

# Integrating Research and Professional Development on Pronunciation Teaching in a National Adult ESL Program

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Pronunciation has been described as the "Cinderella" of language teaching (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996; Seidlhofer, 2001), an orphan in the world of language program development (Gilbert, 1994). Where oral communication skills are included, teacher education courses have typically highlighted components of grammar and vocabulary, or fluency in speaking and listening skills (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996), with the result that some language educators may have received little or no training in the teaching of pronunciation. In addition, the emphasis on fluency that predominantly informs communicative language teaching approaches is often reinforced in commercially available teaching materials (Murphy, 1991), while published materials that do treat specific features, such as intonation or minimal pairs, are usually based on limited representations of pronunciation and typically provide uncontextualised examples involving sentence-level practice (Levis, 1999).

Nevertheless, in recent years a number of introductory texts for teachers have raised the profile of pronunciation and its role in teaching oral skills (e.g., Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Clark & Yallop, 1990; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Kenworthy, 1987; Pennington, 1996; Roach, 2000). This renewed interest in pronunciation (Morley, 1991) was reflected in the context of the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) through a recent two year project (2001-2003) conducted by researchers from the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), in response to continuing indications from teachers within that program that teaching pronunciation was a major professional development need. The aims of the project were to (a) investigate aspects of the teaching and learning of pronunciation within the AMEP, (b) inform professional development in the area, and (c) provide professional development resources for teachers.

## **Method: Phase 1 (2001-2002)**

Teachers in the AMEP develop courses using a national competency-based curriculum framework, *The Certificates in Spoken and Written English* (see Burns, 1996, for a description of the program). Teachers work with relatively newly arrived

adult immigrants to develop language learning skills and a range of speaking, listening, reading and writing competencies, based on text-based syllabuses (Feez, 1998) designed by teachers in response to learner needs.

As the AMEP is a national program (funded by the federal government Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) covering all eight states and territories, it was necessary to establish a network of teacher participants from each location who could be involved at various phases of the research. A national reference group made up of eight teachers or teacher developers with particular interests, or skills in pronunciation teaching worked with the researchers to provide specific input from a local perspective and overall direction from a national perspective. In the first phase, a survey was developed that asked AMEP teacher respondents to identify (a) (Q1) years of experience in TESOL; (b) (Q2) reasons for focusing/not focusing on pronunciation; (c) (Q3) estimations of how frequently they focused on specific aspects of pronunciation (segmental and suprasegmental features); (d) (Q4) views on the effectiveness of taking different approaches (such as integrating pronunciation or teaching it separately); (e) (Q5) confidence levels in teaching specific segmental and suprasegmental features; (f) (Q6) resources used, the reasons for their use, and their usefulness. They were also asked (Q7) to provide any other comments in relation to their teaching or professional needs in this area that they felt to be important.

This survey was first piloted with two or three respondents in various locations across the country, who were contacted by the local participants and asked to give feedback on the appropriateness of the areas surveyed and the clarity of the questions. Two hundred surveys were then distributed nationally and responses received from 143 teachers in six states and territories giving a return rate of 71.5 percent. The respondents' teaching experience covered between 1 and 35 years (mean = 15 years).

### **Survey Results**

As measured on a five-point Likert scale, teachers reported teaching segmental features (sounds and stress) most frequently, with suprasegmental features (rhythm, intonation and linking) less frequently, and voice quality the least frequently. Most respondents appeared unsure of what was meant by voice quality. A similar pattern was reflected in their confidence in teaching these features. However, confidence in teaching pronunciation was reported to be higher than frequency in teaching pronunciation. Despite their apparent confidence, the majority of respondents requested more sources of professional development and many indicated that they were unsure, in particular, about teaching suprasegmental features. On the other hand, some respondents who indicated high confidence also stated that pronunciation teaching was not necessary. No relationship between experience and attitudes to focusing or not focusing on

pronunciation was observable and a wide variety of opinions existed about approaches to teaching it. Those who reported teaching pronunciation the least had between 5 and 35 years of experience, saw teaching pronunciation as a problem, and reported low confidence in teaching suprasegmental aspects, and higher confidence in teaching sounds. They reported that they generally noticed and dealt with pronunciation only when it noticeably interrupted fluency and intelligibility, and that the decision to teach pronunciation depended on the type and level of class and the learners' language backgrounds. Comments from this group included:

