

Phonology

As noted earlier, grammar has been the focus for second language teachers and researchers for a long time. Vocabulary and pragmatics have also received more attention in recent years. However, we know less about pronunciation and how it is learned and taught. Pronunciation was a central component in language teaching when the **audiolingual approach** was dominant. Several techniques for teaching pronunciation were developed at that time, and most of them focused on the pronunciation of **segmentals**, getting learners to perceive and to produce distinctions between single sounds in minimal pair drills (for example, 'ship' and 'sheep').

When the audiolingual approach was replaced by other ways of teaching, attention to pronunciation was minimized if not totally discarded. Furthermore, evidence for the critical period hypothesis, suggesting that **native-like** pronunciation was an unrealistic goal for older second language learners (see Chapter 3), led to the argument that instructional time would be better spent on teaching something that learners could learn more successfully. When communicative language teaching (CLT) was first introduced in the late 1970s, little attention was given to the teaching of pronunciation. If it was taught, the emphasis was on **suprasegmentals** (rhythm, stress, and intonation)—aspects of pronunciation that were considered more likely to affect communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996).

Although research on the teaching and learning of pronunciation is not as extensive as that in other language domains, there is theoretical and empirical work to help us understand the processes involved in phonological development in a second language and the factors that contribute to it. For example, contrastive analysis helps to explain some aspects of first language influence on second language learners' pronunciation. We can all think of examples from our own experiences or those of our students. Japanese and Korean learners of English often have problems hearing and producing *l* and *r* because these sounds are not distinct in their language. Spanish speakers will often say 'I e-speak e-Spanish' because Spanish words do not have consonant clusters beginning with *s* at the beginning of a word. French speakers may place stress on the last syllable of a word because French usually stresses the last syllable. Few languages have the *th* sounds that are frequent in English, and learners may substitute similar sounds from their first language (for example, *t* or *d*, *s* or *z*). Sometimes, however, learners overcompensate for sounds that they know are difficult. Thus, learners may pronounce a *th* (as in 'thin' or 'this') where a *t* or a *d* sound belongs (saying 'thin' when they mean 'tin' for

example). Such errors are similar to the overgeneralization errors that we saw for grammatical morphemes. If they replace earlier correct pronunciation of *t* or *d* sounds, this may represent progress in learners' ability to notice and produce the *th* sound.

The relationship between perception and production of sounds is complex. Evelyn Altenberg (2005) developed a series of tasks to explore Spanish speakers' perceptions and production of English consonant clusters at the beginning of a word. In one task, they had to say whether certain invented words were possible 'new English words'. The Spanish speakers were quite good at recognizing what English words are supposed to sound like. They accepted pseudowords like 'spus' and rejected those like 'zban', even though both words would be unacceptable as 'new Spanish words'. She found that they could usually write (from dictation) pseudowords with initial clusters such as *sp* and *sm*. However, in their own production, these same learners might still insert a vowel at the beginning of words such as 'spoon' and 'smile'.

As we have seen with regard to grammar and vocabulary, it is hypothesized that a greater difference between the learner's native language and the target language can lead to greater difficulty. The evidence supporting the hypothesis comes partly from the observation that it takes learners longer to reach a high level of fluency in a particular second or foreign language if that language is substantially different from the languages they already know. For example, a speaker of Chinese faces a greater challenge in learning English than does a speaker of German or Dutch. Language distance affects pronunciation as well as other language systems. Theo Bongaerts (1999) collected speech samples from highly proficient speakers who had learned Dutch in their adulthood and who came from a wide variety of first language backgrounds. When native speakers of Dutch were asked to judge the speech samples, only those learners who spoke a language that was closely related to Dutch (for example, English or German) were judged to have native-like accents. None of the speakers whose first languages were more distant from Dutch (for example, Vietnamese) were judged to have native-like pronunciation.

There has been little research to document the developmental sequences of individual sounds in second language phonological acquisition. Nonetheless, there is evidence for similarity in the acquisition of some features of stress and rhythm and it is also clear that the learner's first language plays an important role. Other factors such as the amount and type of exposure to the target language and the degree of use of the first language have been identified as influential contributors to pronunciation. Thorsten Piske, Ian MacKay, and James Flege (2001) have reported that longer periods of exposure to the second language can lead to improved pronunciation. It has also been observed that adults who continue to make greater use of their first language may have stronger accents in the second language (Piske 2007).

