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English Pronunciation Teaching

Theory, Practice and Research Findings



Edited by Veronica G. Sardegna
and Anna Jarosz

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: 160

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10 Learners' Views on the Usefulness of L2 Perceptual Training

Anastazija Kirkova-Naskova

Introduction

Over the years, numerous studies have examined the effects of pronunciation training on learners' second language (L2) pronunciation, and the results suggest a positive influence of pronunciation training on modifying learners' L2 perception and production (cf. critical overview in Lee *et al.*, 2015; Thomson & Derwing, 2015). Yet, apart from a few notable instances (e.g. Sardegna, 2012, 2020), very little attention has been paid to learners' experience with different training procedures. The goal of this study is to increase our understanding of the potential of perceptual training for pronunciation improvement by exploring learners' views of one perceptual training approach, including their perceptions of the usefulness of specific perceptual teaching techniques and exercise formats.

This chapter starts with an overview of research insights on the value of pronunciation instruction and pronunciation teaching techniques. It then describes the methodological aspects of the study: research question, participants, perceptual training approach and data collection and analysis. In the next sections, qualitative results are reported followed by a discussion of the findings. The chapter concludes with several suggestions for pronunciation pedagogy.

Background

Pronunciation instruction and teaching techniques

L2 learners demonstrate perceptual difficulties when categorising L2 sounds that are different (both similar and new) from their L1 sounds (Flege & Bohn, 2021). It is very likely that such perceptual challenges cause obstacles to L2 sound production resulting in foreign-accented speech. Nevertheless, this does not mean that learners are unable to accurately perceive sounds. In fact, learners have the sensory capacity to

modify their perceptual routines through language exposure and use (Strange & Shafer, 2008). Where the learning context is such that L2 is taught as a foreign language with little or no exposure to native pronunciation models, phonetic instruction can help in modifying learners' pronunciation.

Empirical evidence from studies that include pronunciation training highlight the potential of explicit phonetic instruction. Better performance outcomes are reported in studies where formal instruction included training in perception and production (Cenoz & García Lecumberri, 1999; Lee *et al.*, 2020), or focused on strategy-based pronunciation training (Sardegna, 2012, 2022). Couper (2003) advocates for incorporating phonetic instruction in general English courses, arguing that, through support and positive reinforcement, learners develop awareness about their pronunciation errors, enhance their auditory memory and motor skills control, learn to focus on native-speaker speech and lower their affective filters. Explicit phonetic training improves learners' intelligibility and comprehensibility of native-speaker speech resulting in better listening skills (Rasmussen & Zampini, 2010).

Different types of instruction employ different teaching techniques that develop different aspects of pronunciation. Studies show that prosody-focused instruction yields better results in learners' speech intelligibility and communicative performance and, therefore, should be prioritised in teaching (Derwing *et al.*, 1998; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Gordon *et al.*, 2013). However, when learners are expected to acquire native-like pronunciation, they should also be exposed to instruction focused on segmental accuracy as it directs their attention to phonetic form. Perceptual training (ear training) is a proven technique used for practising various pronunciation features, such as phoneme discrimination, stress placement, intonational patterns, L1-L2 sounds, or language varieties (Kirkova-Naskova, 2019). Recent research highlights the effectiveness of high variability phonetic/pronunciation training (HVPT) (see Thomson, 2018). HVPT focuses on perception practice through the use of numerous auditory stimuli, produced by multiple talkers, in varied phonetic contexts. It offers exposure to greater language variation with long-lasting improvement results.

The implications of phonological awareness (i.e. learner's knowledge of L2 phonological structures and rules) to successful pronunciation have also been investigated. Venkatagiri and Levis (2007), for instance, examined the link between phonological awareness and speech comprehensibility and concluded that phonological awareness may be an important factor in predicting whether an L2 learner is more or less comprehensible; therefore, as they advise, it should be developed through form-focused instruction. Gómez-Lacabex and Gallardo-del-Puerto (2014) investigated the effect of three types of instruction (perceptual, articulatory and control group with native exposure) on the occurrence of schwa in an

unstressed position. Their findings confirm that controlled practice has a positive impact on raising learners' perceptual awareness.

