

## WHERE DOES PRONUNCIATION STAND IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM? EDUCATORS' AND LEARNERS' VIEWS

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Much research has been conducted on the efficacy of pronunciation instruction, most suggesting that pedagogical intervention leads to improved pronunciation. But what are the actual practices and current views of instructors and learners? In order to understand where educators and learners currently stand, this study will first present views on the role of pronunciation in language learning from post-secondary foreign language (L2) instructors and students, gathered through a national survey. Results indicate that students value pronunciation instruction more highly than their instructors. Conclusions drawn from the data will be accompanied by suggestions for further research and pedagogical recommendations.

### INTRODUCTION

The first National Standard for Foreign Language Learning calls for *communication*<sup>1</sup>, which is defined as the ability to converse, to understand, to interpret and to share coherent information. We teach learners to speak, to listen, to read and to write, ensuring that their goal of successful communication is achieved through a multitude of sociocultural and linguistic cues. Successful communication depends on intelligible pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Without intelligible pronunciation, a grammatically-correct sentence becomes less comprehensible and may contribute to a communication breakdown.

Numerous researchers (Dansereau, 1995; Hannahs, 2007; Lord, 2005; Pennington & Richards, 1986; Saalfeld, 2011; Sturm 2013a; 2013b) have noted the lack of pronunciation instruction in the foreign language (L2) classroom. Could pronunciation be following the path of grammar instruction within the communicative approach? First, grammar teaching received a considerable amount of attention in L2 teaching (focus on forms). Next, it was considered unnecessary (focus on meaning). Finally, a more balanced approach used a focus on meaning while still focusing on grammar with communicative goals (focus on form) (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Pronunciation, it seems, is following a similar path, and while it is receiving more attention, might still lack a necessary focus.

## Review of Previous Literature

Previous studies concerning a focus on pronunciation attempted to make suggestions within the realm of communicative teaching (Anderson-Hsieh, 1989; Cant, 1976; Denbow, 1994; Elliott, 1997). Additional studies (e.g., Miller, 2012; Lord, 2005, 2008, 2010; Rossiter, Derwing, Maintinim, & Thomson, 2010; Saalfeld, 2011; Saito, 2011; Shively, 2008; Sturm, 2013a; 2013b; Thomson & Isaacs, 2009; Trofimovich & Gatbonton, 2006; Vokic, 2010) have examined the impact of pronunciation instruction and have generally found such pedagogical intervention to be effective. However, as Pennington and Richards (1986) mentioned, pronunciation has traditionally been disconnected from communicative intents and is more often associated with linguistic characteristics; it is therefore important to keep pronunciation imbedded in communicative competence as intelligibility of sounds are an important part of oral communication (p. 208).

Dansereau (1995) asserts that pronunciation should be integrated in beginning and intermediate levels, despite the fact that communicative language approaches have set it aside; pronunciation should be an inherent part for successful communication. In the past 20 years, little has changed. While numerous empirical studies on the effects of pronunciation instruction have been done in the past decade, as listed above, Dansereau (1995) and Pennington and Richards' (1986) statements still seem current, as there is a disconnect between communicative-focused teaching and pronunciation instruction.

Among the various aspects of L2 learning, the skills involved in pronunciation tend to occupy the least amount of time, in or out of class, in language courses (Lord, 2005; Saalfeld, 2011). Instructors do not know, or believe that they don't know, how to teach pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2009); current, communicative methodology and practices discourage mechanical drills, such as the production and perception drills associated with pronunciation and phonetics instruction (Saalfeld, 2011); and considerable research on the Critical Period Hypothesis (Bongaerts, et al., 1998; Flege, Yeni-Komshian & Liu, 1999; Walsh & Diller, 1981), along with anecdotal evidence, suggests that L2 learners rarely, if ever, achieve native-like pronunciation.

