Adult Learners' Pronunciation at the End of a Communicative English Program: A Needs Analysis [1]

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Introduction

Recent research has suggested that pronunciation teaching for foreign languages should focus on intelligibility rather than on accent reduction. This idea is not new. Actually, for years pronunciation experts (Abercrombie 1956, Grant 1993, Kenworthy 1987, Morley 1991, Tench 1981) have made the same recommendation. Munro and Derwing (1995) have made such a suggestion lately on the basis of experimental evidence. In their study, they asked native speakers of English to listen to audiotapes of nonnative speakers of English and they found that the native speakers did not find that a heavy foreign accent interfered with intelligibility.

Munro and Derwing's study seems to be unique. In an extensive literature search, no other experimental work on the same topic was found. In fact, the authors recognize that this research is singular. They write, "these are the first experimental data demonstrating what pronunciation experts have long believed" (Munro & Derwing 1995:92).

The results of their research are quite interesting for second language educators. The recommendation that instruction should center on intelligibility and comprehensibility and not on accent reduction could be applicable in many second language courses . Nevertheless, learners' subjective needs (wants and expectations about the learning of English) vary and it may be that some learners would prefer to improve their pronunciation and to reduce their accent because they do not like to sound foreign in the target language, while others would be content only with being intelligible, without worrying about foreign accent.

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To find out what the learners' expectations in pronunciation are, it is necessary to ask them what they want. Munro and Derwing (1995) did not do that, and as far as I know, neither has anyone else. In this study[3], one of the objectives was to survey learners' subjective needs. To ask learners about their needs is important in learner-centered curriculum development. For example, the currently dominant approach, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), is learner-centered, taking learners' subjective needs into account for curriculum design (Nunan 1988): see below. Experts and researchers have given their recommendations about intelligibility and accent reduction but the learners' point of view is still missing.

In general, the purpose of the research presented here is to find out if learners who have studied in a communicative English program have intelligible pronunciation, speak with a foreign accent and want to reduce their accent. In short, the intention is to investigate whether experts, including Munro and Derwing (1995), are justified in their conclusion that pronunciation should focus on intelligibility rather than on accent reduction. If their recommendation is correct, then all well and good. But if it is partially wrong or completely incorrect, some changes in communicative curriculum design are then perhaps necessary.

It is important to define some terms that are central in this research. The first one designates the general area of this study, *pronunciation*. As no one satisfactory explanation of the term was encountered in the literature, the following definition is provided by the researcher. *Pronunciation* is the production of speech sounds. Speech sounds embrace phonemes (minimal units in the sound system of a language) or segments (vowel and consonant sounds which form syllables, words, phrases, and sentences), as well as prosodic features or suprasegmentals that involve: stress, intonation, rhythm, loudness, tone, tempo, and voice quality. The combination of phonemes and the patterns of prosodic features are systematic and follow specific phonological rules in every accent. *Accent* is understood as the characteristic pronunciation determined by the regional and social background of speakers in L1 (first language) or by the phonological system of the native tongue and developmental and learning processes in L2 (second language). The goal of the production of speech sounds is communication, which implies comprehension. However, in the interactions of people with different

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[3] This article is a summary of research conducted for the MA in Second Language Teaching (Correa 1997).

accents, especially foreign accents, comprehension may fail. So pronunciation may range from intelligible to unintelligible to those who listen.

The specific area of research of the present study takes into account three elements related to pronunciation: intelligibility, foreign accent, and learners' needs.

Pronunciation intelligibility occurs when someone's pronunciation is understood by a listener. In second language teaching, the goal, according to Abercrombie (1956), is a comfortably intelligible pronunciation "which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener" (p. 94).

Foreign accent is a characteristic of pronunciation that is caused

> ...by the speech sounds of one language through another. By applying to the foreign language the system of analyzing or sorting the sounds of one's own language, one misinterprets the foreign sounds and, as a result, mispronounces them. (Politzer 1954: 20-21)

Politzer is suggesting that the primary cause of a foreign accent is transfer from one's first language. Nevertheless, pronunciation is also affected by developmental processes and the overgeneralization of L2 rules (Ioup & Weinberger 1987).

