

# Learners' views of social issues in pronunciation learning

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Success in L2 pronunciation learning is affected by both individual differences and social influences on learning. While individual differences have been extensively researched, social influences have not. This study examines the beliefs and attitudes of advanced learners of English in regard to their pronunciation abilities and improvement. Twelve graduate students took part in four weeks of individualized pronunciation tutoring followed by interviews asking about their pronunciation, use of English, and their pronunciation in social contexts. The interviews revealed four images of their pronunciation learning. The first was that their spoken language skills left them feeling pulled in conflicting directions; the second was that they believed that accents could be 'caught' (like a cold) from the models around them (whether those models were seen as good or bad); the third concerned the students' views of accent and identity, which by and large were not seen as connected; and the fourth suggested that they saw themselves as separate from regular social contact in the L2. Each of these images involved contradictory beliefs about the nature of pronunciation improvement and its relationship to social interaction. These beliefs made improvement in pronunciation difficult. It is only by helping learners address these contradictory beliefs that greater pronunciation improvement will be possible.

**Key words:** L2 pronunciation, social contexts, accent, identity, improvement, acculturation, speaking, nativeness.

## 1. Introduction

Pronunciation improvement in a second language is complex. It correlates closely with age of acquisition (AOA) and has often been held up as evidence of a critical period in second language acquisition (Scovel, 1988). In other words, past a certain age, L2 learners are not thought to be capable of native-like pronunciation because they have missed a biologically and cognitively determined window of opportunity. Despite this, there are large variations in the extent to which adult L2 learners master L2 pronunciation features. Some may remain largely unintelligible despite instruction, while others are hard to distinguish from native speakers even without instruction. Research has shown that the correlation of age with L2 pronunciation acquisition may instead be due to when someone first learns the L2 (Hopp & Schmid, 2013), experience with the language as well as the quality of that experience (Moyer, 2004). In addition to these factors, social factors such as attitudes toward the language and those who speak it may play a large role in acquisition. Moyer (2014) examined the success of exceptional learners in L2 phonology and argued that the reasons some L2 learners succeed better than others include a combination of cognitive and sociolinguistic factors. *Exceptional* refers to learners who "defy the critical period hypothesis" (p. 3) and sound like natives even though they learned the pronunciation of the L2 after the age of 10, either in controlled or spontaneous speech tasks. Moyer looked at examples of exceptional learners from her own research and previous studies in order to identify common features among those who can be classified as exceptional. She identified

five factors: a metacognitive approach to language learning (they think about what they are doing and how to improve); a strong identification with the language; a desire to sound like native speakers; an outgoing approach to language learning; and wide use of the new language in many domains (e.g., work, home, social situations). What is striking about these common features is how many of them are social in nature. Exceptional learners become exceptional because they use the language in many contexts and identify with those who speak the language. This also suggests that most unexceptional learners may not be strongly socially oriented. It is these learners that we address in this paper.

### 1.1. Social factors and L2 pronunciation learners

A number of social factors have been identified as relevant to L2 pronunciation achievement. The first is identity, or how one perceives oneself as fitting into or being distinct from a group. Pronunciation is thought to have a special connection to conceptions of identity, though the connection is hard to specify. Zuengler (1988) wrote “pronunciation is a domain within which one’s identity is expressed” (p. 34). This reflects the special sensitivity listeners have for pronunciation differences. Not only can untrained listeners identify accented speech in very short segments of speech (Flege, 1984), they can also identify accented speech when the clarity of speech is completely masked or cut up and played backwards (Munro, Derwing, & Burgess, 2010). Indeed, even when listeners are unfamiliar with the language they are listening to, they appear able to distinguish native from nonnative speakers (Major, 2007). Such sensitivity becomes in many situations a way to separate those who are “in the group” from those who are not. The biblical story of the *shibboleth* is about speakers from a competing tribe who were ethnically indistinguishable but could not pronounce the “sh” at the beginning of the word. This pronunciation difference led to their identification as outsiders (and subsequent deaths). Language shibboleths of all sorts have been and continue to be used to distinguish insiders from outsiders (see McNamara, 2005, for current examples).

