
Review by Mari Sakai (Georgetown University)

Pronunciation myths is the latest book published by University of Michigan Press that addresses popular, but sometimes wholly fictitious, beliefs about learning a second language (L2). Previous volumes dispel myths in second language vocabulary (Folse, 2004), writing (Reid, 2008), listening (Brown, 2011), and acquisition (Brown & Larsen-Hall, 2012). As the editor of this newest volume, Linda Grant aims to make decades of second language pronunciation research accessible to classroom teachers.

The volume is organized around seven common myths about second language pronunciation teaching and learning. The prologue helps to orient readers from diverse fields to a common framework from which to read the rest of the book. It provides a brief history of forty years of pronunciation research, including an explanation of the difference between accent and intelligibility, the basics of phonemes, and the various aspects of pronunciation instruction. The chapters that follow are written by some of the most respected researchers in the field. Each chapter contains three sections. The first section, “In the real world”, includes a relevant anecdote taken from the authors’ or their colleagues’ first-hand experiences with pronunciation issues. For example, John Field narrates a story in Chapter 3 (L2 phonemic acquisition) of a Russian waitress who can understand her customers perfectly, but in turn is not easily understood by them. The second section, “What the research says”, concisely summarizes theories and research on the topics pertinent to each myth. Finally, the third section, “What we can do”, offers tips that can be gleaned from the research and practical ways to integrate pronunciation instruction into the classroom.

The following section introduces the seven myths and offers a brief outline of how the authors approached each topic.

Myth 1: Once you have been speaking a second language for years, it’s too late to change your pronunciation. (Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro)
Derwing and Munro explore fossilization in depth in both first and second language speakers. In the end, they emphatically argue that pronunciation instruction is effective, even for L2 speakers who have been living for over a decade in
a country where the target language is spoken. Additionally, they stress the difference between accent, comprehensibility, intelligibility, and fluency, distinctions that are reiterated throughout the entire volume. They end by suggesting that classroom instructors should consider what is necessary for students to communicate successfully, prioritize these areas, and give explicit corrective feedback. Ultimately, they say, "Don’t wait for fossilization to happen" (p. 51).

Myth 2: Pronunciation instruction is not appropriate for beginning-level learners. (Beth Zielinski and Lynda Yates)
Zielinski and Yates explain that “it makes little sense to immerse beginning learners into the grammar and vocabulary of English but then leave them to struggle on their own with the pronunciation” (p. 59). Beginning learners feel that weak skills in pronunciation affect their ability to confidently interact with speakers in the target language. They want to improve their pronunciation skills and they want their teachers to teach it. Although few studies have focused on the beginner population, action research conducted in Australia provides encouraging results that indicate that beginners can develop awareness of basic terms and concepts (e.g., syllable, word stress, rhythm) needed to talk about pronunciation on a metalinguistic level. Zielinski and Yates suggest that instructors approach pronunciation in a systematic and scaffolded way. They also urge teachers to integrate pronunciation instruction into every lesson.

Myth 3: Pronunciation teaching has to establish in the minds of language learners a set of distinct consonant and vowel sounds. (John Field)
Field approaches this myth by questioning the mental representation of a phoneme. A phoneme is not a fixed, stable entity. It changes in the mouth of every speaker and in every linguistic context. For example, [a] uttered by a man is acoustically different than one uttered by a child, and the duration of the vowel depends on the following sound (e.g., “hard” vs. “heart”). What can instructors hope to achieve by teaching a segment in isolation? Will this actually help students’ pronunciation?

Field briefly explores five theories of how a phoneme is stored in the mind. The more recent theories suggest that we do not use the phoneme alone when we listen, but rather it is one feature of a much more complex web of stored information. Aligning himself with these claims, he ends the chapter by suggesting sounds be practiced at the syllable and word level. Additionally, learners should be exposed to a variety of voices, contexts, and accents, to offer them many exemplars of the L2 phonemes.