Other aspects of phonetic instruction that deserve attention are critical listening and corrective feedback. Both techniques aim to raise learners' awareness of how accurate their L2 speech is. Fraser (2006) argues that pronunciation is a cognitive skill that develops through practice and phonological concept formation. She recommends activities where learners record themselves and analyse their speech by contrasting it with a native speaker's recording of the same content. Her claims are supported by findings from studies that tested the variables of critical listening and socially constructed metalanguage use for corrective feedback – both variables have been found to have a positive impact on phonological concept formation and, subsequently, on pronunciation learning (Couper, 2009). The effectiveness of giving corrective feedback has also been tested under various conditions, for instance, computer-assisted only vs. both computer-assisted and teacher feedback and their effect on vowel production improvement (Maeda, 2010), or the link between the type of corrective feedback (prompts, recasts, peer feedback) and pronunciation accuracy and fluency development (Sato & Lyster, 2012). Overall, research into pronunciation-focused corrective feedback shows that, despite being subject to individual variability, it facilitates the development of learner noticing skills resulting in both segmental and suprasegmental accuracy, and its potential is enhanced when L2 learners demonstrate sufficient phonetic knowledge, conversational practice and perceptual awareness of L2 sounds (cf. critical overview in Saito, 2021).

To increase our understanding of the potential of perceptual training for pronunciation improvement, I explored the perspectives of Macedonian learners of English regarding a perceptual training approach on English front vowels /i:, ɪ, e, æ/. This investigation is part of a larger study that tested its effectiveness on both perception and production. Specifically, the current study attempts to answer the following research question:

- (1) What was EFL learners' opinion of the usefulness of the different components of a perceptual training approach (i.e. explicit phonetic instruction, critical listening, perceptual practice and communicative practice) for learning the pronunciation of /i:, ɪ, e, æ/?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 31 participants (F = 26; M = 5) took part in the study. They were all Macedonian adult learners of English, of 19 ($n = 13$), 20 ($n = 17$) and 22 ($n = 1$) years old. All participants were second-year English-major students (teacher trainees $n = 27$; translator trainees $n = 4$). Their English language proficiency, tested before training, varied and demonstrated the

following proficiency levels according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001): B1 ($n = 1$), B2 ($n = 20$) and C1 ($n = 10$). The participants reported that their frequency of English language use was mainly limited to academic classes and social media.

Perceptual training approach

The intervention combined phonetic and perceptual training on English front vowels /i:, ɪ, e, æ/ during a period of three weeks. Prior to training, participants were familiarised with all English phonemic symbols in six 45-minute sessions. They were also recorded reading dialogues with vocalic contrasts (Baker, 2006); the dialogues were later used as teaching materials in class. During the treatment phase which followed, participants received perceptual training in twelve 45-minute sessions with two goals in mind: (a) expose learners to good exemplars of authentic speech, and (b) raise their phonological awareness of English front vowels. The training itself focused on speech perception only (i.e. no production exercises were included nor practiced) and was adapted to the curriculum of an undergraduate course on English phonetics and phonology. In other words, the intervention was carried out in a classroom context. The researcher was also the instructor.

The components of the perceptual training approach were as follows:

- (1) Explicit phonetic instruction of /i:, ɪ, e, æ/ (listen and analyse).
- (2) Critical listening (listen and compare).
- (3) Perceptual practice (listen and discriminate).
- (4) Communicative practice (listen and understand/think).

Explicit phonetic instruction consisted of detailed multimodal presentations of the phonological features of English front vowels. Thus, explicit information was complemented with visual materials: pictures (vowel diagrams and a sagittal section of a head), videos from *BBC Learning English*¹ with a native speaker demonstrating vowel articulation and use, and animations (movable lips).