Transfer, developmental processes, and overgeneralization may lead to pronunciation errors, which one may define as deviant pronunciation from native pronunciation. Some other causes of deviant pronunciation may be distraction, tiredness, nervousness, and momentary forgetfulness. Slips caused by these four factors are considered *mistakes*—not errors—by some authors (e.g. Underhill 1994). According to Underhill (1994:133), a mistake implies that the speaker has "the inner criteria for self-correction", and an error occurs when the criteria for correctness do not exist in the speaker. In the present study, the causes of mispronunciations and the existence or nonexistence of criteria for correctness are not relevant. For that reason, here *pronunciation errors* will designate indistinctly errors and mistakes, deviations of pronunciation from the target pronunciation. These errors may obscure meaning and affect intelligibility or may be compensated for by the listener, leading to no break-down in intelligibility. Through recognition of these two listener responses to errors, it is possible to appreciate that intelligibility and foreign accent are two different elements of pronunciation that

have a complex relationship, one that is dependent, in part, on the way they are dealt with by the listener.

Learners' pronunciation needs have not been defined fully in the literature yet. Learners' general language needs, however, have been defined. Brindley (1994) distinguishes between objective and subjective needs. Objective needs refer to "the gap between current and desired 'general' proficiency level" (Brindley 1994: 66). This level is generally determined by curriculum designers. Subjective needs are defined as follows:

> ... the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation derivable from information about affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies. (Brindley 1994:70)

Hence *objective learners' pronunciation needs* will be viewed as the gap between present and desired pronunciation proficiency as determined by curriculum designers. The desired pronunciation proficiency for those learners that are finishing an English communicative program will be intelligible pronunciation because that is precisely the goal of a communicative program. *Subjective learners' pronunciation needs* will be regarded as learners' attitudes, wants and expectations concerning the learning of pronunciation. In this study, both dimensions were considered in order to carry out a needs analysis (a tool for programming and designing courses, foreign language courses included, and services), i.e. the needs analysis was objective and subjective. Berwick (1994) points out that CLT has used this tool since its early stages. However, this approach has not utilized needs analyses to thoroughly assess learners' pronunciation needs.

A study with college learners conducted by Correa (1995) also identified meaningful needs in pronunciation. Through a questionnaire, she surveyed student interest in seven elective modules. These modules or courses would be offered for learners in their last semester of the English program during the following session. Every module would last a month. Four modules would make a semester. The topics of the modules would be conversation, pronunciation, listening, writing, reading, grammar and culture. She found that learners were highly interested in the module of pronunciation. Such a module was the second in order of interest, only the module of conversation surpassed it. Grammar was not very popular, placed in the sixth position out of seven, compared with first place in Little and Sanders (1990). Another finding in Correa's investigation was that learners were in-

terested in reducing their foreign accent. 63% of the 92 subjects who answered the questionnaire wanted to reduce their accent and only 47% cared about intelligibility.[4] This indicates that learners were more interested in accent reduction than in intelligibility. These learners were not in a communicative program, they were in an academic ESP program, and their pronunciation was left to develop without special training. Thus, their answer was a reaction to a program in which pronunciation has little importance.

Correa's results confirm what Macdonald, Yule and Powers (1995) say about surveying preferences with respect to pronunciation (i.e. subjective pronunciation needs): "learners consistently give extremely high priority to mastery of pronunciation of the target language when opinions and preferences are investigated" (p. 76).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Pronunciation

CLT is an approach to teaching foreign and second languages that began in the mid 1970's. It is very influential nowadays. In this approach, pronunciation is not emphasized. The desired goal of the approach is communicative competence. Accuracy is a factor tied to the context, that is, to be intelligible in a given situation is what matters and comprehensible or intelligible pronunciation is the objective. As Moy (1986) mentions in CLT pronunciation receives a secondary emphasis compared with other skills, thus no pronunciation drills take place. Learners are not expected to acquire native-like pronunciation. Pronunciation is not neglected but is contemplated "as a small part of linguistic competence" (Moy 1986:82). Pronunciation is monitored principally during communicative activities; however some genuine communicative pronunciation tasks have been developed (cf. Pica 1984, Celce-Murcia 1987). Nevertheless, there are practically no materials available to teach pronunciation with an emphasis on communication (Celce-Murcia 1987).

