

## **Learner perception of L2 pronunciation instruction**

Nguyen Anh Duc Dao  
*School of Education*  
*University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus*

### **ABSTRACT**

The efficacy of L2 pronunciation instruction has received extensive interest due to its potential for informing both theory and practice in the area of instructed second language acquisition. Yet, although significant improvements in learner performance have been reported in many other studies, findings have shown that pronunciation instruction do not yield expected outcomes. The current paper examines L2 pronunciation teaching from the point of view of the language learner, with reference to language models and teaching techniques and activities. A total of 157 first year English major students at a university in Vietnam were requested to complete a questionnaire in the pronunciation classes as well as their impact on learning. The survey data were analyzed and major trends were then identified. The findings reveal respondents' expectations of the teacher as well as their perceived evaluation of the available classroom activities and teaching approaches. The paper also makes several implications regarding L2 teachers' role in helping their students learn pronunciation more effectively.

**KEYWORDS:** pronunciation instruction, pronunciation teaching, learner perception, phonetics

### **Introduction**

Levis (2005) claims that L2 teachers' ideology and intuition still largely influence their decision as to which approach to adopt towards pronunciation teaching. Some of them might choose to minimize or even leave pronunciation instruction out of their lessons while some others are finding ways to incorporate pronunciation into their classrooms. However, the latter group could also find the job formidable since "teachers' positive declarations and attitudes to L2 pronunciation are insufficient for implementing pronunciation teaching" (Szyszka, 2016) and "there is no agreed upon system of deciding what to teach, and when and how to do it" (Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012).

Even more importantly, there is a disparity between teacher cognition of and learner perspective on key issues such as what should be taught and learnt and how it should be taught. Therefore, an understanding of the respondents' views of beneficial language models and workable techniques and activities is essential in establishing general guidelines for L2 pronunciation teachers so that they can do their jobs with more ease.

## Review of Literature

### *Pronunciation models*

According to Rogerson-Revell (2011), a pronunciation model is “a set of standard pronunciation forms for a particular accent” that can be used as “a point of reference or guideline” (p. 8). Until recently, target models for teaching English have been adopted from native speakers from countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa (Levis, 2005).

Several reasons, however, have been identified as to why native speakers should not be considered as the only models for pronunciation teaching. First, while “the best instructor is the person with a detailed practical knowledge of both the L1 and L2 phonetics” (Walker, 2001, p. 8), this is often not the native speakers (Setter, 2008). Second, many varieties of English are not intelligible even to other native speakers, let alone non-native users (Jenkins, 2000). Finally, the vast majority of English language teachers are now non-native speakers of English (J. Miller, 2009, p. 176).

In addition, there are good reasons why non-native teachers of English should be included as models for pronunciation instruction. Murphy (2014) recognises two benefits of working with non-native English language samples: they seem to be more aspirational and accessible models as well as more relevant to respondents’ pronunciation needs when their learning goal is not attaining a native-like accent. In addition, recently, Levis, Sonsaat, Link, & Barriuso (2016) conducted a study on how native and non-native teachers affect L2 respondents’ performance and found out that instruction on pronunciation skills depends more on knowledgeable teaching practices than on the focus of nativeness.

### *Techniques and tools for teaching L2 pronunciation*

Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) provide a comprehensive list of techniques which have traditionally been used to teach pronunciation. These techniques that are quite common, include listening and imitating, phonetic training, minimal-pair drills, tongue twisters and reading aloud, tend to focus on accuracy at the word level. Moreover, most of the techniques may not guarantee improvement in spontaneous speech situations as the materials used are often scripted.

When pronunciation has become an integral part of not only the whole curriculum but also every single lesson, modern techniques and activities have been devised in the hope to bring more success in teaching L2 pronunciation. However, there are a number of concerns regarding the extent to which the new ideas can bring changes to the pronunciation classroom. First, it is unfortunate that the new techniques, activities and tips are not readily accessible to all L2 teachers around the world. Second, and consequently, the new ideas have not been widely implemented and evaluated by either the teachers or the respondents, so they lack-grounding in classroom practices. This may help to explain a phenomenon that Szyszka (2016) puts forth: many teachers report knowing a variety of techniques but still use reading aloud and repetition more often than the others. Finally, Lear (2011) concurs that “there is a significant disparity between learner and teacher beliefs about the use of language learning activities” (p.131). While

a large body of research has been done from the point of view of the teachers, the respondents opinions about what they find useful for their learning is equally essential.

