODUCTION

Voiceovers have been discussed as an effective and enjoyable teaching tool for language learners (Henrichsen, PSLLT 2014), and studies in shadowing (repetition of listening to model speech) also suggest imitative speech is an effective comprehension and retention tool in L2 learning (de Guerrero and Commander, 2013). International teaching assistants (ITAs) are often asked to record and imitate the speech of native-English speakers as a pronunciation exercise (Goodwin, 2007), and imitation and repetition are often proposed in teacher training materials (Harmer, 2012). However, little research has been conducted on how language learners (LLs) take up imitation activities such as these and internalize them in terms of their pronunciation development and identity. The purpose of this study, which consisted of a survey and an interview of seventeen students who participated in a TED Talk (TT) voiceover exercise in two academic communications courses, stems from the practice of advising language students to imitate native speakers of the target language to become more orally proficient speakers, particularly in terms of L2 pronunciation. This study asks the following questions:

1. How do LLs perceive imitation activities, in particular the specific TT voiceover imitation activity?

2. Do LLs enjoy the voiceover activity, in particular do they perceive this activity as valuable, specifically in improving pronunciation skills?

3. If LLs perceive self-improvement, how do LLs utilize the learning and practice from this exercise to continue pronunciation improvement—if they do?

Participants

The participants in this study were adult learners in a support program for graduate students who have been accepted and matriculated into a Southeastern U.S. university. The learners are filtered into oral classes through one of the two different assessments: an in-house interview or the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) for those planning to be International Teaching Assistants. The majority of the LLs were in science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) or in accounting/commerce. In many cases, the students opt to take the course, particularly in the summer. In some cases, however, the students are recommended, and in some cases required by their departments, to continue language support classes to work on proficiency for one of the following reasons: 1. Successful participation in content classrooms, 2. Continued work toward the minimum score of 55 on the SPEAK test or completion of an ESL advanced academic communication course to be an ITA (the 5th and final level of oral communications class offered in the ESL program), 3. Completion of a personal goal, such as presenting at professional conferences. On average, the LLs are over twenty two years of age and have studied English for over ten years, are advanced learners of English, and have scores well above the minimum of 90 composite on the ibt TOEFL which is the recommended minimum for acceptance into most university departments. Almost all of the students in these courses test above the recommended score for beginning level of oral academic communication.

METHODS

Henrichsen (PSLLT, 2014) reported the practice of video voiceovers "to extend the benefits of researched pronunciation practice and tracking" and found that his students enjoyed voicing over animated films. Initially, this research was developed to pilot the introduction of the voice-over activity and help instructors determine whether they desired to continue the voice-over activity as part of the oral academic course curriculum. In order to answer the above research questions concerning enjoyment of the voiceover exercise as well as if the participants perceive it as an activity that facilitates pronunciation improvement, graduate students in two ESL oral academic communications courses were recruited to be participants in this study.

The oral academic communications classes are skills classes; however, within this class, students focus on pronunciation and vocabulary structures as needed. In doing so, the students are asked to discuss what they think makes *comprehensible* and *intelligible* speech and communication and thusly, *comprehensible* and *intelligible* pronunciation, prior to their first presentations. The terms *comprehensible* and *intelligible* (Munro & Derwing, 1995) are specifically used with the students in the first two weeks of class, in the assignment sheet, as well as on the feedback sheets they receive from their introductory presentations. In defining comprehensibility with the students, the instructors introduce elements and examples found to be related to comprehensibility such as effective thought groups including focus within them, linking, word stress, segments, intonation and rhythm, speed, and contrastive stress. In the first presentation, the students are asked to bring a transcript of their introductions to specifically discuss their comprehensibility and the terms that comprise it as discussed in class, and this is noted in both the activity's description on the syllabus, the assignment description listed in the collaborative site, and on the rubric or feedback sheet.   All of these terms are defined for the participants and later the participants are asked to apply these definitions to the final presentation, particularly in marking transcripts for effective thought groups, focus, stress—both within words and contrastively in the discourse,

linking and rhythm as well as reductions, segments they have difficulty with and want to practice, and intonation.

