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INVITED TALK

UTOPIAN GOALS FOR PRONUNCIATION RESEARCH REVISITED

Tracey M. Derwing, University of Alberta, Simon Fraser University

In 2009, I gave a presentation at the inaugural PSLLT entitled Utopian Goals for Pronunciation Teaching. Here I revisit those goals to see how far we have come. Pronunciation is no longer the Cinderella of applied linguistics research; in fact, it is the Belle of the Ball, in that not only are many more PhDs graduating with a focus on L2 pronunciation, but established academics whose primary interests are elsewhere are now collaborating with others to examine pronunciation in relation to their own research specialty. We have seen massive increases in empirical studies on L2 pronunciation, as well as the establishment of a journal devoted to L2 pronunciation issues. In addition, innovations in technology devoted to pronunciation improvement have emerged. However, there is still considerable room for improvement and development in our field. I will address the Utopian goals identified in the original paper, outlining progress thus far, and suggesting ways forward. The goals are: increased attention to pronunciation from researchers; a stronger focus on teacher education; appropriate curriculum choices; a stronger focus on intelligibility/comprehensibility; more useful software/other technology; a focus on NS listeners; no more scapegoating of accent; and better strategies for integrating newcomers into the community.

The first PSLLT was the impetus for this paper: in 2009 I was invited to give a presentation on what I thought would contribute to better learning experiences for students (Derwing, 2010). Pronunciation at that time was still the Cinderella of second language acquisition, and now it is the Belle of the Ball. Still, we have not yet reached a happy ending. Considerably more work is necessary before we get there. Here I will revisit the goals set in 2009 to examine how far we have come as a field.

Although the presentation ten years ago dealt with "Utopian goals", the goals can also be characterized as a to-do list, because several are quite do-able.

The first goal was increased attention to pronunciation from researchers. Of course, there is always an ongoing need for research, but it is clear that the last decade has witnessed monumental growth in the number of research projects on second language (L2) pronunciation, in part because of the establishment of PSLLT and the *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*. Two overview studies, one a meta-analysis (Lee, Jang & Plonsky, 2015) and the other a narrative review (Thomson & Derwing, 2015) appraised the burgeoning research in this area. Since these articles were published there has been no reduction in interest; each year several more PhDs graduate in our field. In 2017, the American Association of Applied Linguistics received so many submissions on pronunciation issues that in 2018 they created a new area strand entitled Phonology/Phonetics and Oral Communication. Furthermore, attendance at PSLLT has grown from 60 to 195 registrants. It is also heartening that people whose first area of interest is another aspect of second language acquisition are now including L2 pronunciation in their own research. For instance,

Loewen and Isbell (2017) and Ruvivar and Collins (2018) have recently published L2 pronunciation studies. Both Shawn Loewen and Laura Collins are senior researchers whose primary focus is grammar. Clearly, the goal for more attention from researchers has been met! However, several areas remain under-researched, especially within the classroom. For instance, more focus on learners, and the individual and combined effects of different PI activities would be useful.

The second goal was a stronger focus on teacher education. In April, 2017, John Levis established a website intended for teachers, populated with accessible essays on key concepts and teaching techniques: pronunciationforteachers.com. A resources section includes links to webinars and the like. This website is still in a nascent stage but it is growing, and it is exceptional in that the evidence-based essays are all written by leading researchers and expert practitioners in the field. Moreover, in the last few years, several textbooks intended for teachers have been published, all of which are informed by research, including Derwing and Munro (2015), Grant (2014), Levis (2018), Murphy (2013), and Pickering (2018). This is by no means an exhaustive list, whereas at the time of the first PSLLT, there were very few choices of texts for teacher preparation in L2 pronunciation instruction. Teacher education in this area still lags behind, however, because of limited access to courses on 'how to teach pronunciation' in the ivory towers. Many university programs assume that a course in general linguistics or phonology is enough; it is most emphatically *not* enough! In my own experience, at a university which has regularly offered a 'teaching L2 pronunciation' course, students were required to first take a course in linguistics. Although that was useful, most preservice teachers were unable to see exactly how their linguistic knowledge base related to teaching; they needed explicit instruction regarding pronunciation instruction research and teaching to inform their own practice. I am optimistic that in the next decade more courses of this type will be developed as more PhD graduates whose primary interest is L2 pronunciation are hired in university positions. In the meantime, a census and comparison of existing language teacher preparation programs would serve to identify both gaps and good practices.

