

# BOOK REVIEW ARTICLES



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## Teaching L2 English Pronunciation: Research and Course Design. A Critical Review of

John Murphy, ed. 2017. *Teaching the Pronunciation of English: Focus on Whole Courses*. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P. viii + 352 pp. ISBN: 978-0-472-03644-8.

Anna Jarosz. 2019. *English Pronunciation in L2 Instruction: The Case of Secondary School Learners*. Cham: Springer. xii + 165 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-13891-2.

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Second language (L2) speech acquisition differs from first language (L1) acquisition in that the user has an existing phonological system, namely that of the L1. As a result, adult L2 learners are likely to produce L1-accented L2 speech. In this regard, some L2 acquisition theories—especially early proposals—postulated the so-called Critical Period Hypothesis, which posits that native-like L2 pronunciation cannot be mastered after adolescence (Lenneberg 1967; Patkowski 1990; Scovel 1988). However, most contemporary speech acquisition theories, such as James E. Flege’s Speech Learning Model (1995, 2002), challenge the Critical Period notion and claim that “the mechanisms and processes used in learning the L1 sound system [...] remain intact over the life span and can be applied to L2 learning” (1995, 239). There are a variety of factors that play an important role in L2 speech acquisition, such as age of arrival in a new country, amount and type of input received and amount of language use (Flege 1981; Flege et al. 1999; Piske et al. 2001). Learners in an instructional setting often receive a limited amount of input as opposed to those living in the target language country. Metalinguistic awareness, which has been found to have a positive effect on L2 pronunciation (e.g., Ramírez Verdugo 2006; Kennedy and Trofimovich 2010; Mitrofanova 2012), is therefore a key factor that could compensate for the habitually scant L2 input and use in an L1 language learning setting.

In spite of the importance of metalinguistic awareness in L2 speech acquisition, pronunciation has traditionally received less attention in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses than other language skills, like grammar or vocabulary. Jennifer A. Foote et al. reported that many teachers spent less than five percent of their class time on pronunciation (2011, 18). A possible explanation for the lack of pronunciation practice in class is related to the teacher's insufficient training in this area. As some studies point out, ESL teachers often have a limited knowledge of the English sound system and may not have received adequate training on how to teach it (Breitkreutz et al. 2001; Baker 2011). Tracey M. Derwing and Murray J. Munro (2015) published a monograph that attempted to apply the research findings related to L2 pronunciation in the ESL classroom. The book, which provides a thorough insight into L2 pronunciation teaching, aims to serve as a guide for pronunciation teachers.

The two books under review share the same spirit as Derwing and Munro's monograph. They both aim to help English instructors to teach pronunciation and offer examples of course structures and activities. *English Pronunciation in L2 Instruction: The Case of Secondary School Learners*, by Anna Jarosz, is a monograph addressed to secondary school teachers as well as researchers. *Teaching the Pronunciation of English: Focus on whole Courses*, edited by John Murphy, includes examples of course content and activities that will be of use mostly—but not only—to English pronunciation teachers at university.

The main goals of each book will be discussed here. Jarosz's main goal is "to explore whether pronunciation instruction is feasible in a Polish upper-secondary school and whether it is required by learners who come from a variety of backgrounds and whose general aptitude and English proficiency levels differ" (2019, 131). To do so, the author conducted a longitudinal study to follow the progress of secondary school students during a thirty-hour pronunciation course—one hour per week during the whole school year. The study revealed that learners did benefit from the course and improved their pronunciation skills, especially in terms of fluency. However, the study has a number of limitations that temper the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn from its results. In the first place, the participants in the study were volunteers, which may be an indication that they were especially keen on English and were motivated to improve their pronunciation skills. Moreover, the design did not include a control group that did not complete the course, meaning that the author cannot determine that improvement stemmed solely from completing the course. A traditional English course and watching original content in English—e.g., TV shows or movies—could also have had a positive influence on their pronunciation proficiency.

As mentioned before, Murphy's edited volume is addressed to ESL teachers who would like to learn how to teach English pronunciation. Its main goal, therefore, is to provide instructors with useful tools with which to design and teach a pronunciation course. The objectives listed in the book include training English instructors to teach pronunciation in "either a pronunciation-centered course or within an ESOL course of a different instructional focus", as well as to "design and implement pronunciation

curricula [...], analyze language learners' pronunciation needs [...], work efficiently with contemporary instructional materials [and] apply contemporary technologies to pronunciation teaching" (Murphy 2017, 4-5). Moreover, the volume aims to provide the teacher with tools—such as audiovisual resources and software programs and the references cited in the different chapters—to continue their own training independently and use “contemporary pedagogic literature and related empirical research [and to] locate additional resource materials” (Murphy 2017, 6). It is a valuable resource for English pronunciation instructors written by experienced teachers, as it describes a total of ten courses—content, structure and examples of activities. This complete guide should be sufficient to make prospective teachers of English aware of what their pronunciation courses should cover and the type of resources and activities that they could use in class. On the whole, the volume seems to fulfil its objectives, as it provides a thorough training for prospective pronunciation teachers and may offer new ideas to current pronunciation instructors.