### 1.2. Pronunciation and identity

Although identity is often thought to be inflexible, there is evidence that it is changeable and that identities are fluid, being built and rebuilt over time depending on the social context speakers find themselves (e.g., Lybeck, 2002; Marx, 2002; Piller, 2002). Cutler (2014) writes about how young immigrants may identify with and take on cultural uses of language (e.g., hip hop) even when they do not have face-to-face contact with actual speakers. Perceptions of identity are clearly under the control of L2 speakers. Marx (2002), in writing about her attempts to fit into German society while learning German as a college student, discovered that “identities do not exist within people, but are constructed between them in interaction. This shift may have in part been due to the fact that I had constructed a new C2 [second culture] identity” (p. 274).

### 1.3. Pronunciation and agency

Individual differences in L2 pronunciation may also be connected to the amount of work learners do in trying to change their pronunciation. In other words, learners make choices about their pronunciation, and they

“are active agents in their language use, language choices, and targets for acquisition ... they are not passive recipients of the target language, and variation in production is typically systematic and may be due, in part, to social marking due to gender, identity, accommodation to the interactant and the linguistic environment” (Hansen Edwards, 2008, p. 251).

This kind of agency can be seen in the cognitive and social factors identified by Moyer. While one can clearly see that this implies language learners who think about what they are doing and how to improve in relation to language structure and use, it also implies that successful (and exceptional) learners seek out opportunities for language use with native speakers and use the language in as many contexts as they can.

In multilingual contexts, agency is affected by loyalty toward different linguistic communities. In their study of Chinese-speaking immigrants in Quebec, Gatbonton, Magid, and Trofimovich

(2005) showed how speakers chose between English and French identification. Additionally, the degree of Chinese accent affected listener views of leadership potential inside the Chinese community and in relation to interactions with those outside the community. Those with accents more resembling the L2 were seen as better inter-group representatives, while those with accents that were more Chinese-influenced were seen as better intra-group leaders. In an examination of Mexican American English in Texas, Thomas (2014) examined the speech of residents of “North Town” where Mexican Americans have a long history and in which the town’s social structure is sharply divided between Anglo-Americans and Mexican Americans. Thomas examined 24 potential sociolinguistic variables of accent and found that ethnicity was the most important variable. He explains the strength of this variable by describing the historic shifts in the power structure of the town.

#### **1.4. Pronunciation and participation**

Moyer’s characteristics of exceptional learners also suggest that pronunciation change occurs most successfully inside a social context, or as Marx says, learners must “participate in a community of knowledge and practice” (Marx, 2002, p. 265). We learn our first language within a social context, we develop our ways of speaking in relation to the ways others speak, and this is likely to be operative in a new language as well. Acquisition in new cultures occurs best when learners are socially connected (Miller, 2003). Piller (2002) examined bilingual couples in Germany who could pass for native speakers in limited contexts (such as service encounters). She discovered that those who pass for native speakers (NSs) often have the closest connection to the sociolinguistic realities of the target culture. Some of the “passers” used nonstandard dialect forms, either in vocabulary or in pronunciation to help them pass. In Germany, this meant using forms that were not favoured by standard language use but which had strong regional or social identity value. Presumably, German speakers who heard these forms identified the speaker as coming from a dialect area (that is, a native speaker of a type of German) rather than from a different language.

Social uses of language are not only critical for successful learning, they may be critical for access to opportunities in the second language and culture. Accent in particular may be used as a way to mark L2 speakers as “other” in workplaces and other social contexts. Harrison (2014) says “employers routinely form initial impressions of job applicants on the basis of their linguistic presentation, using accent to make inferences about social group membership and level of competence. In these contexts, vocal features such as accent and speech style serve as signifiers of status and credibility” (p. 205). While accent may lead to discrimination (Lippi-Green, 2012; Munro, 2003), language-related work (i.e., work that requires the ability to interact in the language of business) is the fastest-growing segment of many advanced economies (Harrison, 2014), and language and accent provide cultural capital that can only be used through social participation.

L2 learners, especially those in second-language contexts, are very aware of the perceived value of more native-like accents (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). However, there is little research about what advantages L2 speakers think improved pronunciation will give them and how they think such improvement will occur. These issues form the basis of this study and the following research questions.

## **2. Research Questions**

1. How do learners view the impact of their pronunciation on their personal and professional identities?
2. What do they want to achieve with their pronunciation and how do they think their goals might be achieved?