Rather than native-like perfection, Derwing and Munro (2009) emphasize that intelligibility should be the goal for L2 pronunciation instruction and research. According to Richards (1997), pronunciation is one of the most significant factors to successful communication. If the pronunciation of an individual is impaired, despite perfect grammar, the message might not be understood. In L2 French, for example, L1 American English learners have difficulty pronouncing /y/ and /u/ as two distinct vowels (Darcy et al., 2012; Rochet, 1995; Simon, Chambless, & Alves, 2010). Sturm (2013a) cites the confusion that can arise with the lack of distinction between /y/ and /u/: “au-dessous” [od.su] (underneath) and “au-dessus” [od.sy] (on top of), among numerous minimal pairs differing only in the vowels /y/ and /u/. Another example might happen with the use of the non-inverted question, in French. “Ca va?” with rising intonation means “How are

you?”, but with a flat or descending intonation, it will likely be perceived as a declarative statement (I am fine!), which would be pragmatically inappropriate in some situations.

Concerned for their intelligibility, students also believe pronunciation has a major role in language instruction (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994). Derwing and Munro (2009) contend, furthermore, that pronunciation is absolutely learnable and that students do want to learn. Both Derwing and Munro (2009) and Levis (2005) note the supposed “accent-reduction” industry in North America as an indication of ESL students’ interest in improving their pronunciation. Harlow and Muyskens (1994) surveyed nearly 1400 L2 French and Spanish learners on their goals for learning their L2. They found that speaking was students’ top goal and that pronunciation was ranked fifth out of fourteen stated goals.

While Berri (2000), Calaque (1981), Dansereau (1995), and Sturm (2013a; 2013b) agree that pronunciation needs early focus, beginning-level textbooks still offer only small pronunciation snapshots, covered quickly at best (Grim, 2016; Pedoya, 1984). Many universities offer “Phonetics and Pronunciation” courses typically taken in the third year of coursework, as discussed in Lord (2005), Saalfeld (2011), and Sturm (2013a; 2013b). Miller (2012), however, incorporated pronunciation instruction in a beginning French course.

In the studies by Lord, Saalfeld, and Sturm, participants in the experimental groups were all enrolled in an advanced-level course dedicated solely to Spanish or French phonetics and pronunciation. These students were compared to students enrolled in other advanced-language courses. Lord (2005) and Sturm (2013a; 2013b) found an effect for instruction while Saalfeld (2011) found a ceiling effect. On the other hand, Miller’s (2012) participants were enrolled in French 101 (first-semester); she compared two instructional techniques and found that IPA-based instruction was more effective (and more popular with students) than rhyming or sound-alike words as pronunciation guide. Miller received feedback from the French learners, requesting more explicit instruction and feedback on pronunciation accuracy. They preferred being aware of their mispronunciation and using IPA as a means to clearly state what they needed to focus on.

While much research has been and continues to be devoted to the efficacy of pronunciation instruction, not much investigation into learners’ (Harlow and Muyskens, 1994 being an exception) and, even more so, teachers’ perceptions of the place of pronunciation instruction in the L2 classroom. Researchers have been preaching to the converted on the virtues and necessity of teaching pronunciation. Yet we know little about how teachers feel about teaching pronunciation, and how teachers’ attitudes compare to students.

### **Research question**

Due to a lack of investigation on teachers’ and students’ perceptions and comparisons of those perceptions, this study poses the following question:

1. Do student and teacher perceptions of the role of pronunciation in the communicative language classroom align?

## **METHODS**

### **Questionnaire**

A series of questions (Appendices A and B) was created to elicit educators' and students' opinion on pronunciation. The questionnaires were distributed through several platforms (language departments, ACTFL blog, regional language organizations, and Facebook).