Given the different nature of the books, it is unsurprising that they have a different structural organization. In general, Jarosz (2019) is a well-organized monograph that has five chapters, as well as a brief introduction (ix-xii) and a conclusion (131-34). The first three chapters, which serve as an introduction to the study presented in the rest of the volume, review key factors related to L2 pronunciation teaching. They are divided into main sections, which are split into subsections, all mentioned in the contents page. They are all given descriptive titles, thus easing the search for a specific topic that the reader might like to revisit. The same structure is followed in the succeeding chapters, which present the study conducted by the author. Just as in the first three, sections and subsections are named descriptively, making it easy to jump directly to a specific part of the study, such as the methodology or—even more specifically—to a description of the participants.

The first chapter, “The Place of Pronunciation Instruction in the Teaching of English” (1-24), reviews the most important approaches to pronunciation teaching, particularly the Communicative Approach, which will be returned to later in this review. “Pronunciation Teaching Techniques and Materials” (25-46) goes over past and current methodologies and their effectiveness, and introduces teaching resources that might be of use to the reader. “Attitudes towards Pronunciation Instruction and Factors Affecting its Success” (47-72) is the last chapter devoted to the literature review. It acknowledges factors related to the teacher and the learner that may affect pronunciation instruction and acquisition. The fourth and fifth chapters present the author's own longitudinal study involving final-year secondary school learners, which follows the progress of students throughout an academic year. In addition to achievement in English pronunciation, it also investigates the students' attitudes towards English pronunciation in general and the pronunciation course in particular. “The Methodology of the Longitudinal Action-Research Study Among Secondary-School Learners” (73-96) sets out the research questions and goals and explains the

design of the study, including course content, the method used to assess students' improvement and the characteristics of the participants. Finally, "Results of the Study, Analysis and Discussion" (97-130) presents the outcome of the study, including the participants' performance before and after the pronunciation course as well as their observations during the interviews.

Murphy's (2017) edited volume, on the other hand, is divided into two main parts. The first part, "What Teachers Need to Know about Phonology," written by the editor, is a description of suprasegmental features of North American English that teachers of English pronunciation need to be familiar with—chapter one, "Suprasegmentals. Thought Groups, Prominence, Word Stress, Intonation and Pitch Jumps" (31-69)—as well as the segmental aspects—chapter two, "Segmentals: Phonemes, Allophones, Vowel Sounds, Consonants and Squeeze Zones" (70-106). Each chapter is divided into subsections that address specific aspects of pronunciation, such as thought groups and word stress in chapter one and English vowels in chapter two. However, these subsections are not outlined in the contents page, so finding a specific pronunciation feature involves flicking through the chapter. The second, and most extensive, part—"Descriptions of Whole Courses" (107-326)—is a collection of chapters written by experienced English pronunciation teachers who present the structure and type of activities performed in the courses that they have designed and taught. Even though the second part of the book is written by several authors, all chapters share a common organization, which results in a coherent structure. The common sections across these chapters, delimited by headings, are "Setting," "Conceptual Underpinnings," "Goals and Objectives," "Assessment," "Course Design," "Activity Types" and "Final Thoughts." Moreover, some teaching tips and discussion questions are introduced at the end of each chapter. The fact that all chapters in part two include the sections outlined above ensures that the reader—i.e., a potential pronunciation teacher—is provided with enough information and tools to design their own pronunciation course.

Most courses in Murphy's volume are addressed to university students, both at a graduate—chapter three (108-29), chapter four (130-54), chapter five (155-75), chapter seven (197-217)—and at an undergraduate level—chapter seven (197-217), chapter eight (218-38), chapter ten (262-84). Chapter three, "Pronunciation and Communication for Graduate Student Researchers and Conference Presenters," by Carolyn Samuel, describes a course designed to improve young academics' intelligibility and presentation skills focusing mostly on suprasegmentals. Chapter four, Veronica Sardegna and Alison McGregor's "Oral Communication for International Graduate Students and Teaching Assistants" explains a course for graduate students and teaching assistants with different L1s, which means that the teacher needs to address the individual challenges that each learner may have and hold individual interviews with them. In chapter five, "A University-Based Online 'Pronunciation Tutor'," Edna Lima and John Levis propose an online pronunciation course. In terms of undergraduate courses, the one described in chapter eight, "Small Group Tutoring in ESL Pronunciation for Pre-

