



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.3. 2022 (July-Sept)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SECOND LANGUAGE (L2) PRONUNCIATION
LEARNING

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Article information

Received:19/08/2022
Accepted: 20/09/2022
Published online:24/09/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.3.91](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.3.91)

ABSTRACT

The present paper will focus on some of the most challenging theoretical aspects of L2 pronunciation learning. For many second language (L2) learners, pronunciation is 'simultaneously the most difficult skills and the one they most aspire to master', Fraser (2010). The study or research in L2 pronunciation has been ignored during the past due to limited resources and a lack of theory until recently various aspects of learning L2 have made way. That is to say, most of the studies and research now do focus on this aspect. Due to a lack of theoretical models/frameworks on L2 pronunciation learning, there arises a need to look into the various aspects of pronunciation and involve various methods and design so that it would be possible to provide suitable theoretical frameworks and models for those interested to embark in this study. For instance, there are several factors to take into consideration while dealing with L2 pronunciation of the learners' such as physiological, sociocultural, identity, sociocognitive etc. The study will discuss some of these theoretical models in order to access the L2 pronunciation of the learners'.

Keywords: intelligibility, identity, sociocognitive, L2, frameworks, physiological

1. Introduction

We are aware of the fact that L2 pronunciation learning is unique to each of us compared to other language skills. For instance, some of the learners' acquire some aspects of L2 pronunciation in terms of various physiological aspects namely, aspiration, voicing or voicelessness of certain consonants and vowels cross linguistically. But it does not guarantee whether other aspects of pronunciation are subject to developmental sequences and what their sequences might be. For instance, a simple case can be considered in the formation of consonant clusters – wherein a language permit certain consonant sequences to occur together in a sequence either in the beginning or an end of a word. English for that matter allows from zero up to three consonant sequences to occur in the beginning and from zero up to four consonant sequences in the end of a word. This also poses a challenge in the learners' pronunciation because it would be difficult though not impossible to produce words of such sequences which may not feature in the learners' first language (L1).

Foot and Pavel, (2015) states that variability in rates and outcomes of learning is more pronounced for pronunciation than for other dimensions of language. As notably mentioned by Long (2007) in his study that

pronunciation may also be unique among language skills – in that it is highly constrained by such individual differences s learners’ age, for example, with exposure to an L2 beyond the first six to nine months after birth resulting in non-native perception abilities. In a similar study, Deykeyser (2013) observes that the pervasive influence of age might also make it unlikely that learners acquire pronunciation incidentally (i.e., without intention to learn and largely without awareness), assuming that the learning mechanisms supporting incidental learning are not readily available to adults. As assumed by few scholars such as Van patten and Willaims (2015) to the common belief that learners’ native language (L1) does not have massive effects on either the processes or outcomes, the influence of learners’ L1 on the rate and ultimate success of L2 pronunciation learning is pervasive, which is acknowledged in multiple theoretical views, Flege (2003). Pronunciation is also tied to expressions of a speakers’ identity, Lyber (2002), perhaps more so than any other aspect of language, and pronunciation is intertwined with attitudes, stereotyping and stigma, Lippi- Green, (2012). Yet the identity dimensions of L2 pronunciation learning have been found to be mostly ignored in such theoretical perspectives. One of the most common discussed dimensions on the aspect of pronunciation learning comprises the articulatory or physiological attributes which perhaps is the most obvious characteristic distinguishing from other skills

In sum, while there is no single theory to account for all the aspects of learning L2 pronunciation. On the other hand, a viable theory of L2 pronunciation should handle at least some of the most crucial features such as: the importance of input in L2 pronunciation development, the pervasive influence of learners’ L1, the significant rate of individual differences (including age) in L2 pronunciation learning, and the systematicity and variability of pronunciation development. Nevertheless, it should ideally incorporate socio-cultural dimensions of pronunciation learning, such as identity, and acknowledge the motor component of pronunciation as a skill, Foote & Trofimovich (2015).

2.0. Theoretical background

There are many theories, both linguistics and pedagogical revolving around the various aspects of pronunciation; psychological, linguistic, interactionist, sociocultural, identity etc. For instance, we can refer to the perceptual assimilation model (PAM) developed by Best (1995). According to the PAM model, it focuses on the speech sounds i.e., how listeners process and are able to distinguish the vowel and consonant sounds of L2. Though this model has focused to explain the perceptual difficulties of L2 learners, not many supported it. In contrast, we have Flege’s (1993, 2003) speech learning model (SLM) which is a dominant model of L2 pronunciation learning. According to this SLM model, it assumes that learning L2 sounds involves creating and using long term memory representations for sounds. Yet, SLM assumes that the capacity for learners to learn L2 sounds remains intact across an individuals’ lifespan in enabling learners to perceive crucial cross-linguistic differences which could lead them to establish L2 sound categories. Because of their focus was only in the speech sounds and its perception, both the SLM and PAM remained narrow in their scope and were not acknowledged well. Similarly, the sociocognitive approach which is a combination of cognitive and sociocultural perspectives Atkinson, (2011) emphasizes on the fact that learning cannot be fully understood without reference to the social and physical space in which it takes place. It is a platform for social interaction and is not just an internal process that can be studied indirectly through scores or performance measures. This approach also allows for a more focused work at pronunciation learning. This field comes from the fields as social and cognitive psychology. For instance, sociolinguists have discussed speakers’ use of fluency, prosody and pronunciation as reflecting their attitude towards and desire to connect with the interlocutors.

