

Lee, E. (2016). Pronunciation in EFL instruction: A research-based approach [Review]. In J. Levis, H. Le, I. Lucic, E. Simpson, & S. Vo (Eds). *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, Dallas, TX, October 2015 (pp. 281-284). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

## BOOK REVIEW

Szpyra, J. (2015). *Pronunciation in EFL instruction: A research-based approach*. Multilingual Matters.

[Elizabeth Lee](#), Iowa State University

This book addresses the importance of the pronunciation in EFL education and begins with a discussion on the theory of EFL pronunciation instruction before moving on to instructional techniques that pronunciation instructors could use to teach English pronunciation in an EFL context. Each chapter is divided into two parts A and B: part A gives an overall theoretical picture of topics related to pronunciation teaching, and part B summarizes empirical studies that would support some of the arguments made in part A. As the author mentions in her preface, the book is for current and prospective EFL and teacher trainers interested in improving their teaching skills and pronunciation instruction, pronunciation specialists and students of applied linguistics (Szpyra, 2015, pp. viii-ix). While the author attempts to reduce the amount of technical words, readers who have very little knowledge in pronunciation, phonetics and phonology, would find some of the terminologies difficult to comprehend without referring to outside sources. Nevertheless, I think this is a good introduction to any person who is interested in either teaching or conducting research in pronunciation teaching. This book review would only focus on the contents of the first two chapters of the book.

The author begins with the importance of teaching pronunciation: she argues that pronunciation promotes listener's positive perception of the speaker, good oral communication, and increases speaker's confidence to speak good English (pp. 2-4). However, the author notes that teaching pronunciation has often been neglected because many teachers find pronunciation teaching difficult and least useful; and there are not many teaching materials that support language teachers' ability to teach pronunciation (pp. 4-6). Szpyra thinks teaching pronunciation is important and that rather than emphasizing native-like pronunciation, it is more important to promote "comfortable intelligibility" (7), where the speaker would have to speak intelligibly enough for the listener to understand in a communicative setting.

While various approaches to teaching pronunciation have been advocated, the author believes that the best model for teaching pronunciation in EFL context is one that combines both pronunciation models of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL): the New English as a Lingua Franca (NELF) (p. 25). This approach would allow language learners to receive both native and non-native models of English pronunciation, and recognize the importance of being exposed to various types of pronunciation, and practice the kind of pronunciation that would appear most intelligible to native and non-native speakers of English.

The author then moves on to discuss the difference between EFL and ESL, arguing that ESL learners are more likely than EFL learners to be exposed to English outside of the classroom setting, and therefore have more hours and opportunities to practice the targeted L2 pronunciation. EFL learners, on the other hand, are more likely to have limited English exposure, within a classroom setting, and they may or may not have access to communicating with native speakers of English. As such, phonemic exercises that may be suitable in an ESL context may not transfer easily in an EFL context without considering the different teaching and learning settings.

The author recommends that EFL teachers should self-examine their pedagogical practices and evaluate whether their phonodidactic approach is serving the needs of his or her students (44). For example, a teacher would ask herself or himself, what major pronunciation problems are experienced by EFL learners, and therefore which pronunciation techniques and learning tasks she or he should provide to address learners' pronunciation errors. Importantly, the teacher should consider the learning context and what consequences may follow for the learner who is speaking in L2.

Following her theoretical rationale for implementing a NELF approach to teaching English pronunciation in an EFL context, she provides a few studies she had done that would support her rationale for teaching pronunciation. In the author's own research, she found that listeners' attitudes toward speakers whose speech were heavily accented and less comprehensible, were less favorably evaluated than speakers whose speech were less accented and more comprehensible (48). Her study confirms previous studies that suggest that pronunciation and level of accentedness influence listeners' perceptions of speakers' personality and competency, and so pronunciation would be an important feature to be taught in EFL.

Based on a survey she had conducted on EFL students and teachers in Poland, it appears that pronunciation is not as emphasized as heavily as other areas of language learning. Phonetic training is usually practiced with beginning learners of English but less so with intermediate or advanced learners of English. In classroom settings, a large proportion of participants indicated that they learn pronunciation mostly through teacher correction or by listening to audio recordings. While it would not be fair to assume that every teacher does not prioritize pronunciation when teaching English, the results from the questionnaire seemed to suggest that pronunciation and other phonetic and phonemic trainings are not at the forefront of EFL education. The author may have included these studies in the first chapter to point to the lack of research and support for good pronunciation teaching.