Myth 4: Intonation is hard to teach. (Judy Gilbert)
Speakers of a language use intonation, or prosody, to convey information beyond the semantic meaning of an utterance. For example, prosodic cues can be used
to indicate new or old information. However, these cues are not universal across languages. In English, falling pitch indicates the end of a statement, but in Hindi, it means the speaker is about to say the main point. “Failure to learn the ‘musical signals’ of English can also have serious social consequences” (p. 111). Traditional approaches to intonation were not teacher friendly and may have been outright wrong. Instead, Gilbert suggests that teachers first collaborate with their students to examine the ways their L1s use intonation. Because the rhythm of language is learned before age one, students may not be aware of how they use it. So the first step of teaching intonation may be to convince students of its existence, and then next, the L2 patterns can be introduced.

**Myth 5: Students would make better progress in pronunciation if they just practiced more. (Linda Grant)**

Grant explains that successful second language pronunciation in adult learners is not just a matter of how much they practice, but rather, it is a “function of several learner variables: age of onset, similarities between L1 and L2, extent of exposure to and use of L2, and affective factors” (p. 148). In this chapter, she explores each of these issues in more depth, and even looks at how they interact. For example, by adulthood many people speak in a way that is closely tied with their identities. Adults may then be less willing than children to adapt to the target language pronunciation patterns. For practical application of the research, Grant suggests setting realistic goals. Instead of native-like speech, learners should aim for clear intelligible speech.

**Myth 6: Accent reduction and pronunciation training are the same thing. (Ron Thomson)**

Thomson uses a three-way distinction proposed by Derwing and Munro (2009) to delineate accent programs: those that use a business model (“accent reduction”), a medical model (“accent modification”), and an education model (“pronunciation training”). Through internet searches, he compiled the average cost, mode of delivery, instructor credentials, instructor experience, and marketing claims of each type of program. He concludes by stressing that if foreign accent does not impede communication, L2 speakers should not be encouraged into costly and misleading accent reduction programs. Instead, language programs at accredited universities and colleges should be the ones to provide ethical pronunciation instruction to this audience.

**Myth 7: Teacher training programs provide adequate preparation in how to teach pronunciation. (John Murphy)**

Teacher cognition research investigates teacher beliefs, values, education, and readiness to teach. In this chapter, Murphy outlines eighteen of these studies, two
themes emerging from the results: educators feel unprepared to teach pronunciation, and they feel like more training is needed. He argues that, historically, MATESOL programs have provided “limited attention to pedagogical considerations and instructional techniques. Because the teacher preparation courses focused more on how phonological systems operate and less on how to teach pronunciation” (p. 196). Murphy suggests that readers of this volume advocate for university level coursework and take advantage of local workshops and accessible resources to build an activity recipe bank. He provides a thorough list of sources for further information.

Summary

This book is very easy to read, and will be a valuable addition to any teacher training program. The themes open the path to meaningful discussion for teachers-in-training to reflect on their own beliefs about second language phonological acquisition, and it offers a strong foundation to build best practices and research supported techniques for the classroom. I believe the volume’s content will be most useful for pre- or in-service language educators and TESOL program administrators. For L2 phonology researchers, this volume will be useful to fill gaps. For example, a researcher who focuses on segment training will appreciate a gentle introduction to intonation, and vice versa. All of the chapters offer many references for further reading of theories and both foundational and recent experimental studies. A weakness in the book is that some of the ideas presented in the third section of each myth are repetitious and not particularly innovative. However, the reference lists in the appendix of Chapter 7 created by John Murphy more than make up for this shortcoming, as he compiles twenty-three texts that can help a teacher build a strong arsenal of pronunciation lessons.

Over the past few decades, second language research and pedagogy has unfortunately overlooked pronunciation instruction. After finishing this book, readers will be energized to promote pronunciation instruction and they will be well informed in how to accomplish this task.

References


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