### 3. Methodology

The research followed the guidelines for a phenomenological study (Patton, 2002) in which we describe the lived experience of language learners and how they view their pronunciation and its relation to social factors. Twelve university students in the United States who voluntarily took part in pronunciation tutoring were interviewed. All were graduate students in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. They were recruited from the Iowa State University community to take part in tutoring in connection with a course for ESL teachers on the teaching of pronunciation. The tutors were a combination of native and nonnative teachers. All those being tutored were advanced in their use of English and had paper-based TOEFL scores above 580 (or the equivalent in other forms of the test). Their spoken proficiency, however, varied and typically was weaker than their knowledge of grammar and reading. They volunteered for the tutoring because of concerns about their English pronunciation. Each of the tutees was enrolled in advanced language skills classes for writing skills. Their countries of origin were South Korea (4), China (2), Malaysia (2), Egypt (1), Taiwan (1), Vietnam (1), and Russia (1).

Each tutor/tutee pair took part in four weeks of pronunciation tutoring (approximately one hour per week). Tutoring was individualized. Each tutee completed a recording of their speech including both reading aloud and spontaneous speech. This recording was analyzed by their tutor, checked by the instructor of the course, and used to identify 3-4 high-value instructional targets for tutoring. Each tutoring target was taught each week for 15-20 minutes. The 12 tutees were also recruited to answer questions about their pronunciation for this study. Each was interviewed after the tutoring in open-ended interviews lasting 30-50 minutes regarding their experience of having a foreign accent. One interviewer took the lead in each interview but both were involved in the interview equally.

Each of the interviews was fully transcribed and was analyzed for emergent themes, especially those having to do with the social consequences of living with accented English, and the effects on their identity and other social factors. We identified four consistent themes from the interviews, with each theme being characterized by contradictory sets of beliefs that appeared to limit the learners' ability to change. The interview excerpts that follow are representative of comments made by a variety of students.

## 4. Results: Four Themes

### 4.1. Theme 1: Being pulled in different directions

The first theme we heard repeatedly in the interviews was that these students were uncomfortable, and that at the heart of their discomfort was their pronunciation. They felt that they were being pulled in different directions and tried to minimize their discomfort, sometimes by working on their pronunciation, but more often by avoiding opportunities for oral communication in English. The first example comes from a Malaysian student. In general, he had highly intelligible pronunciation and excellent interaction skills. But he was not happy with his pronunciation and felt that it would hold him back from his goals of being a professor once he had finished his dissertation.

#### Example 1

Interviewer – *Do you find it equally easy to understand students from different countries? Speaking English? Or there are some people that are easier to understand [in English?]*

JPC – [For me,] *I think it's easier because I learned to, you know, all those steps until I get to here, I mean, I'm kind of stuck between, you know, really good English and really bad English I'm kind of like, you know, I'm stuck here...*

His description sounds like Marx's (2000) self-report of her journey into and out of German, where she actually seemed to lose her access to her L1, English before she gained sufficient access to German. This student went to school in English while in Malaysia, but now perceives that his English was somehow sub-standard to what he hears around him. His pronunciation is

the most audible element of being stuck. Surprisingly, he found himself in what could be seen as the ideal learning situation. He was in a lab with American graduate students and no other Malaysian students, yet he was full of excuses about why he did not take advantage of the opportunities he had. For example, he told us he had to concentrate on his work, other people didn't talk a lot, and he was tired at the end of a day's work as reasons for why he did not interact more with his fellow graduate students. He did not see that the social interaction may have been a way for him to reach the long-term goals that he instead sought through the pronunciation tutoring.

The second example of being stuck comes from a Russian student. This student, who was extraordinarily fluent and communicative, gives voice to her feeling that people see her not as an educated professional and accomplished researcher but as the exact opposite - she is stuck between an objective reality and the fear of others' perceptions.

### Example 2

Interviewer – *So if you could have any accent when you speak English, what would you want to sound like?*

AB – *...I don't know. I guess right now the most important is that people will understand me correctly and maybe I will have less Russian accent because I thought I think when I speak English because I have that strong accent, my feeling like people think that I am non-educated person, but I talk with my boss, and he told me that otherwise. When he hears Russian accent he thinks that it sounds very intelligent.*

Interviewer – *So he's sensitive to that.*

AB – *Yes, also because he thinks that people in our lab speak with different American accent. So I'm not sure that if Russian sounds intelligent or not.*

The encouragement of her professor has clearly not helped her feel comfortable with her accent. She has an expert judgment that her accent does not make listeners think less of her abilities, but she doesn't seem to believe it. This student's beliefs about her pronunciation and the ways it marks her can be understood in light of Gluszek and Dovidio's (2010) work on the stigmatizing effects of pronunciation on the learner, causing learners to believe the worst about the effects of their pronunciation and not to be able to evaluate their speech with a modest degree of accuracy. As a result, such L2 users experience a feeling of not belonging. A mark of this for the Russian student appears to be a willingness to believe that others will hear her as not intelligent, despite the words from her boss.