Goal #3 related to appropriate curriculum choices. Stand-alone pronunciation classes can be helpful, particularly if several students share similar difficulties. However, programs may not have sufficient numbers to run stand-alone classes, or students may need to work on other aspects of their L2 as well, which suggests that pronunciation is best integrated into general listening and speaking classes. My sense from reading many classroom-based studies is that students who are receiving pronunciation instruction are mostly registered in stand-alone classes and that we still do not see much pronunciation integrated into general language classes. Years ago, Levis and Grant (2003) pointed to the lack of systematicity in the inclusion of pronunciation in general ESL classes and provided suggestions for ways to incorporate pronunciation. More calls have come out to this effect, but there has been little progress on this front. Numerous studies exist on teachers' attitudes towards pronunciation, but it would be helpful to research and highlight successful integration of PI into general language classes.

Another curriculum choice is whether students have the opportunity for exposure to multiple voices from several L2 accents and dialects. A host of studies have shown that High Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) is beneficial for learners' perception and sometimes production (Thomson, 2018). We now see more HVPT, mostly because of developments in technology, and

a growing awareness that pronunciation is not just about what the students can produce, but also what they can perceive, and clearly they need to be able to understand a range of accents and dialects.

Yet another aspect of curriculum choices is assessment. In the USA, assessments exist for international teaching assistants (ITAs), but in many types of language programs, and certainly in most of Canada, programs and teachers tend to avoid assessing pronunciation. However, if it were tested, it would be taught. Thus, I am in favour of the development of assessment tools for pronunciation. We know there will be washback, so it is incumbent on us to design good tests. Kermad and Kang (2018) recently compared low, medium and high stakes tests of L2 pronunciation, and determined that students tend to do best on low stakes tests. They encourage teachers to vary the content and design of tests to match high and low stakes assessments to give students practice such that their productions will remain at their best. Moreover, better protocols for classroom needs assessment are in order.

Goal #4 was a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility rather than accent. There is definitely more discussion of the first two speech dimensions than several years ago, but accent is still winning the day. Accent reduction programs have proliferated: in a quick search in 2018, I found 11,500,000 hits on Google vs. 633,000 in 2008. Many of the providers are fear-mongers whose practices will not help the clients at all, and in fact, may be detrimental (Derwing & Munro, 2015). We see improvement in a focus on comprehensibility and intelligibility among researchers, but, in a review of 75 pronunciation instruction studies (Thomson & Derwing, 2015), 63% aligned with the Nativeness Principle and 24% with the Intelligibility principle, while 13% had elements of both (See Levis, 2005 for a discussion of the two principles). And that is among applied linguists; in the last ten years, social psychologists have started to take a great interest in foreign accentedness, with little regard for even the existence of other speech dimensions. Of course, an L2 accent can have significant socio-cultural consequences, but it is not an all or nothing phenomenon, and more nuanced considerations involving intelligibility and comprehensibility are warranted.

Goal #5 was the development of more useful software and other technology. Amazing advances have been made in this area. Ron Thomson's (2019) English Accent Coach, for example, provides learners with perception practice on English vowels and consonants using HVPT, which he has shown sometimes results in improved production as well. Youglish (2019) is an excellent web-based resource in which students type in any word to hear many different voices saying that word in context, in natural speech. For learners of languages other than English, Forvo.com offers pronunciation of individual words in multiple languages. Hopefully, more resources (including some with a focus on suprasegmentals) in a wide range of languages will be developed.

