



The functional load principle in ESL pronunciation instruction: An exploratory study

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

^a *Department of Linguistics, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6*

^b *Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, 6-102 Education North, Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2G5*

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Abstract

Although it is recognized that ESL students often need assistance to become more comprehensible speakers, their teachers usually have limited time to devote to pronunciation instruction. Research should help teachers set priorities for pronunciation teaching to address these students' needs as efficiently as possible. Here we test the usefulness of the theoretical notion of functional load (FL) as a means of determining which consonant distinctions have the greatest impact on listeners' perceptions of accentedness and comprehensibility. Although this principle has been proposed by several pronunciation experts, its predictions have not been empirically tested. Thirteen native English listeners judged 23 Cantonese-accented sentences that exhibited various combinations of high and low FL errors. The high FL errors had relatively large effects on both perceptual scales, while the low FL errors had only a minimal impact on comprehensibility. The only cumulative effects of errors seen in the data occurred with high FL errors in the judgments of accentedness. These results not only shed light on the distinction between accentedness and comprehensibility, but also suggest that the functional load principle can be effectively employed in guiding some aspects of pronunciation instruction.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 291 3654; fax: +1 604 291 5659.
E-mail address: mjmunro@sfu.ca (M.J. Munro).

1. Introduction

Pronouncing a new language so that it is clear to a wide range of interlocutors should be a goal of most second language learners; however, it is not practical in many second language programs to offer stand-alone pronunciation classes for this purpose. Instead, pronunciation instruction, if it is offered at all, is typically included as a minor component in a speaking class or it is “infused” throughout the whole program in a relatively unsystematic way (Breitkreutz et al., 2001).

Even in dedicated pronunciation classes, there is often uncertainty regarding the kind of content that is most appropriate. Some experts have advocated devoting classroom time to voice quality and general speaking habits (Firth, 1992; Jones and Evans, 1995). Others have led a gradual shift in emphasis toward the prosodic aspects of speech. This change reflects the growing awareness of the negative effects of prosodic errors on comprehensibility. Although the emphasis on prosody is well-justified (Derwing and Munro, 1997, 2005; Hahn, 2004), there is little doubt that some segmental difficulties should be given attention as well. Munro and Derwing (1995a), for instance, noted that for a sizeable number of listeners, comprehensibility ratings of ESL speakers’ oral productions were correlated with the speakers’ phonemic and prosodic errors.

Given the wide variety of pronunciation problems affecting second language learners, there is insufficient time to address every aspect of learners’ phonological difficulties in the classroom. Instructional time must therefore be carefully apportioned to ensure that it is effectively used. When identifying a focus of instruction, it is helpful to distinguish between accentedness, which refers to the extent of the differences between native speaker and non-native speaker productions, and comprehensibility, which is the listener’s impression of how difficult it is to understand a given speaker (Derwing and Munro, 1997; Munro and Derwing, 1995a). A third concept, intelligibility, refers to how much a listener actually understands. This study focuses on the first two dimensions, though it should be noted that comprehensibility and intelligibility are closely related. Accentedness, on the other hand, is partially independent of comprehensibility and intelligibility. In particular, empirical evidence (Derwing and Munro, 1997; Munro and Derwing, 1995a) shows that an utterance may be heavily accented, but at the same time both fully understood (highly intelligible) and easy to understand (highly comprehensible). Given the nature of these relationships, pronunciation instructors seeking to assist their L2 learners to become effective communicators should concentrate on aspects of L2 phonology that affect intelligibility and comprehensibility, rather than accentedness alone. However, currently there are few bases for determining what would enhance an ESL student’s communicative success. One might be guided by intuition, which may or may not be adequate. Alternatively, one could rely on the extant research literature, which is quite limited at this point, or one could use a theoretical construct to decide what should be taught.

A teacher who relies solely on intuition is faced with the problem of not knowing whether his or her judgments are representative of the broad range of interlocutors who might interact with the student. Since experience with accented speech tends to result in better comprehension (Gass and Varonis, 1984), second language teachers, who are often very experienced in listening to L2 speech, are not necessarily the best judges of their own students’ comprehensibility.

Although some research has helped to identify aspects of pronunciation that have a negative impact on listeners, such as incorrect nuclear stress assignment in English (Hahn,

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