Our third example comes from a non-student taking part in the tutoring. One of the graduate students in the program attended a Korean church, and his pastor and the pastor's wife asked if they could take part in the tutoring. This pastor is also stuck between his professional goals, which depend on better use of English, and his reality, in which his social world is lived in his L1 and is somewhat insulated from the C2. We say somewhat because he was part of a larger English-speaking church organization and had to interact regularly with English-speaking pastors and bishops. This interaction led to his deep discomfort with his pronunciation skills. His discomfort was also increased by his unwillingness to speak English with his Korean church members. Because of his position of authority, he felt they would look down on him because of his perceived poor command of English. So in his daily life of ministering to his congregation he felt he had to stay in Korean, not because it was more effective, but because he feared having his members look down on him. When he had to interact at area meetings of his church equals or authorities, he felt inadequate because his English pronunciation made him doubt his abilities.

### Example 3

CK – *Um... almost seven days a week I met Korean peoples. I speak Korean language but I live in USA so I have to meet I have to meet American peoples such as like superintendents or American church pastors and church members... So, that's why I need in English....I have a membership in such in Korean Methodist church so I would like I'd like to transfer membership to (an*

*Iowa) conference so I request to bishop, but their response to me ... you have to learn you have to speak English.*

He speaks English, he has lived in the United States 10 years, but he perceives himself and is perceived by others as not having basic abilities in the dominant language. And for him, speaking means pronunciation. Professionally, he cannot advance; he is stuck between the culture that he lives in and the subculture that he can function in, and sees the tutoring as a way to address his social and professional stagnation.

These three examples share a common belief that pronunciation in English is the reason for not being able to access the larger culture. Their pronunciation in each case may not be an actual limitation, but it is perceived as a block to professional and personal progress in the new culture.

#### **4.2. Theme 2: 'Catching' pronunciation from others**

Our second theme has to do with the learners' belief that you can catch pronunciation from others. For many of those we interviewed, this theme often sounded like one related to illness or contagious diseases and the learners' comments were frequently stated in negative terms. However, their comments were more nuanced, saying that the quality of the input (who they were taught by or heard) affected the quality of the output (their own improved pronunciation). In other words, they seemed to say, "My pronunciation will only be as good as that of the people I learn from." In our first example, a Chinese graduate student indicated her beliefs that having the right teacher, that is, one with an acceptable accent, would provide the opportunity for effective practice. She recognized the possibility that knowledgeable teaching may be important, but felt more strongly that habitual exposure to the input of a native speaker was most valuable.

##### Example 4

*XY – When you speak with the native speaker you can the more you speak with native speaker the more you can make their habit to your own habit. [It's like] practice if I take some classes and it's given by native speaker...I will repeat them repeat what they said in my mind. So I think that is a kind of practice.*

*Interviewer – Do you think that a non-native speaker might be a better teacher since she would know what you had been through? Or does that not do enough? That it's still better to have a native speaker accent?*

*XY – Mm I think if a native speak- non-native speaker gets it, it's also a good point, if non-native will understand better of the accent problem and we may work on it. But also I found that if a non-native speaker may give you new habit speaking habit that I mean, if you always speak to if me always speak to people from India. I mean learned their speaking accent habit.*

This student recognized that there would be some work involved in taking on the native speaker's speech, but at the same time feared that the osmosis would also work the other way in learning the 'speaking accent habit' of nonnative teachers (which to her is clearly undesirable). The noteworthy thing about this attitude is not the student's desire for input that fits her desired output, or her recognition that effective teaching is important, but rather that she lived and worked surrounded by potential native input yet did not make use of it.