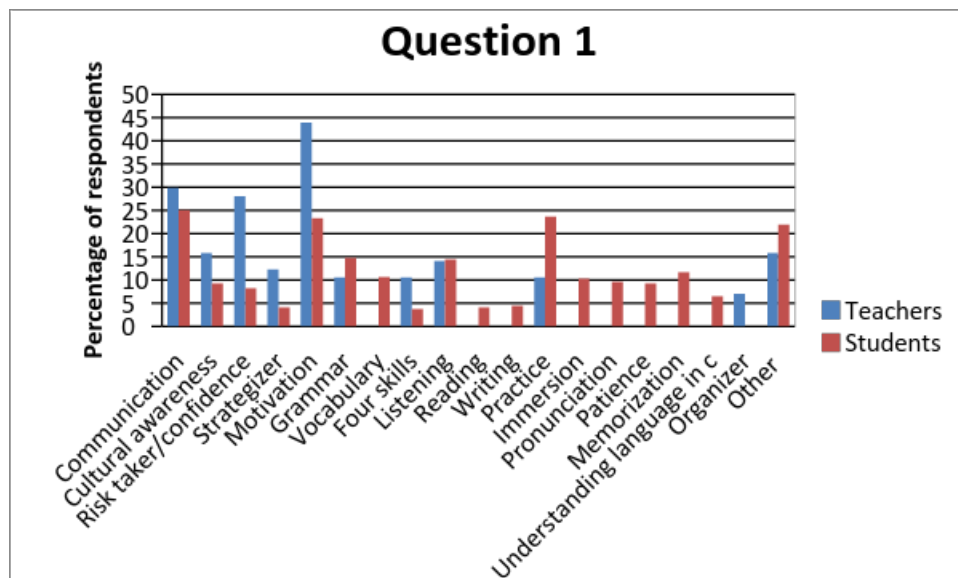
The questionnaire was designed to indirectly assess teacher and student attitudes toward L2 pronunciation by asking open-ended questions about teaching/learning priorities. In this way, we sought to solicit honest, gut-reaction responses to our questions. By not asking specifically about pronunciation, we were able to gauge pronunciation's importance to teachers and students: those who did not mention it clearly did not prioritize it.

### **Participants**

Completing the study were 292 students and 57 instructors (total: 349). Languages represented by the students and teachers surveyed were Arabic, Chinese, Classical Greek, English as a second language (ESL), French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Russian, and Spanish.

## **RESULTS**

We will compare instructor and student answers for Questions 1-4. Figures 1-3 and Table 1 below reflect percentage of teachers and students naming each answer to the question.



*Figure 1. Teachers' and students' answers to the question According to you, what are the most essential skills in knowing a foreign language?*

Overwhelmingly, teachers named “communication” and “motivation,” followed closely by “risk taker/confidence” as the skills that are most essential in knowing a foreign language. From these results, we can conclude that instructors do not view pronunciation as an important skill, possibly because they group pronunciation under communication. Some of the comments left by the instructors show that pronunciation was needed for successful communication; however, they do not seem to view it as a fundamental skill to acquire.

Students named motivation, communication, and practice as the most essential skills in knowing a foreign language. In this they are fairly in sync with the teachers. However, 28 students also named pronunciation as one of the most essential skills (compared to only one teacher). This suggests that students are more concerned with pronunciation than their teachers a) realize and b) respond to.