Goodwin (2014) claims that L2 teachers make use of an array of tools to enhance learning. The tools may range from inexpensive to more costly ones, and from simple to more sophisticated objects that take more time to prepare. Different gadgets and props like a feather, a match, a piece of paper, or a rubber band can be used for describing certain features such as aspiration, stressed and unstressed syllables. Cartoons and comic strips could be effective in introducing minimal-pair contrasts or supra-segmental features such as linking, intonation and prominence. Games can also help engage respondents in classroom activities and maintain their attention to target forms. Another excellent tool for motivating respondents and practising pronunciation is songs and chants, which are believed to be useful for teaching stress, linking, intonation, and reduced forms (S. F. Miller, 2006). Other resources for presenting supra-segmental features are jokes, riddles, poetry and rhymes.

In modern days, one of the most important tools for teaching pronunciation is instructional technology which includes audio-recordings, video-recordings, software and the Internet. In summary, even though technology should not be considered as a replacement for the L2 teachers, it contributes to pronunciation learning (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Goodwin, 2014).

### ***The use of feedback***

Desonch-Jezo, (2011) claims that feedback may facilitate L2 acquisition by providing respondents with error correction and metalinguistic information. Research in the field of pronunciation has shown that corrective feedback – feedback that indicates the error and/or provides the correct form – contributes to improvement in L2 phonological acquisition (Lee et al., 2015). In reality, many teachers tend to limit or neglect giving feedback on respondents' pronunciation for several reasons: time constraint, a lack of knowledge of how to give feedback effectively, and the uncertainty of what to do and when to do it in giving feedback on respondents' pronunciation (Baker & Burri, 2016).

However, teachers who do give feedback to their respondents believe that it is the key to enhancing their comprehensibility. Findings from Baker & Burri's (2016) study, which examined five experienced teachers' beliefs about the role of feedback, reveal that both instructor and peer feedback is important and that feedback can be given in various ways: written or via voice recordings, individually or to the whole class. Yet, it is still unknown as to which type of feedback was preferred by the respondents. This concern should not be taken for granted if we would like to manipulate feedback to facilitate pronunciation learning.

### ***The research questions for the present study***

1. How do respondents perceive the non-native English pronunciation teacher as a language model?
2. How do respondents evaluate different types of English pronunciation teaching techniques and activities?
3. How do respondents evaluate teacher feedback in learning English pronunciation?

### ***The participants***

The participants in the current study were 157 first-year English majors at a multi-disciplinary university in Vietnam. At the time of the study, they were all enrolled in a compulsory nine-week long pronunciation course. The class met once a week and each session lasted about four hours. There are two main reasons why these students were recruited for this study. First, as they were receiving intensive instruction on pronunciation, they would have a better understanding of the issues related to pronunciation learning (e.g. terminology, learning activities, teaching techniques, and so on). As a result, it would be more convenient for them to answer the questionnaire, and their responses would also be more relevant. Second, with a focus on and the research and thus give more reliable responses.

### ***The questionnaire***

The questionnaire consists of three parts: the first one addresses the participants' perception of their non-native teachers as a language model, the second examines their views of the teaching techniques and tools used by their teachers, while the last one looks into their evaluation of the feedback they received in class.

In developing the first section, the researcher wanted to find out how the participants perceive the presence of the non-native speaker teacher in their class. A four-point Likert scale is used in this question. Section two, which consists of 13 items, asks the participants to assess the different activities, techniques, tools, and technologies that are used in their classes. The last part of the questionnaire, which comprises seven items, is focused on the availability of teacher's feedback, specifically when, to whom and how it is given. A semantic differential scale is employed in the last two sections, but the N/A (Not Applicable) option is also included in case a certain activity is not used in the surveyed classes.

### ***The procedure***

In order to secure the largest possible number of participants, the survey was administered on the dates the students had to sit for the mid-term test of the pronunciation course. After the exam and a short break, each of the students was given a copy of the questionnaire, which took them about 30 to 45 minutes to complete. The researcher was present to offer help or answer queries. Each of the participants received a drink voucher upon returning the completed questionnaire. The data was then fed into SPSS for analysis, from which statistical results were retrieved.