The next example comes from another Malaysian student, one who was a very self-aware learner. Her English was fluent, grammatical, and mostly intelligible. Overall, she seemed to be a very good language learner who wanted to perfect her pronunciation. This student's tutor was a nonnative speaker (NNS), but she was also as close to a NS in pronunciation as could be. (We asked all of the tutees who had NNS tutors about their perception of having a NNS teacher and whether they would be interested in continuing the experience if possible.)

##### Example 5

*Interviewer – If you had the option of doing more tutoring sessions with either your same tutor or with one who was born in the U.S., would you have a preference?*

*ZMN – I would like go for the native speaker.*

Interviewer – *The native? Even though you said your tutor was just like a native speaker.*

ZMN – *Because you said that if I have better option [laughs]*

What is particularly interesting is the student's use of the words "better option", something we never said or even suggested in our question. She was strongly aware of the excellence of her tutor's English, that the tutor had learned her pronunciation from NS teachers and that we had paired them precisely because her tutor was native-like in pronunciation. Nonetheless, the student still seemed to believe that she had been given second-best.

The third example comes from our interview with a student from Vietnam. His view of input, like many students, indicated that his difficulties with pronunciation had deep roots because of the quality of the teachers he had in his home country. As a student, he did what he was asked, but he had no way of knowing whether his imitations were accurate. That only became apparent when he had to use his English in a communicative context where his pronunciation had consequences (i.e., the United States).

#### Example 6

LN – *Right, they don't have kind of, you know, fancy stuff [laughs] So they don't rec, you know, in Vietnam right now is better, but in the past even they don't have enough in a teacher, the teacher don't have you know enough to try to teach the student, but they speak out and you repeat it, if they speak right if you repeats right and you right, otherwise you wrong, if they wrong, you follow them and you wrong.*

The belief that quality input in the form of native speech was essential to quality output (i.e., their own pronunciation) was deep-seated in the comments made by the tutees. Clearly, the presence of native input in the environment was not enough for their improvement, but none of the tutees appeared to question the superiority of native input. They had not learned English pronunciation correctly because of their previous NNS teachers, and well-trained and native-like pronunciation tutors were not the best option if the tutor was not an authentic native speaker.

### **4.3. Theme 3: Pronunciation and Identity**

The third theme that was apparent in the interviews had to do with the weak or nonexistent connection of identity and pronunciation in the students' comments. Because identity is frequently connected to pronunciation and/or accent (e.g., Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Lippi-Green, 2012; Zuengler, 1988), and because some have argued that asking students to change their pronunciation unfairly asks them to change their identity (Jenkins, 2000), we wanted to find out what the students thought about how changes in pronunciation would influence their views of themselves. Perhaps our greatest difficulty was in getting the students to understand what we were asking. Overwhelmingly, they reacted with disbelief and barely disguised contempt that anyone could believe something so foolish. The first excerpt, in Example 7, uses the word *absurd* to characterize the viewpoint we asked about.

Clearly, this student (who was representative of most students we talked to) has a clear division between what she sounds like and her sense of herself as Chinese. She also gives a very nuanced sense of how identity is not fixed, but flexible, changing according to many factors. Pronunciation is, to her, a communicative tool. Her view is strongly utilitarian, but represents how most looked at pronunciation: it is simply a way to communicate more effectively, not something that affects how they view themselves.

#### Example 7

Interviewer – *[Now] one of the things that that shows up in research studies about pronunciation is that sometimes researchers say that somebody with a Chinese accent for example, shouldn't try to sound like a native speaker because it would make them less Chinese.*

YL – *What does less Chinese mean?*

Interviewer – *That somehow you, by having a native accent you would be going against your Chinese identity. What do you think about that?*

YL – *I think is absurd. Pronunciation is pronunciation, nationality is nationality or identity you can have a lot of identities but you don't have to work on the, you know, pronunciation.*

Interviewer – *So pronunciation is just a little piece of things. Your identity is bigger than that.*

YL – *Yeah, yeah. It's irrelevant, you need to because pronunciation is a part of communication you want others other people to understand you that's our main goal.*

Not all students failed to see the connection between how they sounded and who they understood themselves to be. Our Russian student had lived in the United States for some time before starting graduate school. During that time, she worked in a small town in a shop where she had to communicate in English each day. She was painfully aware of her Russian accent, and had seen that many people struggled to understand her. However, she recognized that in an English-speaking environment, that accent grounded her in who she was. She wanted excellent English pronunciation to communicate and to feel comfortable, but she did not want an accent that hid her Russianness, an identity of which she was proud. She wanted it to be obvious that she was Russian, but not so obvious that it would affect communication.

