

English pronunciation and fluency development in Mandarin and Slavic speakers

Tracey M. Derwing^{a,*}, Ron I. Thomson^a, Murray J. Munro^b

^a *Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, 6-102 Education North,
Edmonton, Alta., Canada T6G 2G5*

^b *Department of Linguistics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby,
BC, Canada V5A 1S6*

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Abstract

The development of accent and fluency are traced in the speech of 20 Mandarin and 20 Slavic adult immigrants to Canada over a period of 10 months. The participants were enrolled in an ESL program but had no special instruction in either pronunciation or fluency. The immigrants' self-reported exposure to English outside of class was used to determine whether there was a relationship between accent, fluency, and voluntary contact with English. Judgment tasks were carried out in which native English listeners assessed L2 speech samples recorded at the outset of their studies, 2 months later, and again 10 months after the first recording. The listeners' scalar judgments of accentedness and fluency indicated that there was a small improvement in accent over time, and that the Slavic learners made significant progress in fluency, whereas the Mandarin participants showed no improvement. The Slavic participants reported significantly more contact with English speakers than did the Mandarin speakers. Suggestions are made for ESL instruction and further research.

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For many adult immigrants to English-speaking countries, the importance of developing comprehensible, fluent English is considerable. Successful integration into a new cultural environment depends in some degree on newcomers' ability to interact comfortably

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 780 492 3668; fax: +1 780 492 1318.
E-mail address: tracey.derwing@ualberta.ca (T.M. Derwing).

with members of the host society. In the absence of intelligible, fluent productions, interaction can be severely compromised and the costs are both economic and social. For instance, as [Dávila et al. \(1993\)](#) found, overall earnings are negatively related to degree of foreign accentedness. In response to concerns about immigrant integration, the Government of Canada ([Statistics Canada, 2004](#)) has implemented a pilot project to enhance immigrants' 'water cooler' talk in the workplace; that is to say, there are sufficient reports from employers to indicate that, despite having English language skills that are adequate for their occupations, too many newcomers are unable to fit into the workplace culture. Both accent and fluency may be involved, along with several other factors. Thus, there are strong practical reasons for closely examining the developmental path of both L2 pronunciation and fluency under conditions that are typical for thousands of ESL immigrants.

Immigrants who live in countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, or the United States often interact with native speakers of English who have limited tolerance for accented or dysfluent speech. Images of negative responses to ESL speakers abound in the popular media ([Lippi-Green, 1997](#)), and language learners themselves report instances of unfair judgments based on their language productions ([Derwing, 2003](#)). Indeed, some individuals have successfully taken legal action in cases of discriminatory conduct due to accent ([Munro, 2003](#)). While the unjust treatment of L2 speakers by native speakers should be opposed through educational and legal channels, it is unlikely that the current situation will change in the very near future. Rather, L2 speakers will likely continue to be judged on the basis of their English productions. In particular, accent and perceived fluency seem to be the aspects of L2 speech that are most salient to the untrained listener on the street (note that NS judges are generally quite forgiving when it comes to grammatical errors, at least compared to NNS speakers of English ([Derwing et al., 2002a](#))).

1. Accent

There is no question that a foreign accent can adversely affect communication because of reduced intelligibility. However, intelligibility is determined not only by the speaker, but by the listener as well. As [Rubin's \(1992\)](#) study showed, native listeners who anticipate that they will not understand L2 speech are prone to fulfilling their expectations, even when the speech they hear is in their own dialect of English. [Derwing et al. \(2002b\)](#) found that native listeners confessed to "zoning out" when they heard someone speak with a foreign accent. They had so little confidence in their own abilities to understand that they failed to pay attention to their non-native interlocutors. The other side of the intelligibility equation is the non-native speaker. Although many salient features of L2 accents do not interfere with intelligibility, some factors, such as incorrect stress assignment, have been shown to have deleterious consequences ([Hahn, 2004](#)). Students who have problems making themselves understood as a result of such features can benefit from focused pronunciation instruction ([Derwing et al., 1998](#); [Hahn, 2002](#)). Unfortunately, many ESL teachers feel uncomfortable teaching pronunciation, often because of a lack of training ([Breitkreutz et al., 2002](#); [Burgess and Spencer, 2000](#); [MacDonald, 2002](#)). It is perhaps for such reasons that [Derwing and Rossiter \(2002\)](#) found in interviews with 100 immigrants to Canada that only eight had received explicit pronunciation instruction. Many individuals' productions are thus shaped by what they perceive in the environment around them, rather than by a focus on phonological form in the ESL classroom.

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