Critical listening involved analysis of participants' dialogue recordings and their comparison to an authentic dialogue using three different approaches (see Table 10.1). Working as a group, participants did all three approaches with each approach employed once for a different vowel contrast: Approach #1 for /i: - ɪ/; Approach #2 for /ɪ - e/; and Approach #3 for /e - æ/.

Perceptual practice aimed to enhance students' discrimination skills. First, a corpus of minimal pair contrasts was created² and then stimulus materials were developed from audio recordings available in online dictionaries³. Such auditory training stimuli included numerous samples with vowels in varied phonetic contexts produced by multiple talkers (male and

Table 10.1 Critical listening: An overview of approaches for analysing participants' recordings

Approach	Step 1 LISTEN (authentic and participants' recordings)	Step 2 EVALUATE (compare and contrast the recordings)	Step 3 CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK (given by peer or teacher)
#1	Group listening Participants' names revealed	Joint evaluation No instruction	Joint discussion of pron. errors Peer feedback (general/ individual)
#2	Group listening No participants' names revealed	Individual self- evaluation No instruction	Joint discussion of pron. errors Peer feedback (general)
#3	Group listening No participants' names revealed	Individual self- evaluation Written instruction	No discussion Written feedback by the teacher

Table 10.2 Perceptual exercises

Type	Exercise	Description
A	Minimal pair: Same or different	10 recordings; 10 different minimal pairs Words are pronounced by different talkers. Students decide whether the two words they hear are the same or different.
B	Minimal pair: Word recognition 1	One recording with a word sequence; minimal pairs on a sheet Words are pronounced by different talkers. Students circle the word they hear.
C	Minimal pair: Word recognition 2	Six recordings, each focused on one of six minimal pairs Words are pronounced by different talkers. Students can see the pair on a sheet and circle the word they hear.
D	Word sequence: Vowel recognition	One recording with a sequence of different words Words are pronounced by different talkers. Students listen and decide which word contains the target vowel.
E	Word sequence: AXB	Three-sequence word recordings Words are pronounced by different talkers. Students decide whether X is same as A or B (X = A, X = B).

female speakers of different ages and origins). These stimuli were used in various types of exercises described in Table 10.2. Activities with minimal pairs used in a sentence context were also incorporated.

Communicative practice focused also on perception – the students were not expected to produce speech but to listen, think and process what they heard when working in pairs or small groups. Two types of activities were incorporated: games and authentic TED talks (<https://www.ted.com/talks>). The games included quizzes and maps. After listening to the motivational TED talks, students completed activities that focused on the four vowels.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was collected through interviews conducted in Macedonian 10 days after the training. The interview questions were semi-structured and scripted (Richards, 2003). They were grouped into five categories consisting of specific questions related to each component of the perceptual training approach (see Figure 10.1 in Appendix 10.1). During the interviews, the researcher also asked unscripted questions following the participants' responses. Each interview lasted 20 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded in a language lab with the computer software Audacity 2.0.6. (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>), transcribed, translated into English by the author, and then coded (M01 – M31; M = Macedonian). Care was taken to translate participants' comments as close to the original as possible even if that meant leaving ungrammatical sentences. A qualitative content analysis was conducted based on participants' responses, which were categorised according to differences and similarities (Dörnyei, 2007). In addition, field notes were kept after each class. These noted students' reactions and remarks to particular activities.