#### Example 8

Interviewer – *So if [Interviewer 2] could wave her magic wand and give you any accent you wanted, would it make you less Russian?*

AB – *I don't think so and I think it will be very interesting so people will be surprised afterwards find that I am Russian. I guess I want my Russian accent only for ten percent out of what I have it now and probably that's all.*

Interviewer – *So just a little bit of Russian accent.*

AB – *Yeah, maybe in some words and that's all...*

Identity is likely more closely connected to pronunciation than our subjects believed, but the consistency of their reactions to our questions was noteworthy. Pronunciation was, to them, a tool for communication. They did not see how it would make them different or at least feel differently about themselves. Most of those interviewed saw better pronunciation as a badge of honor. Jenkins (2005) found that NNS English teachers had ambivalent feelings toward native accents, and that accent was a complicated element in their personal and professional identities. Their ambivalence was not shared by these learners. However, it was clear that a connection between L2 pronunciation and identity was not uppermost in these learners' minds.

#### **4.4. Theme 4: Living in a bubble**

It is well-established that changes in pronunciation are most likely when the target language is regularly used in a social context (Levis & Moyer, 2014), or even better, in multiple domains of use (Moyer, 2014). One of the most surprising things to emerge from our interviews was just how little social contact students had with English speakers. The lack of social connection made it hard to use their English, and the resulting discomfort with their English made it hard to make social connections. Example 9 highlights the views of a woman who had lived in the United States for 10 years, but felt as if she was in a cultural bubble related to her husband's work in a Korean church. She was very outgoing, yet found herself struggling to keep connections going even when they were available. Using her English was tiring, and using her Korean was much easier, so she sought out contact with Korean speakers.

#### Example 9

HK – *So sometimes... oh! I don't need to speak English so before I met [my tutor] my situation really changes several things blah blah blah before I met [my tutor] when I met American sometimes I sleepy really sleepy because [laughs]*

Interviewer - *Sleepy?*

HK – *Yeah because I when I speak English I need more energy.*

Interviewer – *Ahh.*



HK – *Nervous something and speaking I need when I speak in English just just not speaking I have another processing and thinking and something and...*

AB (Example 10) crystallized the kind of social isolation students often found themselves in. Living in a second language context is supposed to be beneficial because native speakers are easily accessible, the target language is spoken everywhere in society, and it is straightforward to access input. This did not appear to be the case for many students, who found themselves linguistically isolated. In the Coleridge poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the narrator describes how being stranded on the ocean led to a situation in which there was “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.” Similarly, students found themselves often in a place where there was “English, English everywhere, and not a word to speak.” She even felt that she had a better chance to speak English in Russia.

#### Example 10

AB – *So basically those are classes this is the only opportunity you can speak with people, on the otherwise like I do not speak with anybody so, and I guess this is also the problem why my maybe English language skills deteriorated at this time because I studied English six hours a week in Russia. And when I came to United States we will sit in this class in classroom and we will study and we will speak and we will do different exercise but when I get here I understood very often I will say “hello” only to the bus driver and good bye and that’s all.*

This isolation was a consistent theme for most of those we interviewed, and their participation in the pronunciation tutoring seemed often to be a way to address their perceived problems without having to get out of their bubble. They had many excuses about why they could not be more socially involved, and no doubt, many of the excuses were valid. But in the end, they found the social isolation more comfortable than seeking out social interactions in English.

## **5. Discussion**

This study looked at two questions. First, it asked how learners viewed the impact of their pronunciation on their personal and professional identities. Second, it examined what these learners want to achieve with their pronunciation and how they think their goals might be achieved. The answer to the first question is clear, at least in regard to their professional selves. These learners see pronunciation as one of the key factors holding them back professionally. Whether their goals have to do with being a professor, being a pastor, or simply being heard as professionally competent, the learners see their pronunciation as a block to their professional advancement. Personally, the answer is less clear. The learners said they would like to sound native-like, but they do not see pronunciation as important for their personal lives, in which they use English a minimal amount. They live their home and social lives largely in their L1s not in their L2, and thus pronunciation is an optional skill for them outside of their professions. This conflict between professional and personal uses of English makes it harder for them to improve their pronunciation. Pronunciation is seen as a tool, not a way to socially interact beyond very basic needs.