Learners' ethnic affiliation and their sense of identity are also related to how they produce the sounds and rhythms of a second language. Elizabeth Garbonton, Pavel Trofimovich, and Michael Magid (2005) found a complex relationship between feelings of ethnic affiliation and second language learners' acquisition of pronunciation. Among other things, they found that learners who had achieved a high degree of accuracy in pronouncing the second language were sometimes perceived as being less loyal to their ethnic group than those whose second language speech retained a strong 'foreign accent'. Such perceptions can affect learners' desire to achieve high levels of proficiency in the second language, especially in contexts where there are conflicts between groups or where power relationships imply a threat to one group's identity.

Pavel Trofimovich (2005) has looked at learning pronunciation from a somewhat unusual perspective. His research raises questions about how well learners perceive the specific sounds of the new language while their focus is on meaning. Second language learners of Spanish were asked to listen to a list of familiar Spanish words. For the purpose of comparison, they also heard a list of words in English, their native language. One group of participants were told to 'just listen' to the words; the second group were asked to pay attention to how good the recording quality was; the third group were asked to rate the 'pleasantness' of the things the words referred to. Then they heard another list, which included both the original words and some new words, and they were asked to repeat each word as they heard it. Trofimovich then compared how quickly each learner started to pronounce the words they had already heard and the new words. The difference in the time it took them to react to 'old' and 'new' words is a measure of how easily words could be retrieved from memory.

As expected, the participants were always faster at retrieving the old words in their native language, and two groups of learners also showed this pattern for their second language. But the third group, who had been told to focus on the 'pleasantness' of the meanings, did not retrieve the old words faster. Trofimovich suggests that when learners focus primarily on meaning, they may not be able to also pay attention to the sounds that make up the words. In Chapter 6, we will review other research showing that learners sometimes fail to notice certain language forms—grammatical morphemes, vocabulary words, syntactic patterns, pragmatic features—when their focus is on understanding meaning.

Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction, but the results of recent research suggest that it can make a difference, particularly if the instruction focuses on suprasegmental rather than segmental aspects of pronunciation (Hahn 2004). Tracey Derwing and her colleagues (2003) carried out a series of studies to determine how intelligible learners were judged to be. They found that learners who were given pronunciation lessons emphasizing stress and rhythm were judged to be easier to understand

than learners who received lessons focused on individual sounds. Even though the learners who were given instruction on individual sounds were more accurate in their use of those sounds, this did not seem to increase listeners' perception of the intelligibility of their speech to others. Findings like these support the current emphasis on suprasegmentals in pronunciation classes.

One of the controversial issues in pronunciation is related to the question of whether the goal of second language acquisition is to sound like a 'native speaker.' One obvious problem with the question is that it suggests that there exists a single correct variety of English, and this is far from true. Not only are there many different pronunciations of English by American, Australian, British, Canadian 'native speakers', there are also many other varieties of English that have come to be used as a *lingua franca* around the world. Jane Setter and Jennifer Jenkins (2005) and Barbara Seidlhofer (2011) are among the many scholars who stress the role of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF). Indeed, there are now far more speakers of ELF than of English as a first language.

A related question is whether intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation is the standard that learners should strive toward. Studies of relationships between English native speakers' perceptions of foreign accent, their perceptions of comprehensibility, and their actual ability to understand what speakers are saying show that the three are related. However, research by Murray Munro and Tracey Derwing (2011) shows that the presence of a strong foreign accent does not necessarily result in reduced intelligibility or comprehensibility.

Unfortunately, research evidence does not change the fact that some listeners respond negatively to second language speakers' pronunciation. In some situations, accent still serves as a marker of group membership and is used as the basis for discrimination. Thus, some second language learners, particularly those who have achieved a high level of knowledge and performance in other aspects of the target language, may be motivated to approximate a more 'native-like' accent for personal and professional reasons. Other second language learners view this as irrelevant to their goals and objectives as users of the second language (Derwing and Munro 2009).

Research related to teaching pronunciation is gaining more attention. It is already clear that decontextualized pronunciation instruction is not enough and that a combination of instruction, exposure, experience, and motivation is required if learners are to change their way of speaking. Robin Walker (2010) provides guidance for teaching pronunciation in a way that recognizes the importance of preparing students for interacting with other speakers of English as a *lingua franca*.