## **Results and discussions**

### ***Demographic data***

A total of 157 questionnaires were returned. However, 5 of the questionnaires were incomplete. These were discarded and the final number of respondents was 152.

The demographic data shows that this group of participants are at very similar ages. 148 of them are aged 18-19 while only 4 respondents are aged 20 years old. The majority of them are female, at 84.2 percent, while male students account for only 15.8 percent. This gender inequality is commonly found among degree programs in foreign languages at universities in Vietnam. Apart from 11 participants who did not specify their hometowns, the remaining 141 come from 33 different provinces of Vietnam. The highest number of respondents (n=28) were from Ho Chi Minh City, followed by Binh Thuan (n=13) and Dong Nai (n=12). The Gia Lai and Phu Yen province had 8 respondents respectively.

### ***The non-native teacher as an L2 language model***

The responses to the first two questions revealed that respondents still value native teachers over their non-native counterparts. A total of 63 percent of the participants either strongly disagree or disagree when asked if it was acceptable for their pronunciation teacher to speak English with a non-native accent. 98 percent of the respondents noted that they would like to study pronunciation with a native speaker teacher if possible, while another 70 percent choose “Strongly Agree”.

Likewise, the findings also indicated that the respondents recognize the benefits of studying with a non-native teacher. 75 percent of them either agreed or strongly agreed that one of the strengths of non-native teachers is their knowledge of both English and Vietnamese while a higher percentage, 92 percent agreed that non-native teachers can be good models because they can share their learning experiences with the students.

There seems to be a mixed response from the respondents. The majority of respondents showed a preference for non-native accent despite their acknowledgement that the teachers can be good models?

Several possibilities contribute to the situation. First, these students are aiming at achieving the near nativeness standards. Such a target might have caused them to have a prejudice towards any non-native accent, especially the one spoken by their pronunciation teacher, who is supposed to speak the L2 natively. Alternatively, they may have high expectations of their teacher, who, as a language model, should have a native like accent. Their perception is not unusual, since not any particular non-native language sample could be used for instructional purpose. Murphy (2014) asserts that “samples of nonnative English speech are useful as pronunciation models as long as they are intelligible and comprehensible” (p.258). However, this conceptualization of acceptable non-native speech samples may not have made its way to this group of respondents, who might be thinking of a native-like accent as the only standard form. This leads to another possible explanation for their negative reaction: they may have been confused between up a non-native accent and a non-standard accent. In other words, they may not understand that a native accent can be non-standard while a non-native one can still be standard.

### *Usefulness of different teaching techniques and tools*

The respondents were asked to evaluate the techniques and tools according to their usefulness in improving their pronunciation. They were also informed that if a certain activity / tool was not used in their class, they should choose N/A (Not Applicable). The findings show that the most useful technique is minimal pair drills (Mean=4.42), followed by IPA practice (Mean=4.36) and repeating after models (Mean=4.17). In contrast, the three least useful ones are using clapping and tapping (Mean=2.48), visual aids (Mean=2.89) and teacher's explanation of theoretical concepts (Mean=3.14). Table 1 shows the mean scores for all techniques and tools. The percentages of those who selected N/A for certain items are also listed in the table, since they do raise some issues which will be discussed below.

*Table 1.* Respondents' evaluation of teaching techniques and tools

Teaching techniques / tool	Mean	% of N/A
Teacher's explanation of concepts	3.14	6.6
Teacher's use of visual aids	2.89	18.4
Repeating after models	4.17	0.7
Minimal pair drills	4.42	2.6
Use of clapping and tapping	2.48	21.1
Teacher's use of songs, poems, jokes, etc.	3.22	13.8
Doing IPA transcription practice	4.36	3.3
Role-playing	3.59	6.6
Pair/group work	3.96	2.6
Watching films/video recordings	3.24	14.5
Dictation exercises	3.39	7.9
Playing pronunciation games	3.30	13.2
Teacher's use of Internet materials	3.66	7.2