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[4] The sum of the percentages of the reasons of improvement is more than 100 because, in this case, the learners could choose more than one answer.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated:

> 1. Assuming that a communicative approach has positive effects on all skills, it was hypothesized that the majority of learners finishing such a communicative English program would be judged as ranging from *mostly intelligible* to *perfectly intelligible*.
>
> *2.* Taking into consideration the fact that there is little emphasis on accent reduction in the communicative approach, it was hypothesized that learners who finish such a program would be judged as varying from *a heavy foreign accent* to *a medium foreign accent.*
>
> 3. Considering previous research (Correa 1995), it was hypothesized that most learners who finish a communicative English program would like to improve their pronunciation by reducing their foreign accent.

The two first hypotheses are related to the objective needs analysis. They were structured to verify whether Munro and Derwing's finding (1995) that intelligible pronunciation may be highly accented might be replicated. The third hypothesis is concerned with the subjective needs analysis. It contradicts what Munro and Derwing and other experts recommend, that FL (foreign language) pronunciation teaching should not focus on accent reduction.

Methodology

This section presents a summary of the subjects, the material and the procedure employed in the study (see Correa 1997 for more details). Briefly, it is possible to say that learners finishing a communicative English program were audio taped retelling a short story in a recording studio. The tapes were listened to by native-speakers of English who evaluated intelligibility of pronunciation and foreign accent.

The sample of subjects who were studying English within a communicative program was selected from students of the Universidad de las Américas-Puebla. They were 23 learners in the last semester of their English program, who had reached a low intermediate level according to institutional objectives and measures. They had not lived in a city or town next to

the US border for more than a year and they had not lived in an English speaking country for two months or more.

The materials and the procedure were the following:

First, learners who were studying in one of the three skill courses (Oral Communication, Reading, and Writing) filled out a form to determine who was eligible for the study. The form was written in Spanish to avoid misunderstandings. The subjects selected went to the UDLA recording studio individually. Initially, learners were given an instruction sheet. It was in Spanish and very straightforward. Second, they were given a cartoon with text to be read silently. The cartoon was taken from a EFL book for beginners, so the grammar and the vocabulary were very easy for the subjects. Third, learners were audio taped telling the story having only the pictures of the cartoon as a stimulus (i.e., with the text removed). To record the voices, high quality equipment was used in a sound-proofed studio. Fourth, learners were given oral instructions for the recording of the narrative in the cabin. After learners were recorded, they answered a questionnaire on their subjective needs for learning pronunciation. It was written and answered in Spanish.

In order to establish coding scales, a pilot evaluation of intelligibility was conducted with three native-speakers of English, students in the UDLA graduate program in Applied Linguistics. Training tapes specially recorded for this study were used for the pilot assessment. Finally, five coders took part in the actual evaluation. They were native speakers of English with only limited knowledge of Spanish. They were students in exchange programs from Canada. The coders were trained in order for them to distinguish intelligibility of pronunciation from broad intelligibility and intelligibility from foreign accent using: i) training tapes, ii) two six point scales which were also used for the actual assessment, and iii) evaluation sheets. The training sessions and the evaluation sessions with actual coders were intercalated. The sessions devoted to intelligibility lasted one hour each and were conducted on two successive different days. Two days later the evaluation session on foreign accent took place. They lasted 20 minutes each and were on the same day with a five-minute break. The training and the evaluation sheets were also used for the actual assessment.