The second question looked at what these learners want to achieve with their pronunciation and how they think their goals might be reached. Most of the learners wanted to sound like native speakers, indeed, thought that this was a completely reasonable goal, but on the whole they were not able to state what this would take for them to achieve. Volunteering for the tutoring was seen as a step toward achieving this goal, but these individual lessons were isolated actions that were not supported by individual and social use of English. They seemed to believe that they could improve without actually using the language beyond the limited domains of their educational settings. Moyer’s (2014) five features that distinguish exceptional learners were not reflected in the ways our more strongly accented learners approached their own pronunciation: They did not think about what they were doing or how to improve, they did not strongly identify with the L2, they were not outgoing in their approach to language learning, and they did not widely use their L2 in many domains. Their consistently expressed desire to sound like native speakers, an important feature in Moyer (2014), did not seem to be followed in their language

learning behavior. There was, in other words, a strong disconnect between their expressed desire and their actions.

What the students wanted was, by and large, impossible to achieve and led to lack of improvement despite their expressed desire to improve their pronunciation and realistic views of what improved pronunciation might mean for their futures. In *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 1871), Alice is chided by the White Queen for saying that she could not believe impossible things.

Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

When it came to pronunciation, the students in our study were well-practiced in believing impossible (or at least contradictory) things. Pronunciation raised many conflicting demands for them, reflecting their expressed desire for change and their lack of understanding about how change could occur. They struggled to improve because they could not meet conflicting demands implied by their beliefs that they could improve without using the L2 in authentic social interactions.

### **Impossible Thing 1 – Wanting to pass as a NS but only to communicate in professional contexts, not in personal and social ones.**

The first impossible thing reflected their desire to keep their English carefully constrained. All expressed a strong desire to sound more native like in order to communicate more effectively in professional contexts, where their pronunciation would improve their standing through improved communication and confidence. However, most seemed to believe that they could compartmentalize their pronunciation goals to work for them in professional contexts without affecting other domains of their lives. Moyer (2014) says that exceptional pronunciation learners are often those who do not compartmentalize, using the target language in as many domains as possible. In our study, few had contacts in English outside their workplace. They spoke their L1 at home, socialized in their L1, and even in the workplace, they spoke English less than was possible. They rarely practiced their English. Overall, they were unrealistic in what it would take to improve or inconsistent about trying to change.

### **Impossible Thing 2 – Wanting to pass as a NS, but with underdeveloped and limited C2 networks**

The second impossible thing is related to the first. These learners expressed a consistent desire to have native-like pronunciation without a corresponding desire to have connections to the L2 culture. Miller (2003), in her study of high-school aged immigrants in Australia, found that those who were most successful in becoming audible, that is, heard, by those in the L2 culture, were those who learned to speak in a way that helped them be heard. They not only sounded right, they used the vocabulary and discourse markers of the target culture (i.e., teenagers in Australia). This led to their gaining more opportunities to speak, and to their improving both their spoken language in general and their pronunciation in particular. In contrast, our subjects were strikingly cut off from the larger culture. They worked, often in isolation from the L2 culture, then went home to roommates or family who were similarly isolated. When we asked them what they could do to make greater connections, they usually stated that it was difficult (or even impossible), especially citing time constraints and fatigue. Lybeck (2002) found that American women in Norway whose pronunciation was the best also had the most well-developed social networks. Piller's (2002) study of married bilinguals in Germany who could pass as native speakers showed that excellence in pronunciation came from sociolinguistic skills in using linguistic markers and in their regular social use of their L2 in multiple registers. In all these cases, those who had the best pronunciation were those who were most involved in the C2.

### **Impossible Thing 3 – Believing they can "catch" good pronunciation from NSs without seeking out interactions with NSs**

The third impossible thing in these learners' beliefs involved the importance of input. They were consistently reluctant about the possibilities of improving their pronunciation with nonnative teachers, yet they did not seek out the native input that they believed would be effective. This contradiction is based on at least two misconceptions. First, they seemed to believe that they could "catch" (like a cold) good pronunciation from input alone. Second, they seemed to believe teachers have to be an ideal model in order to be an effective teacher. The first misconception suggested a belief that acquiring L2 pronunciation for adults occurs in the same way that it does for children, through exposure alone. This also is behind their bias against NNS teachers (in general). They were afraid that they could also "catch" the defective pronunciation of a NNS teacher. The second misconception gives primary credit to a model's power in pronunciation change. It implies that effective teaching is not crucial, the model is. What they do not recognize is that L2 learners rarely succeed in acquiring native like L2 pronunciation because they face different challenges from children. They do not have the same type of exposure or experience, their social connections to the language are different, and they already have a language in place, including the automatic muscle movements tied to pronunciation and the cognitive structures that make it more difficult to hear and produce new sounds.