One important point drawn from the findings is that respondents tend to value traditional techniques and tools (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010) over more innovative ones. Activities such as watching films and video recordings, playing games and using materials from the Internet received only average scores. The first possible explanation for this is although the teacher did attempt to use the techniques and tools in their classrooms, they may not have succeeded due to a lack of pedagogical guideline, as mentioned earlier in the background section. Second, and even worse than the first case, it can be seen from Table 1 that the proportions of respondents who revealed that these techniques/tools were not used in their classes are quite high in comparison with the figures for the others. A total of 14.5 percent chose N/A for watching films/video recordings and 13.2 percent did so for playing games. The same situation happens to the use of clapping and tapping and visual aids – these are the two least useful techniques in the view of the respondents. In fact, this figure is the highest for these two items, at 21.1 percent and 18.4 percent respectively. So, the question raised here is whether the participants did not highly value such techniques and tools because they were actually not very useful for learning English pronunciation, or because respondents did not have much experience learning with them due to

the teacher's ineffective use or even non-use of them in the classroom. The answer to this question requires further study.

### *The use of feedback*

In responding to the questions in this part, the participants also rated the techniques according to their usefulness in learning English pronunciation. If a particular activity was not used by their teacher, they would choose N/A. Results show that in general, respondents highly value immediate feedback, individual feedback and delayed feedback; mean scores are 4.31, 4.26 and 4.12 respectively. However, they consider private feedback the least useful, giving it only 2.78. Table 2 gives data on the mean score and the percentage of the respondents selecting N/A for each item.

*Table 2.* Respondents' evaluation of teacher feedback

Type of feedback	Mean	% of N/A
Immediate feedback	4.31	1.3
Delayed feedback	4.12	0.7
Individual feedback	4.26	1.3
Group feedback	3.34	6.6
Feedback given in front of the class	3.86	2.0
Private feedback	<b>2.78</b>	<b>14.5</b>
Teacher's encouragement of peer feedback	3.35	9.9

A comparison of the mean scores of the contrasting types of feedback has led to interesting findings. First, respondents seem to be less perturbed about being interrupted, as they prefer immediate feedback to delayed one. Second, individual feedback is far more useful for them than group feedback, with a mean score of 4.26 for the former in comparison to 3.34 for the latter. Similarly, feedback given in front of the class is much more highly valued than one given privately, their mean scores are 3.86 and 2.78 respectively. Based on the findings, it can be argued that students love to have their (mis)pronunciation corrected by the teacher, and they want to receive feedback immediately and individually. The only concern here is the unexpected low value attributed to private feedback. However, when the number of N/A responses is taken into account, it seems that this concern can also be addressed in the same way as in the previous section. Specifically, 14.5 percent of the students informed that their teacher did not provide any private feedback, so they could not say whether or not it was useful for their learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper indicates that Vietnamese adult respondents of English still value native speaker teachers of English over non-native ones in learning pronunciation. In addition, traditional teaching techniques, tools and activities are perceived to be more useful for them. Finally, feedback given by the teacher is important in helping them to improve their pronunciation.

This study also has a number of implications for L2 pronunciation teachers. Firstly, it is vital that teachers themselves be cognizant of the intelligibility principle, consider it a new target for

teaching and then make respondents aware of this new goal. Murphy (2014) claims that it is unfair and unethical for teachers to make their respondents believe that they will ever be able to achieve native-like pronunciation. They ought to aim at a more realistic and achievable goal for learning: being intelligible. This, in turn, is expected to lead to more acceptance of the non-native speaker teacher as the language model in the classroom, since L2 pronunciation instruction is more dependent on knowledgeable teaching practices than on nativeness (Levis et al., 2016).

Also, the new learning goal and the non-native language model should not be understood as a negation of the value of native speech samples. In fact, the respondents ought to have the opportunity to be exposed to as many different native speakers' voices as possible so that their perceptual learning and listening skills become more robust (Bradlow et al., 1999). Nowadays, this can be done easily with advances in recording technology and the vast availability of audio and audio-visual resources.

Finally, the decision as to what activities or techniques to be used in the pronunciation classroom should be consulted with the learner, and for the learner's benefit; this decision should not be based on only the teacher's knowledge, assumption, or convenience. It is recommended that the teacher understand the respondents' preferences and then select appropriate tools to allow for stronger learning motivation to be created and thus better outcomes to be achieved.