Professional Undergraduates,” by Christina Michaud and Marnie Reed, consists of a series of tutoring sessions with three to four students that “was developed as an innovative response to a significant expansion of enrolment of international students” (225). In chapter ten, “A Haptic Pronunciation Course for First-Year ESL College Students,” Nathan Kielstra and William Acton describe a course with a haptic approach to L2 pronunciation teaching. Body movement and intrapersonal touch are used to anchor phonetic features such as vowels, word stress, rhythm and intonation. Chapter seven, “Advanced English Pronunciation for Undergraduate and Graduate Students,” by Lynn Henrichsen, presents an elective university course for learners studying a variety of degrees both at an undergraduate and graduate level—e.g., Engineering, Chemistry, Business Management. The author emphasizes the importance of enjoyable learning and describes a variety of engaging activities.

Although most courses are embedded in a university context, chapter twelve (307-26) refers to a different type of learners, namely secondary school students. Under the title “Teaching Prosody to ESL Middle Schoolers: Pre-Teens and Teens,” Tamara Jones explains how she introduced prosody in content-based lessons for students in grades seven to nine in a British School in Belgium. Chapter eleven, “The Color Vowel Chart: Teaching Pronunciation to Beginning-Level Adults” (285-306), written by Karen T. de Caballero and Claire Schneider, depicts a course for adults in an immersion setting. The Color Vowel Chart is used as a tool to promote phonological awareness by means of terms simpler than those used in articulatory or acoustic description.

Finally, chapters six and nine present courses designed for a more heterogeneous class. In chapter six, titled “Phonology Applied: Developing the Oral Communication Skills of L1 and L2 Speakers” (176-96), Graeme Couper describes a hybrid course attended by both a group of L2 learners and a group of native teachers, so that they can benefit from one another—the future ESL teachers help the L2 learners and simultaneously gain experience of how to teach L2 pronunciation. The ninth chapter, “Teaching Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca in England and in Spain” (239-61), by Laura Patsko and Robin Walker, presents a course in which English pronunciation is taught with a lingua franca approach. The course took place in two different contexts, namely an immersion setting at a private language school where mixed-L1 learners studying business were trained in their English pronunciation, and at a Spanish university, where Spanish learners of English—with a common L1—studying a degree in tourism management improved their pronunciation skills.

Having compared and described each book’s structural organization and content, we shall now identify some of their recurrent topics. One of the main aspects that the two books have in common is that they both take a Communicative Approach to L2 pronunciation. From this perspective, the main objective of learning L2 pronunciation is to improve communicative competence, that is, to use language in an effective and appropriate manner (Richards and Rodgers 2006). However, the two books differ in the understanding and application of this framework. On the one hand,

Jarosz's course combines traditional audio-lingual activities—e.g., listen and repeat, listen and discriminate, minimal pair practice—with slightly more communicative exercises like acting out dialogues in order to achieve effective communication. On the other hand, Murphy's volume goes a step further and describes innovative courses where English pronunciation is taught mostly communicatively, using activities such as observing, annotating and imitating native speakers' speech, giving presentations or peer-tutoring activities.

The fact that effective communication is the main goal of the Communicative Approach is tightly linked to another point that the two books have in common, namely the emphasis on the importance of *intelligibility* and *comprehensibility*. Intelligibility—how much of a speaker's content can be understood—comprehensibility—the effort needed by the listener in order to understand the speaker—and *accent*—the perceived differences between the speaker and the listener's speech—are the three main elements that influence pronunciation according to Derwing and Munro (1997, 2015). Whereas comprehensibility and intelligibility have a direct impact on effective communication, accent does not. Both Jarosz's and Murphy's volumes follow Derwing and Munro's (2015) view, which posits that comfortable intelligibility is a realistic goal for L2 learners. Suprasegmental features are considered to contribute to comprehensibility and fluency to a greater extent than segmental features (Jenner 1989; Roach 1991; Derwing and Rossiter 2003; Hahn 2004; Gilbert 2008). As a result, the courses proposed in Murphy cover mostly suprasegmentals. The editor's recommended order of teaching begins with an early introduction of thought grouping, prominence and word stress, which provide the learner with a wider picture of English pronunciation (2017, 32). Conversely, following Celce Murcia et al. (2010), Jarosz's course takes a more balanced view, which considers that both segmentals and suprasegmentals are important and contribute to intelligibility and comprehensibility. As a result, the course that she proposes has a more traditional curriculum and thoroughly covers segmental features, whereas it only considers some connected speech processes—weak forms, assimilation, /t/ elision and linking—towards the end of the course. Even though comfortable intelligibility should be sufficient to cover the communicative needs of L2 learners, Jarosz's study, as previous works have also found (Timmis 2002; Sifakis and Sougari 2005), points out that most students would like to acquire a near-native accent. In line with John C. Wells (2005), Jarosz claims that aiming at a native accent will enhance motivation and set a clear direction for the instructor regarding course content (2019, 75).