In the second chapter, Szpyra considers which phonetic features should be focused in order to help learners produce comfortable intelligibility. She lists teaching high functional load (those where you would see a lot of minimal pair contrasts); words that would have "high return" (i.e. speakers giving lower effort in order to produce higher result); and words that would match the learners' end purpose for studying English (pp. 68-71).

Again, the author emphasizes the importance of intelligibility in oral communication and considers the different proposal for English pronunciation priorities: Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core, Amalgam of English and International English, and Collins and Mees' Error Ranking (88). While proposals vary in terms of which pronunciation to prioritize, focus on consonants, vowels, and word stress patterns appeared to be common priorities found in all four models. A further assumption that is made in all four models is that pronunciation errors are universal. The author notes that none of the proposals are research-based, and so what these proposals consider pronunciation priorities may not be as reliable as one would deem. In other words, without strong empirical research to back up their arguments, it is difficult to validate which pronunciation priorities are more important than others.

Instead of listing which consonants, vowels, and prosody to focus on, the author of this book suggests that teachers consider what common L2 pronunciation errors their learners make. The author recognizes that students' L1 can influence how they acquire L2 pronunciation, and therefore teachers may need to prioritize different pronunciation features depending on learners' L1. Moreover, the author thinks rather than focusing solely on phonetics, more emphasis should be given to pronunciation of phonetically difficult words (90).

In addition to helping learners pronounce phonetically difficult words, the author also suggests teachers addressing local errors, which are perceived to be more severe than global errors. According to the author, global errors have to do speaking English with a foreign accent due to L1 phonological and phonetic transfer; and local errors are mispronunciations of individual words that are considered more severe and more difficult to fix than global errors (93). The author reasons that local errors are severe because there are interference from L1 and L2 that may hinder learners' ability to pronounce L2 words properly. The author is likely to promote L2 pronunciation teachers who prioritize common local errors found in L2 learners' speech in order to correct their mispronunciations, rather than those relying on a model that focuses on different consonantal, vocalic, or prosodic features without considering the needs of their learners. Although this is not to say that the author opposes phonetic training, the author seems to suggest that current pronunciation teaching favors phonetic training over other pronunciation activities; and in this chapter, the author clearly points to the importance of attending to teaching phonetically difficult words as well as addressing learners' local errors.

The author then argues that the debate of whether to prioritize segmental vs suprasegmental issues, in order to improve learners' intelligibility, is not as important as figuring out to what extent segmental and suprasegmental features are similar and different between students' L1 and L2. If L1 and L2 were found to have similar segmental features but differing suprasegmental features, then the teacher should focus more on suprasegmentals; and if L1 and L2 were found to have similar suprasegmental features but differing segmental features, then the teacher should focus more on segmentals.

In other words, learners' pronunciation needs may vary depending on their L1 backgrounds, and so, assuming that one feature is more important than another is suggesting that L1s have similar

pronunciation features and therefore teachers simply need to focus on either segmental or suprasegmental features. However the author would think this is not true as certain languages share more segmental features with English, and other languages share more suprasegmental features. Still, for beginning learners of English, it would benefit to focus more on segmental issues, and for more advanced learners of English, it would be useful to concentrate on suprasegmental issues.

In part B, the author conducts research about intelligibility and pronunciation priorities of Polish learners of English. When Polish learners of English were asked to evaluate the intelligibility of two different non-native speakers of English, her study found that intelligibility is correlated with annoyance (119). That is, a speaker who produced global errors (i.e., prosodic issues) was perceived to be less annoying than a speaker who produced local errors (i.e., idiosyncratically deviant words). The author concludes that pronunciation instruction should focus on not only segmental and suprasegmentals features but also whole words that are commonly mispronounced by EFL learners.

As the author notes in part A of chapter 2, pronunciation priorities largely depend on learners' L1. In the case of Polish learners of English, she found that learners frequently struggle with pronouncing English words that have a different spelling to pronunciation rule from Polish. In addition, cognates and words with difficult stress patterns were also found to be problematic for these learners. If one were to teach Polish learners of English, pronunciation teachers would have to address such issues in order to help learners improve their English pronunciation.

As a person with limited knowledge of pronunciation teaching, I've gained a lot of insight about the current issues that are going on with pronunciation teaching in EFL context (especially in Poland). The first chapter discusses how pronunciation has been taught in various English language learning contexts. In the second chapter, the author talks about pronunciation priorities. While the author did point out the limitations of her study being limited to a Polish EFL context, I think this book would attract a wider audience if the author had done meta-analyses of current pronunciation teaching studies in other EFL contexts. Despite the lack of generalizability of her studies, I appreciate that the author made great efforts to cover a host of pronunciation-related issues in concrete detail, while still maintaining her main argument, which is, helping learners produce intelligible speech.