Language thus can be studied by observing the activities of human beings acting – thinking-being-aligning in and to the world, Atkinson et al (2007), and language learning is a continuous adaptation of the learner to his or her environment through what is known as ‘alignment’. The process of alignment is complex, involving multiple dimensions – linguistic and non - verbal behaviors, to physical objects and looks (textbooks), to social conventions and structures, to physical relationships and histories of the participants Atkinson (2014).

For instance, when people communicate with each other, they might approach each other (align) or refrain from doing so in terms of not only facial expression, body gesture, voice quality or eye gaze but also

fluency patterns as well as various aspects of language such as prosody, pronunciation of speech sounds etc. This approach is more advantageous to explain various aspects of pronunciation learning. Variability and systematicity in rates and outcomes of learning can be explained through both similarities and also the vast differences in how each individual learner – with his /her own cognitive skill set – approaches the complex task of aligning to his/her interlocutors and educational setting in a specific sociocultural context. Learners' age and L1 could also be viewed as factors that will affect alignment.

The sociocognitive approach thus appears to offer sufficient room for pronunciation – specific research that addresses cognitive and social factors especially because this view is also new and undeveloped that it seems open to the full range of possibilities, Atkinson (2011). Put differently, speakers converge or diverge in their interactional patterns, which include a variety of speech phenomena, such as pause, speech rate and the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, because they wish to be liked and accepted by their interlocutors or instead because they want to distance themselves from their listeners (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991).

Cognitive psychologists have discussed alignment as a mechanism by which interlocutors facilitate understanding through interaction. In essence, speakers tend to imitate, reuse and otherwise appropriate each other's language such as (words, expressions, pronunciation patterns) and non – linguistic behaviors such as, (eye gaze, body posture) because they help speakers understand each other. These processes are often automatic and thus can occur quickly and sub-consciously, but may also be associated with conscious and intentional decisions speakers might take, Gambi & Pickering (2013). The scope overall of this sociocognitive approach provides room for pronunciation research to investigate many factors as part of sociocognitive alignment. For example, learners' *imagined communities* could determine how they align with other learners or a classroom environment ultimately, influencing their pronunciation development.

3. Discussion

Seen from this vantage point, then L2 pronunciation learning can be conceptualized as a complex task requiring learners to align or realign their pronunciation patterns – for instance, in terms of the articulation of individual vowels or the production of fluency and prosody – to their interlocutors, by their teachers or fellow non –native speakers. Depending on learners; cognitive abilities, the frequency and type of interactions they engage in, and their identity, orientation, age or L1, some learners might be more successful than others at this kind of sociocognitive alignment.

There are many current theoretical frameworks that do offer the potential for pronunciation researchers to ask questions that can be addressed through research. For instance, there are many ways in which the interactionist and the sociocognitive perspectives could be used to learn more about pronunciation during authentic communication. There are also powerful possibilities offered by the sociocognitive perspective – as it offers a broad framework for researching L2 pronunciation through both a cognitive lens and a sociocultural lens.

Finding ways to address the cognitive and linguistic variable traditionally studied in L2 pronunciation research and to acknowledge and explore sociocultural issues such as *identity*, is a serious challenge, not just in pronunciation research but in second language acquisition (SLA) research in general. Another important consideration pertains to which aspects of pronunciation viz., speech sounds, clusters, syllable, word accent, intonation etc. should be taught and which model(s) viz., British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), General American, African etc., should be used when choosing instructional targets. Most pronunciation research today embraces the *intelligibility principle*, or the idea that what needs to be taught through instruction involves those aspects of pronunciation that impede successful communication rather than those that make L2 speech non-native, Lewis (2005). Because in a given set up, between a speaker and a listener, as it happens often than not, that it is the listener, who tries to understand the concept (meaning) of what is being conveyed by the speaker rather than how the words are uttered. Put simply, the importance is given to the meaning rather than the sounds. Therefore, in the field of L2 pronunciation learning, there is a need for more evidence that can inform pronunciation pedagogy.

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