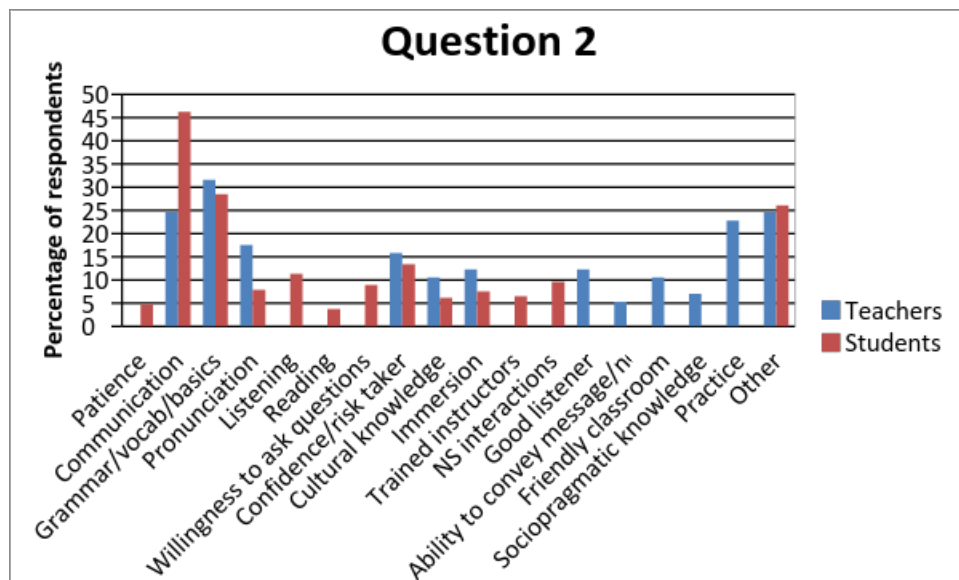


Figure 2. Teachers’ and students’ answers to the question “What do students need to achieve adequate/successful communication”?

Teachers named “communication/authentic discourse/opportunities to speak” along with “adequate knowledge of grammar and vocab,” “pronunciation,” and “willingness to take risks/confidence” as the greatest necessities to achieving successful communication. Communication is clearly a theme among the teachers’ answers, reflecting current communicative methodology and the ACTFL Standards (The National Standards Collaborative Board., 2015) However, in answering Q2, 10 of 57 teachers also recognize the role pronunciation plays in effective language learning.

Students named communication and grammar/vocabulary basics most often as the skills needed for adequate/successful communication, along with confidence and pronunciation. Students believe pronunciation is important to their language learning. Yet they don’t mention motivation, which was an important factor according to teachers. It might be more difficult for students to assess their personal motivation and the need for it to succeed in a language. Teachers have a different perspective as they see the impact of a lack of motivation. Students expect more tangible skills, such as pronunciation, to make a difference.

Table 1.

*Average rankings from answers to “Rank the following components, in order to importance (1 – most important; 5 least important): Grammar – Communication – Culture – Pronunciation – Vocabulary”*

	Grammar	Communicatio n	Culture	Pronunciatio n	Vocabular y
<b>Teachers</b>	3.18	1.42	3.56	4.25	2.60
<b>Students</b>	3.28	2.18	3.71	3.12	2.67

Both teachers and students ranked communication as the most important component in language learning, followed by vocabulary in second place. After that, the two groups diverge. Teachers rank grammar 3<sup>rd</sup>; students rank it 4<sup>th</sup>. Students rank pronunciation 3<sup>rd</sup>; teachers rank it last. Teachers rank culture 4<sup>th</sup> but students rank it as least important. Teachers see pronunciation as least important, while students value it more highly in their language learning. This supports their initial answers, that teachers do not view it as an important skill for success while students, in contrast, do.

