

Silpachai, A. (2017). Accent reduction for professionals: How to eliminate your accent to sound more American (Review). In M. O'Brien & J. Levis (Eds). *Proceedings of the 8th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, Calgary, AB, August 2016 (pp. 270-273). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

BOOK REVIEW

Nelson, W. (2015). *Accent Reduction For Professionals: How to Eliminate Your Accent to Sound More American*. Self-published. Kindle Edition. (110 pages in print)

[Alif Silpachai](#), Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION

Just as scientists must educate the general public through science communication, pronunciation researchers too should bridge the gap between research and practice (see Levis, 2016 for current review). This was why I chose to investigate pronunciation teaching in non-academic settings. I found this book on Amazon.com. It was the first item that showed up after I typed “accent reduction.” It has positive reviews although there are only sixteen reviewers. I purchased the Kindle version for \$2.99 (which is a lot cheaper than the print version which is \$34.79).

As the title suggests, the goal of this book is to help learners of English reduce and eliminate their foreign accents to be successful in their careers in the US. The author, Whitney Nelson, writes that accent elimination is easy, or in her words “Before you begin to think that it’s impossible to eliminate your foreign accent, I’m here to tell you that it’s not only possible, but probably easier than what you believe it to be” (171-172). This shocking claim goes against current research, which suggests that accent elimination is extremely difficult; it is instead more practical to train learners to become intelligible L2 speakers (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2000; Munro & Derwing, 1995).

According to her Amazon profile, the author is an “international English professor” who has been teaching EFL courses for 23 years “at a few big organizations in Korea and China, Open Universities, technical colleges, and high schools.” Her other books on the website are all about improving one’s speaking skills. Unless she uses a pseudonym, I could not find her professional, university-affiliated web page, or any peer-reviewed journals authored by her. This frankly makes me skeptical about her expertise in pronunciation.

The introduction addresses a few questions concerning accent elimination, e.g., “What is an accent?” and “Is eliminating accent really necessary?” etc. She describes two types of accents: native accent (e.g., New York accent) and foreign accent. Her main rationale for accent elimination is based on the premise that NSs “have difficulty understanding their [an NNS’s] strong accent” (146). Thus, her definition is different from Munro & Derwing (1995) who do not conflate accentedness with intelligibility and comprehensibility. Her definition also suggests that her teaching shares the nativeness view (Levis, 2005).

Chapter 1 attempts to answer “Is your strong accent preventing you from getting your perfect job?” She argues that it does, and to support her claim, she uses discrimination as the main reason. For example, she cites Dianne Markley, a professor at the University of

North Texas at Denton, who says that “there exists an ‘incredibly strong statistical correlation between judging someone as cultured, intelligent, and competent and placing them into prestigious jobs’ based on the lack of an accent” (242-244). Although discrimination against accents certainly exists in certain places, she still needs to provide evidence that clearly supports the claim that people’s foreign accents prevent them from getting a “perfect job,” let alone being “successful” in their careers. Also, her argument is flawed because she makes the assumption that NNSs’ “perfect jobs” will be discriminatory. A person’s idea of a “perfect job” might be a place where foreign accents are highly valued. For me, my “perfect job” would be a place where I am not discriminated against because of my accent.

In chapters 2-7, the author gives lessons on sound production. In chapter 2, she provides tips on how to master word stress, although sentence stress is briefly mentioned too. She rightly points that English stress is not always predictable and urges learners to listen to NSs as models for best results. Considering the book’s aims, this chapter’s lesson is appropriate for the audience. From what we know from the literature, accentedness in English is correlated with word stress (e.g., Crowther, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2016). Thus, focusing on this area might make learners sound less accented. However, the literature also informs us that accentedness is correlated with rhythm in English (ibid). She therefore should have also included a discussion on rhythm with the focus on vowel reduction.

In chapter 3, entitled “Learning the Sounds of the Vowels,” the author draws readers’ attention to only five vowels: a, e, i, o, and u (IPA: /eɪ/ /i/ /aɪ/ /oo/, and /u/ respectively). Although I can see why these canonical five vowels might be appealing to her readers, this chapter does not accomplish the book’s goals. These vowels are sufficiently distinctive from each other. If a reader wants to be understood better, he/she must work on high functional load vowel pairs, e.g., /i/ and /ɪ/ (Brown, 1988). Another concern I have is the organization of the chapters. Chapter 7, entitled “Discovering Diphthongs,” is also about vowels (two diphthongs: /ɔɪ/ and /aʊ/). Three of the vowels she discusses in chapter 2 are also diphthongs. Why not combine these two chapters?