In spite of the fact that the books under review describe courses that cover different phonetic features, both of them emphasize the importance of metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness. Being aware of the phonological and phonetic features of the target language and how a student's L1 differs from their L2 plays an important role in the mastering of L2 pronunciation and the cancelling of L1 transfer (Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk 2002; Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk et al. 2013). In this regard, Jarosz claims that “awareness

is the key to success” (2019, 67) and trains L2 pronunciation by explicitly teaching phonetic and phonological aspects of the target language. Metacognitive awareness provides learners with the ability to self-monitor their speech and continue improving independently outside the classroom. Furthermore, it may also increase motivation (Scott and Winograd 1990). Alene Moyer (2014) found that successful learners of L2 pronunciation have an explicit concern for L2 speech, and master metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring, imitating L2 native speakers and paying attention to difficult phonological features. The importance attached to metacognitive awareness becomes evident in both these books through some of the activities that students are asked to perform. For example, in chapter four in Murphy’s volume, the first activity that L2 learners have to complete in the course consists in reflecting on their own performance during an oral self-introduction in their L1 and L2 that they have videotaped previously. After self-assessing their speech in their L2 and comparing it to their L1, students will have raised awareness of their limitations, which will help them set specific goals (2017, 137). Similarly, in Jarosz’s course participants are asked to reflect on their aptitude and speaking skills and make notes throughout its duration (2019, 92).

Being aware of their own skills and limitations is not only important for learners, but also for pronunciation instructors. A diagnostic exercise at the beginning of the course is a useful tool to discover the students’ initial proficiency and set individual goals, which will determine the specific pronunciation aspects that each student will need to improve. Several courses presented in Murphy’s volume include a diagnostic exercise—chapters three, four, five, seven, eight and twelve. For instance, in the secondary school course presented by Jones in chapter twelve, students have to read a diagnostic passage “that demonstrates their strengths and challenges” (2017, 311). Diagnosis and individualization become more relevant in a mixed-L1 classroom. In chapter seven, the course presented by Henrichsen devotes its first few days of class to identifying each student’s particular challenges and to designing what the author calls their own Personal Pronunciation Improvement Plan (2017, 204). The diagnostic test proposed is complete and includes reading a passage aloud, an oral self-introduction and a perception test involving segmentals and suprasegmentals, as well as a background questionnaire. On some occasions, the same diagnostic activity may be completed at the end of the course in order to assess the learner’s improvement. In chapter eight, Michaud and Reed’s students are asked to read a list of sentences—which test specific suprasegmental aspects—as well as to produce spontaneous speech on a controlled topic both at the beginning and at the end of the course (2017, 223). Similarly, Jarosz’s students are asked to read the same passage before and after the course (2019, 93).

Finally, regarding style, both books use clear and concise language, which should be accessible enough for their potential audience—L2 English teachers who may or may not be familiar with more research-oriented sources. Jarosz’s book does present a study, but its clear organization along with a direct language makes it accessible to a wide audience. As for Murphy’s volume, even though it is clearly founded on empirical

evidence—as becomes apparent in the introduction and in the descriptions of the courses—its practical nature makes it straightforward and easy to understand. The book exhibits a mastery of narrative techniques that make it highly engaging for the reader. In part one, the editor tells a number of personal anecdotes—e.g., being mistaken for his older brothers by his teachers—and some chapters in part two start by telling a story about one of the learners enrolled in the course. For example, chapter eleven tells the story of Sandra, a Mexican woman who, despite having lived in the US for eighteen years, had heavily accented speech. Towards the end of the chapter, de Caballero and Schneider reflect on how the Color Vowel Chart helped Sandra discriminate English vowels and she could then, using her own words, “listen in colors” (2017, 303).

All in all, the two books under review are a useful read for both English pronunciation teachers and English instructors who would like to introduce English pronunciation in an ESL course. Jarosz’s book is a well-documented monograph that investigates a population of pronunciation learners that has until now been understudied. Whereas most research focuses on university students, her study analyzes the progress made by Polish L2 secondary students through an entire pronunciation course and gathers their interests and attitudes towards L2 pronunciation. Murphy’s collection is a valuable resource for L2 English pronunciation teachers, since it provides them with tools and examples to develop their own pronunciation course. Finally, both books address important topics, such as what the realistic objective for L2 learners should be and the importance of metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness when it comes to L2 acquisition.

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