A desirable tool for designing appropriate software and technology is a naturalistic corpus. Such a corpus is JASMIN-CGN (Cucchiarini, Driesen, Van Hamme, & Sanders, 2008), a repository of contemporary Dutch as spoken by adults, children, seniors, and L2 learners. Orthographic transcriptions, broad phonetic transcription, and part-of-speech tagging have been done. The speech material consists of equal proportions of read and extemporaneous speech. The JASMIN corpus has been used to develop an automatic speech recognition CALL system used for teaching Dutch to immigrants, with a focus on pronunciation. Clearly, the technology and the expertise

exist, as the Dutch have shown us, but no similar corpus has been developed for English and many other languages. Corpus development is a huge endeavour and requires teams of people including engineers and applied linguists, but there are promising signs that individuals in the PSLLT community will be working on a multilingual corpus in the near future (Huensch & Staples, 2018).

In 2009, little attention had been paid to the notion of training native speakers (NSs) to be better listeners to L2 accented speech (Goal #6). The only study of which I was aware at that point was conducted by my colleagues and me (Derwing, Rossiter & Munro 2002) in which we trained social work students to better understand accented speech. Although there was a trend in the right direction, no significant improvement in listening pre- and post-training emerged from this study; however, there was a marked improvement in confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) with L2 speakers, which we saw as an important finding. My colleagues and I have argued that training would be worthwhile for any individuals whose occupations require interaction with members of the public.

Since then, more attention has been given to NS listeners, including some intervention studies. Kang, Rubin and Lindemann (2014) carried out a structured contact activity, based on Kang's dissertation, in which ITAs and undergraduates were brought together to work on a task. Getting to know ITAs in this context led to more positive attitudes towards them as instructors. In another study, Lindemann, Campbell, Litzenberg, and Subtirelu (2016) conducted a short online training program to familiarize NSs with a Korean accent and found modest improvements. Subtirelu and Lindemann (2016) have proposed that native speakers can be helped by (1) improving their attitudes toward nonnative speech, (2) increasing their familiarity with a range of accents and (3) encouraging them to develop and utilize interactional strategies to cope with communication difficulties.

Goal #7 was to eliminate the scapegoating of L2 accents. Problems with pragmatics (knowing what is appropriate to say in a particular context) and grammar can contribute to a lay listener's sense that an accent is to blame. If a speaker uses unexpected phrases or lexical items, they may not be understood, partly because of the general predictability of much of everyday language. Listeners try to anticipate what will be said in a given context, and when something unexpected is produced, they may struggle to understand. Consider this study my colleagues and I carried out (Derwing, Waugh & Munro, forthcoming): we offered 5 weeks of pragmatics instruction on a range of speech acts, including refusals and requests. Intermediate ESL students role-played scenarios with the research team prior to instruction, and then again 5 weeks later. The pre-post scenarios were randomized and played to listeners, who judged the post-test scenarios to be significantly more comprehensible in three out of four cases. The students received practically no pronunciation instruction over this time, but their productions were much easier to understand because of their predictability. L2 pragmatics as an area of study has followed a similar trajectory to L2 pronunciation, and a recognition of the intersection of these two areas is developing (Yates, 2017). Despite the fact that in many language instruction contexts the focus on vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing dominates, I am hopeful that pragmatics will continue to receive more attention.

It has long been known that the more grammar errors an L2 speaker makes, the harsher listeners' judgments will be of their pronunciation (Varonis & Gass, 1982). The implications of this finding

for L2 pronunciation have been mostly ignored until recently. Now we have evidence from Lee and Lyster (2018) in a study of French gender that a focus on both grammatical and pronunciation forms will result in better knowledge of grammar and improved comprehensibility. Pronunciation instruction can lead to better use of grammatical forms, and grammatical instruction pointing out the differences between masculine and feminine can lead to better pronunciation. It is clear that researchers are no longer scapegoating accents, but it still happens in the real world.