Chapter 4 offers a discussion on the speech organ responsible for nasality — the soft palate, and its role in accent elimination. She notes that “the goal is to sound less nasal” (591). This goal is not useful because it makes the assumption that nasality hinders comprehension and intelligibility, and that workplaces discriminate against nasalized speech. It also assumes that her readers’ English is nasalized and that there is no nasalization in English. To make her lesson more meaningful, she should change the goal of this chapter to “learn how to nasalize like a native speaker” (e.g., syllables with nasal codas; CVN).

In chapter 5, the author highlights the /ɪ/ sound. According to her, it “comes in *three varieties*: or, ar, and air... [and] to make this sound correctly, you’ll move the tip of your tongue toward the back of your mouth, pointing it backwards and flex it.” (619-620, emphasis added). Her description is misleading because these are clearly three vowel phonemes which may influence the phonetic realization of /ɪ/. Varieties of /ɪ/ targets have in fact been identified in the literature, and they can be broadly categorized into two

types: bunched (tip-down) and retroflex (tip-up) (e.g., Mielke, Baker, & Archangeli, 2016). She seems to be describing the latter type. My other concern is that if learners want to be understood, they should prioritize learning initial /ɹ/. There are many non-rhotic varieties of American English (e.g., Boston English), and rhotic speakers do not seem to have difficulty understanding these non-rhotic varieties. Thus, to meet the book's goals, the author should have also included a lesson on initial /ɹ/.

Chapter 6 provides a lesson on /θ/ and /ð/, which are ones of the rarest sounds in the world's languages (Maddieson, 1984) and bear a low functional load (Brown, 1988). Although some researchers do not recommend prioritize teaching these sounds (e.g., Jenkins, 2000), considering that the book's main goal is to help readers master the mainstream American accent, the inclusion of this chapter is justified.

As mentioned above, chapter 7 is about two diphthongs: /ɔɪ/ and /aʊ/. I have already stated my view on this chapter. I will not comment any further. In chapter 8, entitled "Putting it All Together," she provides reasonable tips on how readers can practice their pronunciation. Their tips all rely on listening to NSs either in person through shadowing, or via television, radio, podcasts, and YouTube.

In chapter 9, the author proposes another accent reduction method called "Reverse Accent Mimicry." In this method, learners mimic someone who speaks the same L1 as them, and the goal is to "just repeat what they say, [and] mimic everything you notice in how they speak, down to their gestures" (885-886). Then, the learners have to "transition this mimicry into" English by mimicking NSs of English. Although she does not provide a rationale for this method, I think the purpose might be to raise the learners' awareness of their L1 pronunciation. If true, this would mean that knowing one's L1 pronunciation will facilitate the reduction of L1 sounds when speaking a second language. I genuinely find this method interesting, but I remain doubtful of its effectiveness. The author should have cited research studies that have assessed its role in pronunciation learning.

Very similar to chapter 8, chapter 10 offers more tips and facts (dubbed "secrets") on English pronunciation. For example, other tips include "Practice, practice, practice," listening to audiobooks, and recording oneself etc. A few facts include English has voiced and voiceless sounds, the letter s is sometimes pronounced as /z/, and sounds run into each other in fluent speech etc.

For a book published in 2015, I found it disappointing and misleading. Throughout, the author claims that if people in this country get rid of their non-American accents, they will have a higher chance of being successful in their careers (often dubbed "perfect" or "dream jobs"). This book has not sufficiently provided evidence to support this claim nor the various assumptions which the claim is built on. With regard to her pronunciation teaching, the author should base her arguments on what the literature says. Research should inform practice.

REFERENCES

- Brown, A. (1988). Functional load and the teaching of pronunciation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 593–606.
- Crowther, D., Trofimovich, P., & Isaacs, T. (2016). Linguistic dimensions of second language accent and comprehensibility. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, 2(2), 160–182.
- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2005). Second language accent and pronunciation teaching: A research-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 379–397.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.
- Levis, J. M. (2005). Changing contexts and shifting paradigms in pronunciation teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 369–377.
- Levis, J. M. (2016). Research into practice: How research appears in pronunciation teaching materials. *Language Teaching*, 49(3), 423–437.
- Maddieson, I. (1984). *Patterns of Sounds*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Mielke, J., Baker, A., & Archangeli, D. (2016). Individual-level contact limits phonological complexity: Evidence from bunched and retroflex /ɹ/. *Language*, 92(1), 101–140.
- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of second language learners. *Language Learning*, 45(1), 73–97.
- Nelson, W. (2015). *Accent Reduction For Professionals: How to Eliminate Your Accent to Sound More American* (Kindle Edi). Whitney Nelson (self-published).