The current paper only reports part of the results of the quantitative phase in a mixed method study on factors that might affect success in L2 pronunciation learning. Therefore, such a limited scope does not allow further insights into possible correlations between the issues under discussion, namely language models, teaching techniques and feedback, and other factors such as learning goals or teaching contents. Also, the study is limited to data collected as the researcher did not probe further into discussing findings gained from the follow-up qualitative study, which would help to address unresolved issues identified in this paper.

## References

- Baker, A., & Burri, M. (2016). Feedback on second language pronunciation: A case study of EAP teachers' beliefs and practices. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(6), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2016v41n6.1>
- Bradlow, A. R., Akahane-Yamada, R., Pisoni, D. B., & Tohkura, Y. (1999). Training Japanese listeners to identify English /r/ and /l/: long-term retention of learning in perception and production. *Perception & Psychophysics*, 61(5), 977–985. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03206911>
- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., Goodwin, J. M., & Griner, B. (2010). *Teaching Pronunciation: A course book and reference guide* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Darcy, I., Ewert, D., & Lidster, R. (2012). Bringing pronunciation instruction back into the classroom: An ESL teachers' pronunciation "toolbox." In J. Levis & Levelle K. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd pronunciation in second language learning and teaching conference* (pp. 93–108). Ames: IA: Iowa State University.
- Donesch-Jezo, E. (2011). The Role of Output and Feedback in Second Language Acquisition : A
- Nguyen Anh Duc Dao. (2018). *The English Teacher*, 47 (2), 44-52



- Classroom-Based Study of Grammar Acquisition By Adult English. *Esuka-Jeful*, 2(2), 9–28.
- Goodwin, J. M. (2014). Teaching pronunciation. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. Boston, Massachusetts: National Geographic Learning ; Heinle/Cengage Learning.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Shanghai: OUP. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=0TvHACfrUjEC>
- Lear, E. (2011). Using guided reflective journals in large classes: Motivating students to independently improve pronunciation. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 13(September), 113–137.
- Lee, J., Jang, J., & Plonsky, L. (2015). The Effectiveness of Second Language Pronunciation Instruction: A Meta-Analysis. *Applied Linguistics*, 36(3), 345–366. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu040>
- Levis, J. (2005). Changing Contexts and Shifting Paradigms in Pronunciation Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 369–378. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588485>
- Levis, J., Sonsaat, S., Link, S., & Barriuso, T. A. (2016). Native and Nonnative Teachers of L2 Pronunciation: Effects on Learner Performance. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(4), 894–931. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.272>
- Miller, J. (2009). Teacher identity. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 172–181). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, S. F. (2006). *Targeting pronunciation: Communicating clearly in English* (2nd ed.). Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Murphy, J. M. (2014). Intelligible, comprehensible, non-native models in ESL/EFL pronunciation teaching. *System*, 42, 258–269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.12.007>
- Rogerson-Revell, P. (2011). *English phonology and pronunciation teaching*. London : Continuum.
- Setter, J. (2008). Theories and approaches in English pronunciation. In R. Monroy & A. Sanchez (Eds.), *25 Years of Applied Linguistics in Spain: Milestones and challenges*. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia de Publications (pp. 447–457). Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, Servicio de Publicaciones.
- Szyska, M. (2016). English Pronunciation Teaching at Different Educational Levels: Insights into Teachers' Perceptions and Actions. *Research in Language*, 14(2), 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1515/rela-2016-0007>
- Thomson, R. I., & Derwing, T. M. (2015). The Effectiveness of L2 Pronunciation Instruction: A Narrative Review. *Applied Linguistics*, 36(3), 326–344. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu076>
- Walker, R. (2001). Pronunciation priorities, the lingua franca core, and monolingual groups. *Speak Out!*, (18), 4–9.

### Author Information

Nguyen Anh Duc Dao is currently a PhD student at the University of Nottingham - Malaysia Campus. She is also a lecturer at Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She holds an MA in TESOL Studies from the University of Queensland, Australia and an MBA from Bolton University, UK. Her research interests are pronunciation, phonetics, phonology and teaching methodology. She has presented papers at local and international conferences.