The "real world" is in need of better strategies for integrating newcomers into their local communities (Goal #7). I will give some examples from Canada, because that is the context with which I am most familiar, but similar strategies may be happening in pockets all over North America and in other immigrant-receiving countries. By no means is Canada doing anywhere near what could and should be done, but the strategies offered here could be implemented almost anywhere.

Dudley (2007) conducted a study in which she surveyed 55 adult ESL students to determine how many of them had done volunteer work to enhance their English. Only 8 had, and only 2 had good experiences. She formulated several recommendations, and a few years later the college where she carried out her research decided to implement them; they developed contacts with ethical businesses and designed a class including a volunteer placement that benefits both employer and student. The employer has additional help (and exposure to L2 learners) and the students receive Canadian experience and references as well as more varied spoken English input than in a standard language class. Both the companies and the students are carefully vetted. This is a very popular program. It requires considerably more work on the part of the teachers than a regular class, of course, but the students find it to be extremely useful on many levels.

Another integration strategy is the Community Connections program, offered by settlement agencies and funded by the federal government. The program matches Canadian-born volunteers with newcomers to facilitate their settlement. Obviously, churches and other community groups can (and do) implement similar programs, but they have to recognize a need in the first place, which may require being approached by an ESL program. We know that the Window of Maximal Opportunity (WMO) for phonological change is in the first six months of massive exposure to English (Derwing & Munro, 2015), so anything that can be done to increase contact with speakers of the local variety of English during that period will be helpful, not only for integration but for pronunciation. Another set of useful resources has been developed by the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC); these are geared to issues of inclusion for employers and newcomer employees. TRIEC has freely available videos and other materials that may be useful in other language programs for pragmatics development, which, as noted above, can lead to enhanced comprehensibility.

Finally, another factor to assist the integration of newcomers into their local communities is positive stories in the press and social media. Ray (2018) reports that Peace by Chocolate is a company started by Syrian refugees who came to Canada two years ago and settled in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The Hadhad family went from making chocolates in their kitchen and selling them at a farmers market to a company that employed 25 people. In August 2018 the family announced that they are hiring 25 more employees to keep up with demand: that is 50 jobs that Antigonish did not have before the Hadhad family came. I chose this story because I happened to read it on a

day when I was writing the presentation on which this article is based, but there is a lot of positive press in Canadian mainstream media about the contributions of newcomers, and that helps the overall climate. A majority of Canadians think that immigration is a good thing, although they are worried about irregular asylum seekers (Momani & Stirk, 2017).

Personally, I do not enjoy talking to reporters; indeed, I have colleagues who refuse to do it, because it can be frustrating, but overall, I see it as a chance to get a positive message out. If the media are not covering positive stories in your area, you can approach them yourself with an interesting item about some students, or about pronunciation research that has implications for your community. Typically, news outlets are most likely to be responsive during the summer months and in the December holiday period when they often welcome "soft" news. The more positive the attitudes of the general community members, the more likely they will be willing to talk to newcomers: a plus for integration, language learning, and pronunciation development.

So how close have we come to reaching those Utopian goals set nine years ago? We aren't at Utopia yet. But we have made tremendous progress – so let's keep on trucking!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracey Derwing is a professor emeritus of TESL in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta, and an Adjunct Professor in Linguistics at Simon Fraser University. With Murray Munro, she has extensively researched L2 fluency and pronunciation, especially the relationships among intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accent. She has also investigated native speakers' speech modifications for L2 speakers, and interventions to enhance native speakers' comprehension of L2 accented speech. Recently, she has conducted workplace studies involving pragmatics and pronunciation. As a director of The Prairie Metropolis Centre for eleven years, Tracey has a strong interest in factors that contribute to successful social integration of immigrants and refugees.

6-102 Education North
Educational Psychology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB
T6G 2G5

Canada
780-431-0604
tderwing@ualberta.ca

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