While the research that the terms "comprehensibility" and "intelligibility" originate (Munro & Derwing, 1995) is not shared with the LLs, these terms are used and discussed in the following ways, when the LLs review their transcribed introductions with partners (language consultants who volunteer in the ESL classes): "How well do your group members understand you? How hard do your group members have to work in order to understand you?" "Are you monitoring your group members' faces for understanding?" "What body language tells you your group members are comprehending you?" The students also often note that comprehension is determined by many factors that are non-linguistic, such as eye contact and body language. These elements are also discussed as affecting communication competence in the course and especially in presentations.

The academic communications course implemented a TED-talk voiceover as part of the curriculum in 2014-15. In two academic oral ESL courses, graduate student LLs were asked to take part in short (less than 3 minutes) TT "voiceovers" as part of the curriculum of these pass or fail classes. The language learners (LLs) self-selected a talk and focused on practicing their TT during the last ten weeks of the semester. All of the students, with the exception of one, chose TTs with Native-English speakers as their models. Each student sent the instructor of the course an initial MP3 of their reading of the TT between the second and third week of the course, approximately ten weeks prior to presentation, so that the instructor could compare the initial recording to the final presentation which occurred after LLs had practiced inside and outside of the course. Students were surveyed (see *Appendix A*), and follow-up interviews were conducted with those students who were successfully recruited for the research. Since the students in this program are graduate students matriculated into departments, and many of these students have the expectation of eventually serving as ITAs, professional speeches were utilized as the voice-over material. Since TTs have a variety of speakers, topics, transcripts, and closed-caption ability, but are often performed by professionals, particularly academics who are professionals in their field, the TTs were deemed an appropriate fit for voice-over materials for this particular population, a population with a majority that will most likely find itself giving academic lectures of some sort. Language consultants (native-speaking volunteers who work in the oral classes) often participate in peer or pair work within classes from week two to twelve. The LLs worked with language consultants the last few minutes of every class to discuss unknown words, stress patterns, meanings, stress, focus, thought groups, linking, and intonation of certain discourse units. LLs were asked to bring their transcripts of their chosen TT to their oral academic course to practice if time permitted at the end of every class. The LLs were also recommended to practice outside of class and were taught about shadowing. LLs participated in class discussions of different methods for shadowing with various recording tools such as audacity, multi-track song recorder (MTSR), or merely using the TED Talk and a hand-held recorder. The LLs were asked to practice shadowing, but shadowing was not mandated as the sole method of practice, as I was interested in how the LLs would choose to practice or review the TT.

The LLs were video recorded while performing their voiceovers in the last week of classes. All students were asked to view their presentations which were made available through the course site. LLs were asked to then fill out a survey and take part in an exit interview concerning the total voiceover activity.

Seventeen of the eighteen student LLs participated in the activity, filled out surveys, including a scalar item concerning self-perception of enjoyment and improvement of the activity. Finally, LLs underwent exit interviews that were a follow-up to the information they provided in the surveys about the activity (see *Appendix A*). Interviews and surveys were then partially transcribed and coded for possible shared themes or phenomena (Crotty, 2003) in which the LLs constructed how they understood and enjoyed the activity. They were also asked specifically about how they perceived the activity's results, particularly in terms of effect for pronunciation.