1. A heavy foreign accent
2. A marked foreign accent
3. A medium foreign accent
4. A mild foreign accent
5. A near native accent
6. A native-like accent

Results

The scale used for the evaluation of intelligibility of pronunciation is the following:

> INTELLIGIBILITY OF PRONUNCIATION SCALE
> 1. Speech full of pronunciation errors . Almost totally unintelligible.
> 2. Frequent pronunciation errors that obscure meaning. Very unintelligible.
> 3. Several errors obscure meaning. Partially unintelligible.
> 4. In general, good pronunciation but with occasional errors that obscure meaning. Occasionally unintelligible.
> 5. Uses English with few pronunciation errors that obscure meaning. Mostly intelligible.
> 6. Pronunciation errors—if any—do not interfere communication. Perfectly intelligible.

The results related to the objective needs analysis are the following:

RATING	SCORE
Intelligibility mean was	3.6
Minimum intelligibility rating	2.4
Maximum intelligibility rating	4.8

The mean is the average between two points of the scale: partially unintelligible and occasionally unintelligible. The maximum intelligibility rating was mostly intelligible and the minimum was very unintelligible.

There were no subjects rated with scores at the beginning and at the end of the continuum (almost totally unintelligible (1) and perfectly intelligible (6). Only three learners were rated mostly intelligible (5). To reach the goal of intelligibility that characterizes a communicative program learners should have rated mostly intelligible as it was hypothesized. In sum, it can be said that the level of intelligibility of pronunciation is lower than one would have expected.

The scale used to assess foreign accent is given below:
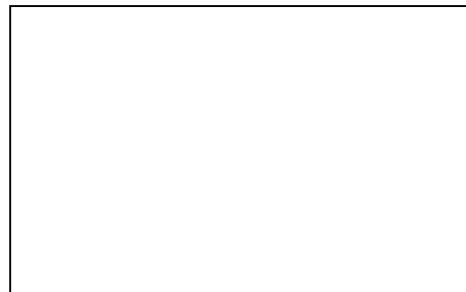
These are the for-   eign accent re-

sults:

RATING	SCORE
Foreign accent mean was	2.6
Maximum foreign accent rating	4
Minimum foreign accent rating	1.2

The mean is an average between two points of the scale: marked foreign accent (rating 2) and a medium foreign accent (rating 3). The maximum foreign accent (4) was a mild foreign accent and the minimum (1.2) a very heavy foreign accent. Neither a native-like accent (rating 6) nor a near native accent (rating 5) were encountered. Twenty-one ratings accounting for 91% of the total between 1.2 and 3.49. This means that almost all the learners ranged from a heavy foreign accent to a medium foreign accent, congruent with the little emphasis on accent reduction characteristic of the communicative programs. Hence, the hypothesis concerning foreign accent was fully confirmed by the data gathered. Subsequently, diagnostic ratings of the foreign accent and desired goal were also compared in order to complete the objective needs analysis. Results showed that the ratings of intelligibility and foreign accent have a weak correlation. However, the value of the correlation (.409) was not far from a significant correlation. In fact, .413 was needed to determine the existence of a significant correlation. After all, it is possible to say that foreign accent ratings do not predict intelligibility scores well and vice versa.

The main results of the subjective needs analysis are those concerned with the learners' interest in intelligibility and in accent reduction. It was found that 91% of the learners wanted to improve their pronunciation, 69% wanted to reduce their accent and 56% wanted to be more intelligible. Hence, learners are more interested in reducing their accent than in being intelligible.

Discussion

The evaluation of intelligibility indicated that learners in a communicative program were less intelligible than one would have expected, i.e. the goal of intelligibility is not being fully achieved. Learners were not well understood by native-speakers. This suggests that the CLT approach to pronunciation may not be the most effective option. It seems that some pronunciation work is still needed. Monitoring pronunciation during some activities may not be enough. The research reported here indicates that more specific communicative pronunciation exercises are required.