Results

Participants generally expressed positive comments about the perceptual training approach they received. This overall sentiment is best exemplified by a remark made by M23:

I didn't know something like this could be so useful. (M23)

First, with respect to the component of phonetic instruction, as many as 25 participants (81%) remarked that the visual materials helped them understand vowel formation and duration, face musculature and expression, and speech organ position. Their comments underscored the important role of visual materials in enhancing their learning experience and raising their awareness of the English front vowels:

Knowing theory is of no use if you don't have a picture in front of you. This way you can create an image or a concept and then you can practice on your own. (M06)

It's different when you see it and then you try to pronounce it to compare it, you adapt your mouth; in a way, you become conscious how to pronounce it. (M18)

You can stop the video to check the position of the lips and tongue, how it stretches or contracts; that was really educational. (M28)

Some participants made specific comments about the videos in relation to the perceptual exercises: 16 reported that they would think of the

presenter when doing the perceptual exercises or when practicing at home; 3 mentioned that they paid more attention to the auditory characteristics of the vowel and that the videos were not very useful to them. Many participants (68%) approved of the phonetic explanations for each vowel given by the teacher, finding them useful for distinguishing between English and Macedonian vowels and a valuable repetition of points previously presented in the videos or explained with the vowel diagram:

I think giving explanation is very important, especially with the diagram, how the tongue is positioned. At first, it wasn't really clear but with practice and repetition, I started to understand the diagrams. (M24)

As for preferences regarding type of presentation, participants opted for videos ($n = 24$; 78%), videos followed by the teacher's explanation ($n = 4$; 13%) and a combination of videos, animations and diagrams ($n = 1$; 3%). Two participants were indecisive.

Second, participants' views of the critical listening component were varied, which was not surprising given that they had no prior experience with such exercises. Positive reflections included feeling relaxed throughout the exercise ($n = 10$), being skeptical at first but then relaxed ($n = 3$) or focusing only on their mispronunciations ($n = 6$). Negative reflections included feeling uneasy and unable to concentrate on mispronunciations when they listened to their own voice, which resulted in negative psychological effects, such as a strong feeling of embarrassment about others hearing their voice ($n = 13$), inability to recognise their voices ($n = 10$), or dislike of their voice quality as it sounded unnatural ($n = 4$). Based on class observations, such feelings directly influenced their successful engagement in the activity: they were distracted, unable to hear their pronunciation errors, and unhelpful during group discussions; in a word, precious class time was lost before group dynamics consolidated. Only after overcoming the initial discomfort, participants seemed to understand the value of the exercise and become more open to constructive criticism. As their classmates' opinions became more helpful and specific, some participants changed their attitudes towards peer feedback and started to pay more attention to their mistakes, as evidenced in the following comment:

Maybe it was unpleasant at first because we didn't know each other, but I understand the point of it and by listening to my recording I realized I made mistakes. Most of us think we speak English well, but by listening to ourselves and others, I know where I stand now. That was useful. (M29)

Participants' preferred approach to analysing their speech differed. Two participants thought all three approaches (see Table 10.1) were useful. Six participants opted for Approach #1 (group listening, participants' names

revealed, joint evaluation, peer feedback), arguing that it helped them be better focused, get comments from several learners and understand their most striking pronunciation errors. Three participants preferred Approach #2 (group listening, participants' names not revealed, individual self-evaluation, peer feedback). They reasoned that, in this way, negative criticism was avoided – with no names revealed, learners were more susceptible to accepting their peers' comments. One valid point they mentioned was that not everyone was capable of evaluating their own pronunciation. The remaining 20 participants (65%) preferred Approach #3 (group listening, no participants' names, instructed individual self-evaluation, written teacher feedback). They observed that this approach was the most useful because it required them to focus intently on noticing segments. Many referred to the teacher's expertise to evaluate their pronunciation and give feedback, because of *being trained to do that* (M15) and for *being more competent to evaluate with precision, which is time-saving* (M05). When asked whether they would accept feedback from a peer rather than a teacher, those who were reluctantly in favour of it ($n = 5$) stated that they would accept any feedback from peers they knew (even if they had poor pronunciation) or from a classmate that had a perceived better pronunciation. The remaining participants either reiterated their preference for teacher feedback only ($n = 6$) or chose not to comment ($n = 20$). Based on notes regarding participants' in-class behaviour, Approach #1 seemed to appeal to those who concentrated better, valued peer feedback and favoured cooperative tasks resulting in group conclusions; Approach #2 appeared to be preferred by learners who avoided criticism and failed to evaluate themselves; and Approach #3 was favoured by learners who wished to be evaluated and informed about their pronunciation. Overall, regardless of their preferences, it appeared that critical listening was a positive learning experience for all the participants.