Because of these differences, it should make sense that progress is more likely with a knowledgeable and effective teacher than with an ideal model (whatever 'ideal' means). Murphy (2014) argues that non-native models who are intelligible and comprehensible provide strengths that native models cannot. Derwing and Munro (2005) and Derwing (2008) also state that the most important factor in changes involves experienced teachers who are knowledgeable about pronunciation and how to teach it. Native speaker status is not determinative in any way. Levis, Link, Sonsaat and Barriuso (under review), in their study of the comparative effectiveness of native and nonnative teachers teaching pronunciation, found that student improvement did not differ based on teacher language status. Of all the impossible things that the students believed, their belief about the critical need for a native model seemed the most entrenched. This reflects the power of the Nativeness Principle (Levis, 2005) and seems to be active in students' preferences for native accents across many contexts (e.g., Buckingham, 2014; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richards & Su, 2006; Simon, 2005).

### **Impossible Thing 4 – Wishing for a magic wand to bypass the hard work of improvement.**

The final impossible thing is their misconception of the effort involved in improving. The "magic wand" that would allow them to have a native accent with no work was attractive precisely because it was magic. But the attraction of the magic wand suggests a deeper difficulty. Our learners appeared to find their difficulties with pronunciation frustrating in that they did not know how to fix them. These students were highly advanced in their ability to use English in graduate study at a research university in the United States. They lived and functioned in an L2 environment, studied in English, wrote scholarly papers in English, and often intended to live their professional lives in English. Yet they often did not have a clue how to improve. They were largely fossilized in regard to pronunciation (Acton, 1984) and needed to know not only that improvement is possible (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1997, 1998) but also what was needed for improvement to take place. This suggests that a different type of pedagogy is called for, one that highlights useable strategies for improvement and their understanding of how improvement occurs over time. In other words, they needed to know how pronunciation improvement takes place, what kinds of things made the greatest difference, and the critical role of their own autonomy in making change take hold over time.

Perhaps part of the reason for the students' lack of knowledge may be that many teachers do not know how pronunciation improvement takes place (see Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Many practitioners advocate that native pronunciation skills are possible, but these types of claims go far beyond what can be justified (Thomson, 2014). Indeed, achieving a native accent is unnecessary – the more realistic and achievable goal is to become intelligible so that communication is

not impeded (Levis, 2005). Intelligibility is perfectly possible even with an accent that is noticeable or even heavy (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Pronunciation changes take time and may never be fully realized for certain features, but targeted improvement can make a difference. Unlike the either/or construct of nativeness, intelligibility is a continuum along which learners can progress.

### Future directions

These students seemed interested in changing their pronunciation but at the same time were trying to keep their sense of self separate from their use of language. This is unlikely to work, especially for learners who are otherwise advanced in their L2 use. Their views on identity seem particularly interesting in light of their feelings that their pronunciation is stuck at an uncomfortably low level. They were strongly utilitarian in how they viewed pronunciation, but they seemed to believe that their spoken language could improve without actually using it with real people in multiple domains. Piller (2002) writes: “passing for a native speaker questions and destabilises the categories of native and non-native speakers themselves. ‘Native speaker’ is no longer an identity category, and rather than being something that someone is, it becomes something that someone does” (p. 201). The students who deny that pronunciation will affect their identity are wrong in one sense. How you sound cannot help but affect how you see yourself. However, they are correct in their belief that identity is flexible and something they control to some extent. Pronunciation changes lead to new views of identity, but only to the extent that they are willing to change their pronunciation and/or their view of their L2 selves (Marx, 2002). However, talk of change is merely academic unless they seek out opportunities to communicate. Pronunciation acquisition occurs in a social context, and perhaps this is more important for these learners than for others. Their pronunciation has not developed in tandem with their other English skills that do not require the same social context. Pronunciation is a spoken language skill, and in order to change, speakers need to speak to other people.

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