



Cambridge English Centenary *Symposium on Speaking Assessment*

Pronunciation

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From a historical perspective, it can be argued that pronunciation, more than any other component within the broad construct of second language (L2) speaking ability, has been subject to the whims of the time and the fashions of the day. That is, pronunciation, once dubbed “the Cinderella of language teaching” to depict its potentially glamorous yet marginalised existence (Kelly 1969:87), experienced a fall from grace after being a focal point of L2 instruction and teacher literacy training during its heyday—a prime example of a pendulum swing in L2 teaching methodologies and practices (Gass 1996) that have affected substantive coverage for learners in L2 classrooms, often with detrimental effects for stakeholders (e.g. Morley 1991). Naturally, the aspects of L2 speech (pronunciation) that are ascribed pedagogical value in the minds of teachers and researchers have shifted over time (Munro and Derwing 2011). However, an aerial view of developments over the past century reveals the polarised nature of researchers’ and practitioners’ beliefs on the relative importance of pronunciation in L2 aural/oral instruction and assessment. Although there are signs that pronunciation is increasingly acknowledged as an important component of L2 speaking ability by the applied linguistics community (Derwing and Munro 2009), is gradually being reintegrated into the L2 classroom (Isaacs 2009), and is included as an assessment criteria in the scoring rubrics of several prominent L2 speaking scales, often encapsulated by the term “intelligibility” or “comprehensibility” (Isaacs and Trofimovich 2012), such debates continue today (e.g. Brinton and Butler 2012).

In order to take stock of trends in L2 pronunciation research, teaching, and assessment over the past century within the broader context of developments in L2 speaking assessment, this paper will report on the state-of-the-art by first overviewing the ways in which pronunciation instructional priorities and, by implication, assessment targets, have shifted over time. The reorientation of the pedagogical goal in pronunciation teaching from the traditional focus on pronunciation accuracy (accent reduction) to the more suitable goal of intelligibility in light of the target use domain in the case of the vast majority of L2 learners (test takers), will feed into a discussion on major constructs subsumed under the umbrella term of “pronunciation” or that are often cited in L2 pronunciation research. Particular emphasis will be placed on theoretical gaps, definitional quagmires, and challenges in adequately operationalising the focal construct in assessment instruments for operational testing purposes and on implementation challenges in L2 classrooms. Finally, the paper will conclude by setting out an agenda for further research in light of globalising trends, technological advances, and the need to examine pronunciation performance on more interactional task types (e.g., the paired or group speaking test format) than have traditionally been researched in the psycholinguistically-orientated L2 pronunciation literature.

Historical overview

Pronunciation (phonetics) was heralded as foundational to L2 teaching and teacher training by proponents of the Reform Movement at the turn of the 20th century (e.g. Sweet 1899), with phonetic transcriptions emphasised as obviating the need for a native speaking teacher to model the accurate production of target language sounds. Segmental features (vowel and consonants) continued to be highlighted in instructional materials well beyond the first half of the 20th century, including in Lado's *Language Testing* (1961), which featured chapters on testing the perception and production of segments, word stress, and intonation. This work has been unparalleled in its focus on practical issues in pronunciation item design, test administration, and scoring, with the overall goal of systematically testing those features hypothesised to minimise first language influence on target language performance. Several of the challenges that Lado (1951) highlighted over six decades ago, including that "present practice in oral-aural tests shows lack of workable criteria of what is meant by pronunciation and the role it plays in speaking and listening" and that "pronunciation does not appear to have been taken into account systematically" in rating scales, still resonate today and need to be addressed from a research and practical standpoint (1951:531).

Despite the pivotal role of pronunciation in Lado's (1961) seminal book, which is often taken to represent the birth of language testing as its own academic discipline (e.g. Spolsky 1995), the focus on pronunciation in language testing appears to have been short-lived. During periods in which the teaching methods that were often closely associated with pronunciation (e.g. decontextualised drills symbolising rote-learning) ran contrary to the mainstream intellectual currents of the time, pronunciation tended to be either shunned or ignored in applied linguistics circles. Specifically, the naturalistic approaches to teaching that emerged in the late 1960s at the onset of the communicative era and continued into the 1980s, de-emphasised pronunciation in instruction, viewing it as ineffectual or even counterproductive in fostering the acquisition of the target language (e.g. Terrell 1989). Thus, pronunciation fell drastically out of vogue for several decades, the repercussions of which are evidenced in selected publications by pronunciation proponents from 1990 onwards citing the "neglect" of pronunciation in English language teaching and learning (e.g. Rogerson and Gilbert 1990). This discourse of neglect persists today but has been absent in the area of pronunciation assessment in particular, where, until recently, L2 pronunciation has had few advocates deploring its marginalisation as an assessment criteria in L2 speaking tests or drawing attention to its exclusion from the collective research agenda (Isaacs in press). A case in point is that during the first 25 years of publications in the journal, *Language Testing*, research on pronunciation assessment was practically nonexistent, with only two pronunciation-focused articles appearing during that time period (1984-2009). In addition, although the field of language testing has arguably moved beyond Lado's (1961) skills-and-components model as the dominant theoretical view (Bachman 2000), "phonology/graphology" in Bachman (1990) Bachman and Palmer's (1996) highly influential Communicative Language Ability framework seems to have been a direct carry-over from Lado and does not appear to have been reconceptualised since that time.

However, there is reason for optimism. Pronunciation has arguably experienced a modest, if, as yet piecemeal resurgence of attention among language assessment researchers against the backdrop of support from a small but increasingly organised applied linguistics community with an interest in L2 pronunciation teaching and learning (Isaacs in press). To date, three articles, which directly centre on issues and challenges in assessing L2 pronunciation, have appeared in *Language Testing* since 2010, others have appeared in *Language Assessment Quarterly*, and pronunciation has additionally been explicitly discussed in other articles published during this period on automated assessment or the assessment of L2 speaking and listening more generally. Finally, the inclusion of pronunciation in the state-

of-the-art on the speaking construct at the 2013 *Cambridge Centenary Speaking Symposium* implies that pronunciation is, indeed, viewed as an integral part of the construct of L2 speaking, and is a positive sign.

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