RESULTS

The following results from this research will be discussed: 1. The overall perception of enjoyment versus improvement from all LLs; 2. Qualitative data from surveys and interviews that suggest the LLs compare themselves to the TED speakers; and 3. Statements in the qualitative data from the LLs that suggest some of them did not understand elements making up the term *pronunciation.*

The majority of learners enjoyed the activity; only one LL rated the activity a 1—the lowest ranking for enjoyment of this activity. Eleven LLs enjoyed the activity even more than they thought they had improved their pronunciation, and four of the LLs ranked enjoyment and improvement equally. The learners all perceived they had improved, even if incrementally, even the LL (KNW in *Figure 1*) who rated the least enjoyment or a 1 on the rating scale of 1-5 rated his improvement as a 3 out of the rating scale 1-5, which suggests that while he did not necessarily enjoy the activity, he perceived that it helped him improve his pronunciation (see *Figure 1*).
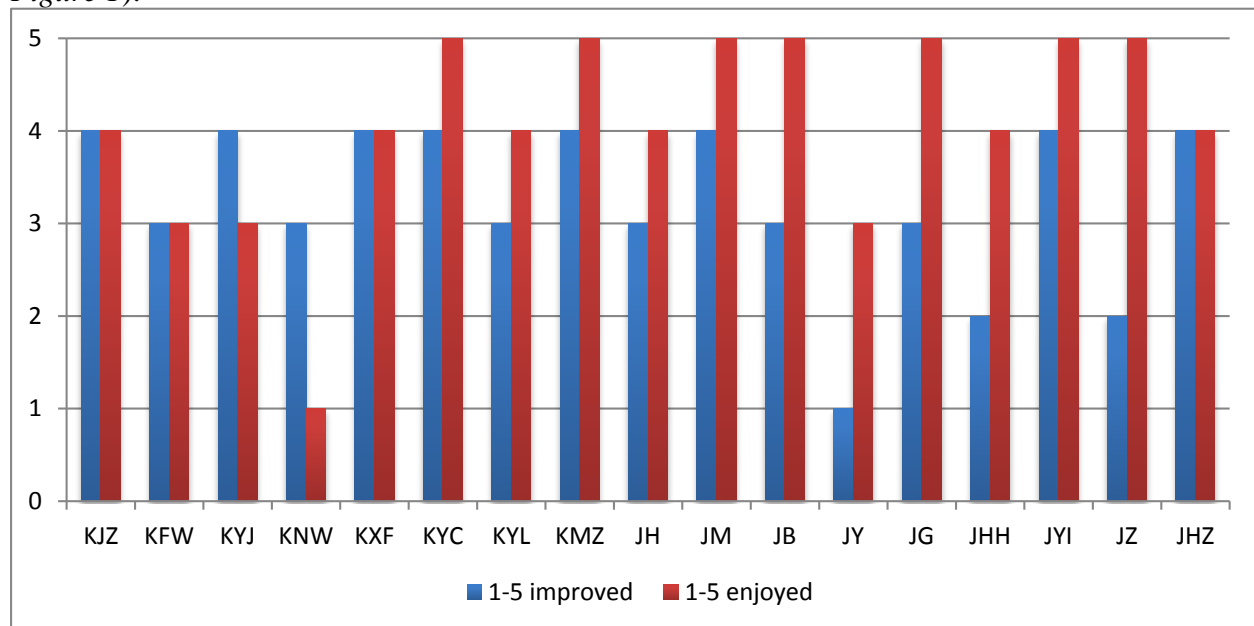

Figure 1. Participants perceived improvement vs. enjoyment.

Although participants' marking of the scalar items suggests they perceived they had improved their pronunciation, they also made statements that reflected conflicting feelings revealed in the discourse when they were asked to review their presentations. Especially noteworthy is that they

did not concentrate solely on their own performance, but their performance in comparison to the professional speaker. The LLs' discourse is full of contradictory statements in which the LLs feel they have improved on the one hand, but are still dissatisfied with their proficiency on the other hand. For example, one student wrote in the survey "though I felt helped by practicing the speech, I realized it is still a long way to go to be a proficient English speaker to address a speech precisely" (KYL, 2015 see *Appendix B*) Another LL reflected the following: "My voice is dim, and I used to think that [when] I would do the presentation, I would try to sound really clear, after, I see the videos, I feel a little disappointed [in] myself (JB, 2015 see *Appendix B*)." The previous types of discourse display that the LLs may be comparing themselves to the professional speakers and perceiving themselves as less proficient through that comparison. In other words, much of the LLs' discourse does not celebrate the perceived gains they have made from their first recording to their final presentation, as noted in the survey results and presented in table 1, but, instead, the discourse focuses on what they perceive defective in comparison to the native-speaking professional speakers.