My experience has shown me that a lot of effort can be expended for very minimal results—very, very few people that I have taught have had such a drastic pron [sic] problem that communication was all but impossible. I feel that pron [sic] is a bit of a red herring. (20 years experience)

We don't have enough time to focus on pron [sic] only as we've got competencies to focus/achieve. (5 years experience)

It may be too demoralising. Students may not gain from constant correction. (11 years experience)

The main insights gained from this survey were that there was considerable variability in teachers' knowledge about the main features of pronunciation and their confidence in teaching them. Calls for professional development support were made from almost all of those surveyed. The type of support requested was mainly for workshops on the patterns and sound systems of Australian English, and on specific approaches that would help certain groups of learners (e.g., speakers of Southeast Asian languages). In addition, there were requests for materials for professional development and teaching, and for resource lists of current teacher-oriented texts and articles on teaching pronunciation.

### **Method: Phase 2 (2002-2003)**

As a result of these findings, a series of three fact sheets was prepared (Yates, 2002), containing literature reviews and lists of resources for teaching pronunciation. These could be easily accessed and downloaded by teachers from a professional development website located at NCELTR. The fact sheets provided definitions of pronunciation from a spoken discourse-based perspective, described the major suprasegmental and segmental features of pronunciation, and presented overviews of the implications for pedagogy and the development of pedagogical activities. A national professional development course that drew on some of the survey findings was also offered online by Lynda Yates through the website, with 20 teachers participating in

2002. This course built on two others that had been presented in 2000 and 2001 with 36 teacher participants, before the survey had been completed.

In addition, the national reference group established in the first phase of the research continued to meet to provide a reference point for further input on the specific professional development needs expressed by the teachers in their local organisations. The participants in this group reported on the contents and resources used in recent professional development workshops delivered locally, sometimes by themselves. Some members provided samples of videos they had recorded illustrating classroom pronunciation activities. They also discussed further initiatives for professional development that could be undertaken to meet needs at a national level.

A major aspect of these discussions focused on preparations for the production of a professional development package on the teaching of pronunciation. It was decided that the package should consist of a video and teacher's book (Burns & Claire, 2003), which could be used for professional development not only by individuals or groups of teachers, but also by teacher educators working in ESL settings in preservice or in-service contexts. The feedback from the teacher survey had provided a very clear indication that teachers wanted an accessible resource to help them in three main areas: (a) to develop an overview of the major features of pronunciation, (b) to gain practical strategies for teaching pronunciation, and (c) to have opportunities to observe other teachers working on pronunciation in the classroom.

The reference group developed a set of key theoretical concepts that should underpin the overall production of the video, based on the findings of the survey, the literature reviews and fact sheets, and the members' reports of local needs. These concepts covered the notions of English as a world language, including the concepts of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability (Kachru & Nelson, 2001), as well as the roles and functions of pronunciation in communicative activities, which drew on concepts of spoken discourse (Burns, Joyce, & Gollin, 1996). In addition, the integration of pronunciation into curricula and activities for speaking (cf. Celce-Murcia et al., 1996) was seen as a key concept. Drawing on some of the common themes outlined in the literature (cf. Murphy, 1991), the group developed principles for pronunciation teaching that the classroom presentations demonstrated in the video should include. These principles were as follows:

1. teaching features of pronunciation from the very beginning stages of learning.
2. assessing learners' pronunciation needs in combination with their overall spoken language needs.
3. selecting contexts, content, and topics for pronunciation teaching that are practical, familiar, interesting, and motivating.