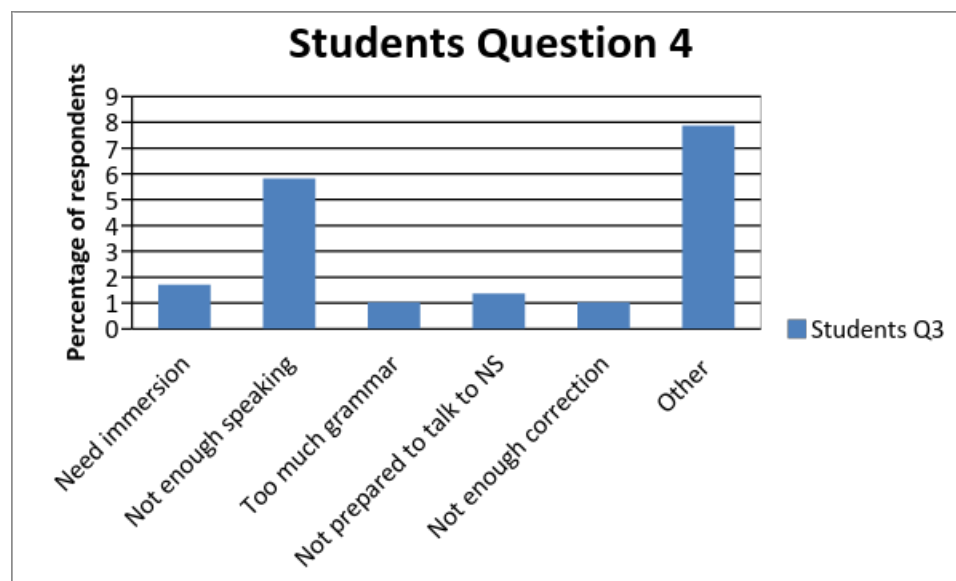


Figure 3. Students' answers to the question "Do you believe your class(es) prepare them (you) for adequate/successful communication? Justify."

This question gauged teachers' and students' satisfaction with classroom teaching. The results show that 96% of teachers seem satisfied with either their classes or the curriculum. On the other hand, 82% percent of students felt that they are prepared by their classes for adequate/successful communication.

Among those who felt unprepared, answers were varied (answers given by fewer than 10 students were combined into the “Other” category). Yet 17 students who said they were not prepared named “not enough speaking” as a reason. Students in this survey want more speaking time; others named the need for immersion or more correction or less grammar.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study shows that teachers and students generally have similar expectations for what is meant by language success and classroom practices. They focused on communication and oral skills as areas necessary for language learning success. Yet disconnects exist between the groups, particularly in relation to pronunciation. Pronunciation appears to have a secondary position in the L2 classroom. This appears to be due to a lack of training (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Pedoya, 1984;) on the part of the instructors. The fact that pronunciation is valued and ranked more highly by students than by teachers shows that students do see the need to acquire more accurate pronunciation in order to be understood by native speakers.

Additionally, as mentioned by Derwing and Munro (2009), teachers may be anxious about their ability to teach pronunciation. Typically, pronunciation and phonetics training is not included in teacher education. Furthermore, non-native speaker teachers may feel inadequate to teach an aspect of the language that they may not feel that they have mastered themselves.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers and students do not seem to understand each other’s priorities. From the answers we received, it seems that teachers’ and students’ objectives are disparate. While teachers have training in pedagogy and teaching approaches, students know what they want to learn, what they find difficult, and what they want to improve. Additional research projects ought to occur in order to better comprehend student and teacher beliefs and allow for more communication between the groups.

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

Acknowledging the student perception that pronunciation should receive more attention in the classroom with the goal of increasing comprehensibility, we need to better prepare teachers to teach it. To this end, the co-author of this paper has developed a graduate-level pedagogy course on Teaching L2 Pronunciation which is offered regularly at her university.

Another important point made by this study is that instructors and students do not seem to be always on the same page in regards to pedagogical goals. Although instructors’ class objectives are normally defined at the start of a semester, students’ objectives might not be considered and incorporated in the curriculum. It might be helpful to consider students’ priorities in language learning from the start, and in turn, either add it to the curriculum or give rationales for not doing so.



Instructors who believe pronunciation should be an integral part of teaching a language and who have received some training with the IPA, segmental, and suprasegmental features might want to consider introducing them from the start, in beginning courses, to a certain degree. Research does support its effectiveness in students' awareness (Miller, 2012; Pennington & Richards, 1986). Having thematic pronunciation lessons could help learners stay within a communicative framework, while making use of some meaningful drill exercises and other types that help them focus on specific sounds. Sturm (2016), for example, gives examples of lessons on French liaison that are short and easily contextualized within a theme or textbook chapter.

