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REVIEW

TRACEY M. DERWING & MURRAY J. MUNRO, *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research* (Language Learning & Language Teaching 42). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015. Pp. xiii + 208. ISBN: 978 90 272 1327 3
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I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, and I would recommend it for any Masters course in Teaching English Language and Applied Linguistics for language teachers. All such courses should include a dedicated programme or module in phonology in view of the strategic importance of pronunciation in learning to speak another language. It is obvious that it is not enough to acquire an expanding vocabulary, to gain confidence in grammatical forms and structures, and to develop ever increasing communicative competence, if a learner wishes to be proficient in speaking the new language. They have to make themselves intelligible in their pronunciation as well. A Masters course in TEFL and AL (for language teachers) that does not make provision for the study of phonology is deficient. Going are the days when Communicative Language Teaching held that pronunciation was unnecessary; competence in pronunciation is increasingly seen as just as vital as grammatical, lexical and pragmatic competence for effective communication in a second language.

This is not the place to describe the curriculum of Masters courses or the syllabus of courses on phonology, but this book should accompany the standard works on English pronunciation in such a module. What Derwing & Munro do not cover is the description of English phonology and phonetics; nor do they cover phonological theory. What they do cover, however, is ‘evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research’, as reflected by the volume’s subtitle. It is a guide for prospective teachers and their trainers, and for any who are engaged in applied linguistic research with a pedagogical dimension. They have presented an overview of the kind of research that should make a difference to professional understanding of the role of pronunciation in language teaching with implications for actual classroom interventions. In addition, they tackle wider social issues, especially the assimilation of immigrants in a predominantly English-speaking environment. They even make concrete suggestions for educating the general public, professionals and officials in how to listen to immigrant speech for effective comprehension.

They start with a clear statement of their focus on the ultimate goal of intelligibility rather than the totally accurate reproduction of a native accent (‘nativism’). Intelligibility measures the degree of a speaker’s success in communicating a message; comprehensibility measures the effort a listener has to make in order to understand the message. They offer the subsequent nine chapters as stand-alone ‘modules’, and they do indeed appear to be well enough designed to be so. We will treat them more or less in the order in which they appear in the book.

Chapter 2 is an overview of the historical developments in pronunciation teaching, not in a chronological manner, but thematically: descriptions of the phonetics of English, accent awareness, textbooks, technology, perception studies and classroom activities. One rather refreshing aspect is their drawing attention to older works that seemed to be ahead of their

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time and were at odds with the prevailing conventional wisdom of their time. Teachers and researchers could do with a little historical perspective.

Then comes a 'module' (Chapter 3) on pedagogical perspectives on acquiring the pronunciation of an additional language, which covers factors like age, exposure to the language – they call this 'language experience', which I think is too broad a term – their own notion of 'window of maximal opportunity', aptitude, motivation and formal instruction. Even alcohol gets a brief mention (p. 50); of greater significance, however, is the assertion that gender is NOT a significant factor.

Chapter 4 deals with pronunciation problems, and whether we should consider them as errors. Conclusion: they are, if they interfere with intelligibility. People have raised ethical considerations about describing pronunciation problems as errors and whether it is right to correct learners with their pronunciation problems, in case such correction dents their sense of identity and worth. Teachers nevertheless deal a disservice to them if they do not help them overcome hindrances to their intelligibility. The origin of errors is considered in terms of the strong and weak contrastive analysis hypotheses and error analysis, both of which focus on the learners' production; and also in terms of the Perceptual Assimilation Model and Flege's Speech Learning Model, which provide a focus on perception. Perceptual skills lead eventually to a matching of productive skills, even though there are huge disparities among learners in the speed and quality of that matching. I feel that Derwing & Munro tended to downplay the potential value of contrastive and error analyses; such analyses provide valuable, indeed essential, information for teachers who are not familiar with the phonology of a learner's mother tongue. This is NOT to maintain that they actually predict or account for all the errors a learner is likely to make, but a teacher who is fore-warned is also a teacher who is fore-armed. A helpful explanation of the effect of functional load concludes this module.

Chapter 5 begins with the same rather pessimistic note as Chapter 4 about the lack of relevance of much applied linguistic research to actual teaching activity in the classroom: 'While heated debates ... seem to carry on eternally in some academic circles, they have little to do with the practical reality that language teachers face' (pp. 55–56); and then 'much of the considerable body of research on L2 speech is not directly applicable to language teaching' (p. 77). This particular chapter is entitled 'Pronunciation instruction research' and is a valuable updating of the kind of research that is specifically orientated to the teacher in the classroom, including the ambitious *English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey* (EPTiES). The latter showed how little confidence teachers generally had in undertaking the teaching of pronunciation and how little specific training they had received. A Finnish study revealed how parsimonious was the help towards pronunciation in 16 'general skills English language textbooks'. Nevertheless, research into the effectiveness of actual pronunciation practice revealed positive results. Yes, it is worthwhile focussing on pronunciation in the classroom. Attention is to be paid to perception as well as production; testing is to be conducted in the long term as well as the short; the relative merits of integrated and stand-alone lessons are raised, as are the merits of non-native speakers teaching pronunciation, single and mixed mother tongues in the same class, needs analysis and assessment. This is a valuable updating of current research.