Regarding foreign accent scores, it was found that they corresponded to those hypothesized. They ranged from *a very heavy foreign accent* to *a medium foreign accent.* Since accent reduction is not contemplated in CLT, a result like this was expected. As it was not possible to find a diagnostic of foreign accent similar to the one carried out in this research in the literature reviewed, a comparison with other teaching approaches is not feasible. Whether the Direct Method, the Oral Approach and the Audiolingual Method which explicitly involve accent reduction have yielded learners with less foreign accent is quite difficult to establish.

The data concerning pronunciation improvement correspond to previous research. Here, most learners wanted to improve their pronunciation, 69% wanted to reduce their accent and 56% wanted to be more intelligible. The last two results are similar to those found by Correa (1995) at the same institution when a non-communicative (ESP) program was used instead of a communicative program. On that occasion, 63% of 92 subjects wanted to reduce their accent and 47% cared about intelligibility.[5] These results were closely replicated in the present survey.

The preference for accent reduction over the deeper issue of intelligibility may perhaps be explained on the basis of affective and socio-cultural factors: i) learners may feel ashamed of their accent; ii) a near native or a native-like accent may be more prestigious for Mexicans and for native speakers; iii) learners like to show off when they speak English, using a near native or native-like accent; iv) they like to do things well and in consequence they want to pronounce properly; v) they identify with the English speaking community; vi) they belong to a social class (high or middle) which values having a near native or a native-like accent. In order to confirm these possible motivations, more research would be necessary.

It was interesting to find that in the present study the scores of intelligibility and foreign accent did not correlate significantly. Munro and Derwing (1995) found a correlation between them. In spite of their result, they reported that "foreign accent scores did not predict intelligibility very well" (p. 91). The absence of a statistically significant correlation in this study implies that the prediction of ratings is weak. This confirms that there is certain independence between intelligibility and foreign accent although it is not total. Therefore, to consider them as two separate factors in this sur-

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[5] The sum of the percentages of the reasons for improvement is more than 100 because, in this case, learners could choose more than one answer.

vey was justified. Hence, it was appropriate to design specific scales for every factor.

Taking into account Munro and Derwing's (1995) results concerning intelligibility and foreign accent, the findings of this study are not surprising. After all, it is clear that the relationship between the two factors is complex. The ratings that do not correlate are of two types : i) those that are of strong foreign accent but medium intelligibility; and ii) those that are of very low foreign accent but less than expected intelligibility. This reflects a complicated relationship in which scores cannot be predicted very well. The results reveal that a heavy foreign accent may not be very unintelligible and that a mild accent may not be very intelligible. In short, it is possible to confirm what Munro and Derwing (1995) claim, that is, that a heavy foreign accent does not necessarily reduce intelligibility and that less accented speech does not necessarily increase intelligibility.

In sum, the results of the subjective needs analysis reject Munro and Derwing's assumption that accent reduction is not necessary. To have a goal of comfortable intelligibility is not enough according to the needs detected. The present study provides teachers and curriculum designers with data that indicates the necessity of reorienting the teaching of pronunciation in order to achieve better levels of intelligibility and to maximize accent reduction. Thus, the needs analysis suggests that pronunciation teaching might deal with both: intelligibility and accent reduction. The extent to which an accent can be reduced is not quite clear. Future research may clarify this question. For the time being, the researcher agrees with Avery and Ehrlich (1992), who hold that the Critical Period Hypothesis is not an impediment to teaching pronunciation, accent reduction included, since there is variability among learners and since there is no clear indication that age is a determinant to acquire a native-like accent.

Considering the results of this study, higher levels of intelligibility and accents nearer to native speakers should be sought. Learners are willing to improve their pronunciation in general, and to perfect their accent in particular. This is a good beginning. Teachers and curriculum designers may take advantage of the situation and give them more pronunciation instruction. Taking into consideration learners' responses to questionnaires, special courses on pronunciation are also an option to perfect their pronunciation. Learners' needs like the ones encountered in this survey may be met in general English courses or in skill courses. It is important to discuss such an is-

sue in the language departments of schools and universities because pronunciation is a skill that learners actually value and may profit from.

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