### **Further research**

Future studies could examine the role of textbooks and online platforms in pronunciation instruction. Depending on the support provided, teachers may or may not feel ready to cover more pronunciation challenges with their students. In addition, a study on practices could also be very informative, as the results of a series of observations of high school and college L2 teachers could show how educators approach the issues of pronunciation and how they react to students' mispronunciation. In time, this could inform teacher preparation programs on the training to provide to their teacher candidates.

### **CONCLUSION**

From our survey of post-secondary learners and instructors, we draw the following conclusions. First, pronunciation ought to be taught as an integral part of oral language use, as part of the means for creating meaningful communication,, not merely as an aspect of the oral production of isolated sounds, words and sentences. This is based on the fact that both learners and instructors value communication as part of L2 acquisition, as well as students' demonstrated interest in improving pronunciation. Furthermore, pronunciation forms a natural link to other aspects of language use, such as listening, vocabulary, and grammar; ways of highlighting this interdependence in teaching need to be explored. Additionally, we need to teach instructors how to teach pronunciation and support pronunciation instruction. If, as noted by Derwing and Munro (2009) and Saalfeld (2011), instructors are less than confident in their ability to teach L2 pronunciation, then teacher training needs to change to meet the needs elaborated above.

Communication is first among the National Standards (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) because it is the most critical skill to acquire when learning a foreign language. Comprehensibility is developed from a good understanding of the language functions and structures, but pronunciation should be an integral part of the learning experience as well, as it is crucial for effective communication. On a more practical level, students want to work on their pronunciation, and this is a need that instructors should be prepared to meet.

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## Appendix A

### Background information and questionnaire (teachers)

Thank you for being willing to participate in this study on your perceptions as a learner of a foreign language! The following questionnaire should take you between 10 and 15 minutes. If you have any question, please contact the research Dr. Frédérique Grim at [Frederique.Grim@colostate.edu](mailto:Frederique.Grim@colostate.edu).

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: M F

Circle the appropriate answer(s)

1. What is the primary foreign language you teach:

Question 1: According to you, what are the most essential skills in knowing a foreign language?

Question 2: What do students need to achieve adequate/successful communication?

Question 3: Rank the following components, in order to importance (1 – most important; 5 least important): Grammar – Communication – Culture – Pronunciation - Vocabulary

Question 4: Do you believe your class(es) prepare them for adequate/successful communication? Yes No

Please, justify your answer.

## Appendix B

### Background information and questionnaire (students)

Thank you for being willing to participate in this study on your perceptions as a learner of a foreign language! The following questionnaire should take you between 10 and 15 minutes. If you have any question, please contact the research Dr. Frédérique Grim at [Frederique.Grim@colostate.edu](mailto:Frederique.Grim@colostate.edu).

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: M F

What is/are your major(s)?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is/are your minor(s), if any?

\_\_\_\_\_

What year of school are you in? Circle the appropriate answer(s)

Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior    Master's  
Doctorate

What is your native language (spoken at home): English Other  
(Specify): \_\_\_\_\_

What is the primary foreign language you study: \_\_\_\_\_

How long (in years) have you studied that specific language: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you studied/travelled abroad in a country where your primary foreign language was spoken? Yes No If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

What class(es) are you currently taking for your primary language?

Question 1: What are the most essential skills to learn a foreign language?

Question 2: What do you need to achieve adequate/successful communication?

Question 3: Rank the following components, in order to importance (1 – most important; 5 least important): Grammar – Communication – Culture – Pronunciation - Vocabulary

Question 4: Do you believe your class(es) prepare you for adequate/successful communication? Yes No

Please, justify your answer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> **Interpersonal Communication:** Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.

**Interpretive Communication:** Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.

**Presentational Communication:** Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) have set guidelines for the education and preparation of foreign language teachers in the United States, where this research took place.