We should test their claim that each chapter is like a stand-alone module, so let us jump to Chapter 7 on technology. They maintain an open mind on its potential, and in some cases, they are enthusiastic, whereas as in others, they are sceptical. Their enthusiasm embraces the use of *YouTube* for shadowing and mirroring, and for obtaining relevant naturally occurring material; and *Skype* for direct interactions with native speakers; digital recordings because they do not degrade in time and because sound features can be manipulated for effect, for the sake of perception training; and 'virtual worlds' on the internet, where learners can congregate. Their scepticism embraces automatic speech recognition and dictation software, and even systems like *Praat*, which provide visual displays of sound and which have proved to be of tremendous value in phonetic research; however, they require extensive training for teachers to use productively. Another, non-pedagogical, factor is the expectation that technology can

replace the teacher and so reduce costs in the long term; this they dismiss resolutely: 'it is crucial for teachers to treat technology as ONE tool among others to enhance their learners' L2 pronunciation' (p. 130, my emphasis).

We turn now to the tricky question of accents in Chapter 8 and basically return to the question of nativism and intelligibility as goals of pronunciation teaching. I was surprised that David Abercrombie was described merely as 'a pedagogical specialist' (p. 133), whereas he was one of the foremost phoneticians of the last century, remembered not only for his standard text *Elements of General Phonetics* (Abercrombie 1967), but also for his *Problems and Principles* (Abercrombie 1956; second edition in 1963). It was in the latter that he gave expression to the notion of intelligibility, in a celebrated declaration:

> Most learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation (and by "comfortably" intelligible, I mean a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener). I believe that pronunciation teaching should have, not a goal which must of necessity be normally an unrealized ideal, but a *limited* purpose which will be completely fulfilled: the attainment of intelligibility. (Abercrombie 1963: 37; his emphasis)

Then come useful discussions on perceived stigma of accented pronunciation especially in the workplace, the difference that often appears between teachers' goals and learners' expectations, accent as the speaker's 'face', and English in the world as a lingua franca. The work of Jennifer Jenkins is referred to in this context, but surprisingly not her main work *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (Jenkins 2000), in which it becomes apparent that pronunciation failures accounted for the majority of mis-communications.

Chapter 9 deals with 'accent reduction' and the ethics of it. People have questioned the ethics of changing a person's accent because it would affect their 'face'. '[I]t is our view, however, that if an individual is unable to communicate in the L2 in a way that interlocutors can understand, the expression of personal identity is threatened far more than by any changes pronunciation instruction might bring about' (p. 153). The ethics of pronunciation teaching is established if the teacher is properly trained, and the teacher addresses the learners' intelligibility and comprehensibility needs without exploiting them in finance, fear tactics or false promises. Derwing & Munro then tackle dubious 'elocution' businesses, prospecting speech therapists and teachers who have no practical knowledge of phonetics. Yes, there is certainly an ethical dimension to pronunciation teaching – good reasons for engaging in it and preventing unscrupulous people from doing so! An unusual angle to take, but most welcome.

Chapter 6, like the other 'modules', is self-contained and independent enough to be consulted in any order. It is on assessment of pronunciation. There is some familiar ground here for those trained in testing: diagnostic, formative and summative assessment, proficiency tests, reliability, construct validity and administrability. It was useful to be reminded that even high-level learners were not always able to assess their own pronunciation successfully, nor identify their pronunciation problems, and also that many teachers do not feel confident in conducting pronunciation tests. There is good advice on testing procedures; they should be brief, recorded, diverse, wide ranging, perception- as well as production-based. A brief section on technology for assessment is as inconclusive as the chapter on technology. One feature not considered is the value of 'lay' people as testers. Thirty years ago, Kenworthy (1987: 20) was already advocating lay people as ideal judges, people 'who have not had an abnormal amount of exposure to non-native speech nor any previous contact with the speakers being assessed'. This is a particularly effective way of testing real intelligibility.

And so to the final chapter, on issues for the future. Applied phonetic research for pronunciation development needs a sociolinguistic and an educational psychology dimension. More research is needed on the factors that contribute to intelligibility and comprehensibility. Also more longitudinal studies are required into the long term effectiveness of pronunciation activities. More studies focussing on other languages beside English are required. Directors of professional teaching courses need to be persuaded of the value of phonology and pronunciation teaching components. More attention to developing perception skills is needed

as are more refined testing mechanisms for individuals, possibly through technology. Also a greater emphasis on pronunciation descriptors in general testing systems, more attention to prosody in electronic programmes, and more opportunity for real life and simulations on internet programmes, including even gaming in the L2. The chapter concludes with suggestions for sensitizing the wider public to immigrant speech.

In conclusion, this book would work as a valuable companion to the standard works on English phonetics and phonology in any programme of language teacher training. Derwing & Munro are effective and resourceful researchers and prolific writers, as is evidenced in their references. Their focus has been on adult learners of English, but it would be as well to remember that most English language teaching in the world is conducted in schools with children under the age of 15. There needs to be much more attention given to THEIR situation. Africa did not get a look in, whereas learners from Europe and Asia are well represented. Teacher cognition, i.e. a study of teachers' beliefs and practices in the classroom, also needs to be incorporated into the research paradigm. The study of phonological interlanguage is extremely valuable in researching intelligibility (see Tench 1996, Levis & Moyer 2014). Despite these few reservations, the book gives an excellent overview of current research into the whole subject of pronunciation teaching.

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