A final result of this research is that not all of the LLs may understand the term *pronunciation* and what it entails even though this term is used in the course and course objectives. In discussing this term, *comprehensibility* and *intelligibility* are targeted as goals for the course. Even though the students discuss and practice elements that comprise pronunciation such as thought groups, intonation (rising, falling, and level), stress within words, contrastive stress, focus within thought groups, rhythm, linking, reduction, speed, and segments (called individual sounds in the course), they still may view their pronunciation as limited to individual sounds as evidenced by LLs' statements in the interview or survey. For example, LLs stated they perceived they had made improvements in "intonation," "stress in words," "pitch," "volume," "rhythm" and "speed," but that they did not feel they had improved *pronunciation*, even though the majority of the students (over 80%) marked they had improved their pronunciation 3-4 on the scale. No one marked the scale as a 5 (the highest rating) in terms of their improvement on pronunciation. The discourse concerning pronunciation of the LLs needs to be further unpacked, as it is unclear whether LLs do not understand that these elements (rhythm, intonation, stress, etc.…) are part and parcel of pronunciation or if the LLs perceive they are improving in specific elements of pronunciation but not overall or holistically. Contrastively, LLs might understand these terms as comprising pronunciation, but they may have felt that they did not improve enough in all of these elements, even when they marked themselves as improving their pronunciation on the survey scale.

CONCLUSION

The following items become evident from this research. First, students may not understand what makes up the term *pronunciation,* even though the terms *comprehensible* and *intelligible* were utilized in the discussion of pronunciation prior to their first presentation, and terms such as thought groups, focal stress in thought groups, stress within words, contrastive stress, individual sounds (segments), intonation, linking, speed, rhythm, and reduction were introduced and practiced in relation to the TTs. The topics in the course, such as use of stress in key words and contrastive stress or understanding of linking in discourse groups to help listeners chunk the information are utilized to improve comprehensibility of the LLs, but it is unclear if the LLs understand these are connected to pronunciation as well, or if the LL still merely perceives

pronunciation as individual sounds or segments. A future survey will need to be developed to understand the LLs' perceptions of this term better.

Secondly, teachers of oral English may need to consider using more non-native speaking models in order to motivate LLs and provide guides for effective comprehensibility, not perfect pronunciation. The LLs self-selected their TTs, and many stated they selected for field, topic, or length, but utilizing non-native models for discussion prior to the activity might serve as "aspirational models" (Murphy, 2014, p. 259) for LLs. Non-native speaking models may assist LLs in further understanding comprehensible pronunciation and also help them to not have unrealistic expectations. However, this recommendation may be connected to LLs' interpretation of the term *pronunciation* and *comprehensibility*. LLs may not understand the term *pronunciation,* and the term may need to be unpacked even more, particularly as many LLs stated they improved intonation, speed, rhythm, and stress, but not pronunciation. However, the misunderstanding of the term also may be an effect of practicing various features of pronunciation on different days (i.e. rhythm for thought groups during week four, contrastive stress on week five, etc.). After all, pronunciation is a complex term with many features comprising it. While a majority of the LLs enjoyed the activity and perceive that the practice, particularly shadowing, helped them to improve intonation, stress, pitch, volume, speed, and rhythm, the LLs were also discouraged or dissatisfied with their outcomes, which may be a product of comparing themselves to native-speakers as the model—a major factor to consider in terms of language-learning identity.