4. embedding a focus on practising various pronunciation features within a larger topic or task.
5. raising learners' awareness about how pronunciation contributes to making certain kinds of meaning.
6. encouraging learners to monitor their needs and to develop personal strategies for improving different aspects of their pronunciation.
7. introducing learners to a metalanguage and notation system that will assist them to learn more about pronunciation independently, both inside and outside the classroom. (Burns & Claire, 2003. p. 4)

As a major aim of the video package was to link theoretical aspects with examples of classroom practice, through the national reference group the researchers called for expressions of interest from teachers who wished to be featured. The teachers participating in the video were asked to demonstrate activities that would illustrate how specific features of pronunciation were integrated into their classroom practice, and to explain from a teacher's perspective their theories of the concepts that underpinned these practices. Proposals were selected from six teachers that aimed to cover a range of learner profiles from beginner to upper intermediate, as well as a range of key pronunciation features and activities. Thus, the video presentations show classroom activities for sound, word stress, and linking at the segmental level; and intonation patterns and sentence stress at the suprasegmental level. A seventh presentation by one of the authors was also included to demonstrate diagnostic guidelines that teachers could use for pronunciation needs analysis and activities for raising learner awareness of their needs in this area. To complement this last presentation, the national reference group agreed that an important element of the video should be the inclusion of learners' observations on their own pronunciation needs and the learner strategies they themselves recommended to address these needs. Therefore, five upper intermediate learners from Iran, Bangladesh, Romania, China, and Japan who had participated in one of the classroom presentations were invited to be videoed.

The handbook accompanying the video was structured to parallel the presentations. It provided an overview of the theoretical underpinnings outlined above, a "map" of the major features of pronunciation and how they relate, brief definitions and descriptions of these features, and a step-by-step outline of each teacher's presentation together with samples of the materials used. Analyses of the samples of learner speech were also included to assist teachers to diagnose their learners' pronunciation difficulties.

A major finding from the initial research was that teachers were seeking resources for their professional development. Therefore, it was important to include in the package opportunities for teachers to reflect on their current practices and to be introduced to

ways to extend those practices. The handbook aimed to achieve this need by outlining how the resource could be used by individuals, by groups of teachers working together, or by teacher educators wishing to select from the material for use in workshops or courses. To this end, reflection and action points were interspersed throughout the handbook in order to allow for professional development discussion, written reflections, and classroom-based investigations. Reflection points aimed to provide opportunities for teacher reflection, either individually or with other colleagues, as for example in the following activity on raising learner awareness that accompanied the learners' commentaries:

Are your learners able to articulate their pronunciation needs? If so, how do they describe them? Discuss with your colleagues the teaching strategies you use to raise awareness of pronunciation needs. (Burns & Claire, 2003, p. 27)

Action points were included to provide opportunities for teachers to undertake small-scale action research explorations in relation to their own teaching contexts, which built on the video presentations and the concepts presented in the handbook. The following example is based on one of the teaching presentations that focused on developing learners' understanding of intonation patterns:

Ask a colleague or friend to record a short semi-scripted dialogue with you on a theme related to the course you are teaching. Transcribe the recording and use the steps in [the presentation] sequence to teach all or some of the intonation features to your students.

While the learners are completing Step 5 [of the presentation sequence], record their speech. Use the recording to analyse their pronunciation and further diagnose their needs. Discuss your observations and analysis with your colleagues. (Burns & Claire, 2003, p.18)

## Discussion

The research described here and the projects to which it gave rise illustrate an attempt by a large-scale national adult English language teaching organisation to integrate research on teachers' current understandings and professional practices in the teaching of pronunciation with professional development strategies to meet their expressed needs. In doing so, it aimed to offer a model of the processes by which theory, research, and practice might be linked and of the way in which teachers actively working in a particular program might become part of their own organisation's professional development initiatives. As teachers in the program had clearly expressed a need for certain kinds of professional development, the challenge for the researchers

was to respond to those needs across a whole national teaching system in such a way that was likely to make a realistic and practical impact. Integrating key representatives of the teachers themselves through a national reference group that could share local perspectives was one strategy. A further response was to invite teachers from within the program itself to provide a range of practical demonstrations, based on the theoretical ideas presented in the online courses and the downloadable fact sheets made available nationally. A third response was to produce an integrated video and handbook package that could be used as flexibly as possible by individuals or groups and that drew on hands-on and practical lesson plans and explicit teaching materials. Through these processes the project aimed to draw further on the notion of contextually "situated practice" (Burns, 1996), exemplified by teacher colleagues working in the same organisation, as a means of providing AMEP teachers nationally with feasible alternatives to their current pronunciation teaching practices.

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