

Introduction

How This Book Came to Be

About twenty years ago, I read an article called “Pronunciation Myths and Facts” (Wong, 1993). In the space of two pages, the author examined and effectively debunked four common myths about second language pronunciation. Ever since then, I have begun pronunciation workshops by asking participants to share their beliefs and preconceptions about pronunciation teaching. The answers help me gauge the level of the workshop participants, but most interesting are the myths I hear over and over:

“My students are fossilized. They don’t seem to make progress in pronunciation.”

“Pronunciation is mostly repetition and minimal pair drills. That isn’t a very interesting way to teach.”

“Beginning students are too busy learning basic grammar and vocabulary to concentrate on pronunciation.”

“My students are from so many different language backgrounds. I can’t possibly meet their pronunciation needs.”

Given my penchant for pronunciation myths, it is no wonder that I was lured into the University of Michigan book exhibit at the international TESOL conference a few years ago by two titles, *Writing Myths* and *Vocabulary Myths*. Why not *Pronunciation Myths*, I thought? I must have been thinking out loud because soon after Kelly Sippell, ESL acquisitions editor, approached me and asked if I would consider writing this volume. Once she assured me that I could opt to edit the book as a collection of articles written by colleagues, we had an agreement. And that is the genesis of *Pronunciation Myths*.

Why Pronunciation Myths Persist

Myths do surround the teaching of pronunciation, and, even though they have little or no basis in empirical research, they are widespread. The prevalence of myths is not surprising, however. First of all, many ESL teachers lack the “basic confidence, skills, and knowledge” to teach pronunciation (Macdonald, 2002, p. 3). In a study of master’s level teacher preparation programs in the United States, Murphy (1997) found that few MATESOL courses in phonology were taught from a practical language-teaching perspective. A later study in Canada (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001) reported that well over half of the ESL instructors surveyed had no preparation in teaching pronunciation. And a follow-up to that Canadian study (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011) revealed that only 20 percent of the teachers surveyed had attended a university-level course expressly devoted to the teaching of pronunciation.

Another reason that myths persist is the relative shortage of information about pronunciation in the second language (L2) literature. Despite a recent increase in L2 pronunciation studies, research in this area lags far behind “other skills such as grammar and vocabulary” (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 380). A 2009 study analyzed the topics in 14 second language professional journals and found that the percentage of pronunciation-related articles published from 1999 to 2008 was similarly disproportionate (Deng, Holtby, Howden-Weaver, Nessim, Nicholas, Nickle, Pannekoek, Stephan, & Sun, 2009).

As we all know, nature abhors a vacuum, and these voids in reliable information open the door to misinformation and hearsay from a variety of sources. One is the popular media, which is sometimes accurate in its reporting of accented speech and often not. Another is accent reduction specialists with questionable training who promise quick, easy fixes for pronunciation issues that take time and effort to resolve. Unfortunately, conference sessions can also become sources of misinformation if the presenters have had only cursory training in applied phonology. At a recent state-sponsored TESOL conference, a speaker incorrectly claimed that learners could distinguish /b/ from /v/ by

holding a tissue in front of the mouth and observing a puff of air (called aspiration) move the tissue for /b/ but not for /v/. The fact is that neither /b/ nor /v/ are produced with a puff of air. Because aspiration does, however, distinguish /p/ from /b/, the speaker was likely confounding the /b/-/v/ and /p/-/b/ distinctions.

Misconceptions about pronunciation also originate from ESL course books, specifically those that claim to integrate pronunciation but do so only nominally. When pronunciation is routinely relegated to token “listen and repeat” exercises at the ends of chapters, students and teachers are apt to develop a simplistic view of pronunciation teaching and learning or to perceive pronunciation as incidental to oral proficiency.

The most serious problem with myths is that they shape the way teachers teach and can lead to counterproductive teaching practices. For example, when teachers assume that pronunciation is mostly individual consonant and vowel sounds, they may spend limited class time teaching all of the sounds as opposed to prioritizing and teaching the features that most impact overall intelligibility. And when teachers believe that the majority of adult learners are fossilized, class time devoted to pronunciation is likely to be negligible.

How the Book Is Organized

To set up the chapters, the book begins with **Prologue to the Myths: What Teachers Need to Know**. This updated look at basic pronunciation principles and concepts is strongly recommended as background reading for the chapters that follow. The body of the book has seven chapters, each dedicated to an established myth about L2 pronunciation. We did not necessarily choose the most popular myths because we do not yet have the research necessary to refute some of the more pervasive or preposterous misconceptions. The book concludes with an **Epilogue** by Donna Brinton, which brings closure to the discussions in the chapters.

Each chapter has three sections. The first, **In the Real World**, introduces and illustrates the myth with a first-person, real-world anecdote.

The second section, **What the Research Says**, brings research to bear in dispelling the myth or the parts of the myth that are unfounded. The final section, **What We Can Do**, provides practical suggestions for classroom activities, methods, and materials informed by the research.

Seven pronunciation authorities from four countries contributed chapters to this volume. Some authors are primarily researchers; others are mainly teacher educators, methodologists, or materials designers. What they all have in common is the unique ability to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Who Should Read This Book

Any pre- or in-service teacher, program administrator, or researcher who desires information about recent L2 pronunciation research and its application to classroom practice will benefit from this book. We see this volume as a potential resource for personal professional development, as supplementary reading in a semester-long applied phonology course, or as a course book in a short-term ESL teacher-preparation course.

Because we are acutely aware of the overall need for accurate, accessible information about L2 pronunciation, we have tried to avoid terminology and descriptions that are overly technical. Consequently, we hope this book will appeal to pronunciation non-specialists as well to more informed and experienced teachers/teacher-educators who wish to be more current with relevant research and the rapidly changing contexts for pronunciation teaching. More than 20 years ago, Joan Morley (1991), a pioneer in re-shaping L2 pronunciation pedagogy, commented that pronunciation instruction was not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. She was commenting on groups of learners whose unique needs challenged traditional views of pronunciation instruction in the mid-to-late 1980s. Nowadays, her statement has acquired new meaning as English has globalized and speaking and teaching contexts have diversified.

We hope *Pronunciation Myths* helps close the considerable divide between research and practice in pronunciation and inspires more col-

laboration between researchers and educators. Your feedback is welcome. Please direct comments and questions to the editors and authors through the University of Michigan Press at esladmin@umich.edu.

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