Finally, teachers may need to continually revisit the growth in comprehensibility of students for continued motivation and development of proficient-speaker identity. While LLs are becoming consciously aware of gaps between their performance of the TT and the professional speaker's, teachers need to acknowledge that awareness to motivate as well as provide opportunities to meet with LLs' learners goals.

In many ways, the activity suggests identity-shifts in terms of language use for the LLs in helping to notice gaps between their production and the models they chose, but for these advanced students, noticing the gap (Schmidt, 1990) is not enough, as they are also aware that production or shifting the production to be more comprehensible is their ultimate goal. This activity makes LLs more aware of the difficulty of advancing from noticing (awareness) to producing (application). While the activity raises awareness, it may be identity-impeding for LLs in perceiving themselves as proficient speakers of English. What may be more important in getting the students to "notice the gaps" or raise awareness towards comprehensibility is to also raise their awareness in their shift in becoming more comprehensible, which may not necessarily entail native-like production, but more comprehensible production. This may be achieved in two ways. First, choosing comprehensible non-native models or urging the LLs to do so may mitigate the disappointment the LLs seem to be feeling in comparing and contrasting their own production to a native-speaker model. Secondly, using Native-speaking models, but concentrating on growth in comprehensibility for the LL, not just the final product of the presentation may be more beneficial at facilitating LLs in building identities in which they see themselves as gaining comprehensibility, not falling short of the model. Using both of these solutions may also help in facilitating the LLs' understanding comprehensibility but also of language diversity, particularly a growing and ever-expanding global English or as J. M. Murphy argues in his 2014 research, *Intelligible, comprehensible, non-native models in ESL/EFL*

pronunciation teaching, "question[ing] the hegemony of native English speaker (NES) models…."(p. 258).

Future Directions

This exploratory pilot study has raised further questions. It was proposed to merely answer a question about enjoyment and perceived improvement for LLs to decide whether to continue an activity introduced into the program curriculum. However, the following questions arose: Is this a comprehensibility exercise or an identity exercise, or both? I originally chose it as a pronunciation exercise to work on overall comprehensibility. However, after examining the surveys and the interviews, it raises the question of when language teachers ask students to imitate native speakers, are they contradicting the current wave of research that finds *intelligibility* and *comprehensibility* can change without a shift in *accent* (Munro & Derwing, 1995)? Are instructors establishing an unobtainable model if students utilize the native speaker for imitation activities, and how is this type of activity identity shifting, impeding, or both in helping students to perceive themselves as proficient speakers?

In her Association for Applied Linguistics presentation, Ortega (2010) discusses the bilingual turn in SLA, noting that too often "SLA discourses construct L2 learning and learners as defined by impossibility and failure, bounded by deficiency and disadvantage" (slide 63). The discourse of the LLs in this research reflects an internalization of the monolingual bias Ortega discusses, as the LLs' discourse in this research suggests feelings of inauthenticity or inadequacy when comparing themselves to NSs and it also questions the notion of Native-English Speaking (NES) models (Murphy, 2014). While this research sought to test perceptions of an activity, it became clear that the LLs, while enjoying the activity, are navigating language-learning identities, and that this activity induced the LLs to reflect upon that navigation.

More work needs to be conducted here, particularly on whether the activity facilitated the LLs in improving their comprehensibility, which is another study for the future to see if the LLs' perceptions of improvement match both expert and naïve raters' perceptions of improvement. Work on unpacking LLs' understanding of the term *pronunciation* is also paramount in order to help LLs understand what facilitates or impedes their comprehensibility, and particularly understanding learners' goals and understandings of pronunciation will be important for this type of activity's use. Finally, perhaps in conjunction with unpacking the term *pronunciation* for LLs, a further need for the future is in how best to assist LLs' in their development of identities as autonomous, comprehensible, and proficient speakers, so they do not just notice the gaps, but fill them.

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Appendix A

Survey questions for research project: *In Other People's Words: Nonnative-Speakers' Imitation of Professional Speech. If you need extra space, please feel free to write on the back.*

1. Which TED talk did you choose?
2. Why did you choose this particular TED talk?
3. Did you listen to the practice script? If you answer no, skip to question #9.
4. If the answer to #3 is "yes," how many times did you listen to the practice script?
5. If you answered "yes" to # 3, did you practice the TED talk with the video? How many times or for how long?
6. If you practiced the activity, how did you practice? What did you pay attention to as you practiced?
7. If you practiced the activity, did you mute the speaker or did you follow right after the speaker?
   Describe your method of practice.
8. If you practiced the activity, how did you feel as you voiced over your speaker?
9. If you did not practice the activity, how did you feel as you performed the talk for the class?
10. Do you feel you improved your pronunciation from the practice script to the final presentation? If so, how?
11. If you answered "yes" to #8, please circle on the scale below how much you feel you improved with 1 being "no improvement" to 5 being the "greatest improvement:"
    1   2   3   4   5
    No Improvement   Greatest Improvement
12. What are your thoughts about the activity? Would you like to take part in a similar activity again? Why or why not?
13. Rate your experience with this activity in terms of enjoyment with 1 being "did not enjoy at all" and 5 being "enjoyed a great deal."
    1   2   3   4   5
    Did not enjoy at all   Enjoyed a great deal
14. Did you review your voice-over final TED presentation provided for you in Kultura in our collab site? If so, how many times?
15. If you did review your presentation, how did you feel as you watched your voice coming from the TED speaker? What adjectives would you use to describe how you felt as you watched and listened to your voice over?
16. If you did not review your presentation, why not?
17. Does this activity help you view yourself as a proficient English speaker? Why or why not?

Other Comments:

Appendix B

Table 2: Similarly themed statements of dissatisfaction made by LLs

Language Learner	Statement of Comparison of Voiceover to the Professional speaker
KYJ	I think it's a good step, and I really like this imitation process, but I will have some concerns about how [we can] use it in our daily talking… I still speak the old way in daily talking.
KYL	Though I felt helped by practicing the speech, I realized it is still a long way to go to be a proficient English speaker to address a speech precisely.
KJ	Yes, it's a good way for me to see the gap between different levels of English speakers, and it enable[d] me to see the progress I've made by practicing often.
JZ	{On reviewing presentation & viewing one's self as a proficient speaker} I think for the TED talk, my performance is not that good, not just because of pronunciation. I am also not satisfied with the speed and just trying to catch the speaker…& [I] did it in a monotone way…
JHH	{On proficiency} Especially because I realize I don't stress words a lot like you guys do, yeah, it was helpful with stress, but I kind of notice how Americans are speaking, American pattern.
KLW	{On pronunciation improvement} I think so. At first, I can't catch up [with] the speed of the lecturer. {On reviewing presentation} I feel a little bit awkward. {On proficiency} Yes, this activity makes me to view myself as a proficient English speaker. If I work hard on one thing, I can perform well.
JG	{On practicing and performing} I recorded the practice and listened to my own voice, and I think I am a little concerned about the fluency of my talk…when I listen to my voice, I can feel the difference…maybe stress or something like that.
JB	{On reviewing presentation} My voice is dim, and I used to think that I would do the presentation, I would try to sound really clear, after, I see the videos, I feel a little disappointed [in] myself.
KFW	{On reviewing presentation} It sounds a little bit unnatural, funny yet awkward. {On proficiency} It has helped me obtain more insights of how native speakers speak, which inspires me to practice more and follow.
KNW	I sound less emotional than I intended to. Unsatisfied…when I really hear myself talking in the video, I still don't think I talk like a native, even if I tried so hard to mock the TED professor.
JY	{On reviewing presentation} No, I did not watch… I don't want to see what I am saying. I can not say why I don't want to. It just makes me uncomfortable.