Third, participants' views of the perceptual practice component were encouraging. More than half of the participants ($n = 19$; 61%) found all of the exercises interesting, useful for noticing vocalic differences, and a positive challenge. The following comment is an illustration of such a viewpoint:

I really liked the exercises. I think each type had its own purpose. Those with different speakers, same word, but you have to contrast two vowels, it was all about the vowel, the difference between two similar vowels. The others with gaps, you could hear the word and the vowels - those were interesting and important. Or, the exercise with three [words], is X same as A or B, sometimes we could recognise the different vowel. I liked that we could hear different speakers. (M24)

Seven participants reported mixed reactions – they found the exercises overall useful, but some of them more difficult than expected. Five participants expressed disapproving views – they found the exercises frustrating

when the words were pronounced too fast, or they found them monotonous and boring when the exercise was too long. With respect to the types of exercises (see Table 10.2), 9 participants (29%) preferred exercise type C ('same word, different speakers'), and 10 (32%) chose type E ('AXB'). For the former, they argued that word repetition by different speakers helped them focus on the vowel only. For the latter, they observed that, although they liked it, the AXB exercise was very challenging as it required intense concentration, and some words were too difficult to understand. The other exercise types were preferred by fewer participants: A ($n = 1$), B ($n = 4$) and D ($n = 2$). Some participants could not single out a preferred exercise; instead, they opted for a combination of two choices, for example, types B and C (M13), types C and E (M15, M29) and/or types D and E (M22). One participant did not answer (M26).

Finally, almost all participants (97%) found the communicative practice component appealing. The games were seen as a fun element and a fresh change compared to the perceptual exercises; nonetheless, few comments were made in the interviews. In contrast, the authentic talks prompted more responses. For example, M12 and M18 noted that the topics appealed to them on a personal level because they were age-appropriate and relevant for their prospective profession; M10 and M15 found the native presenters attention-grabbing; and M29 stated that the content of the talks was educational for the participants. As for pronunciation, the authentic talks made it easier for the participants to notice differences between British and American English. Only one participant (M21) did not approve of the authentic talks due to personal difficulty to understand the native speakers. Almost half of the participants pointed out that they found it confusing and rather difficult to understand the native speakers when instructed to complete the follow-up exercises. One may argue that despite the fact that the level of their grammatical competence was satisfactory, these EFL students appeared not to be used to listening to authentic speech. The 15 participants who seemed not to have any difficulties understanding the talks noted that sometimes they could not complete the exercises promptly as they were more interested in learning about the content of the talk.

In sum, participants' overall impression of the perceptual training approach was positive as most concluded that it was useful for learning how to improve their pronunciation of English front vowels. In fact, 13 (42%) stated they believed they could discriminate the vowels better after the training. However, this newly-experienced alertness should not be confused for improvement as participants could not easily assess whether their pronunciation improved or not. In fact, all but one reported being more aware that they *should* improve their pronunciation. The following comment exemplifies this impression:

It's better to some degree I guess, but once you become aware of certain aspects, you strive to improve them. (M18)

Apart from raised awareness about the phonology of English front vowels and increased self-awareness about their pronunciation, 3 participants also noted increased sensitivity to British vs. American English. Finally, when asked whether they were aware of their own pronunciation errors and the errors their peers made, their views were divided: 10 reported being more aware of others' pronunciation errors, 9 believed they were more aware of their own pronunciation errors, 8 expressed being equally aware of their own and others' mispronunciations, and 4 reported not being aware.

When asked which component they found the most useful, 5 participants gave no response, and 4 participants preferred a combined approach with the four components complementing each other. The remaining participants opted for perceptual practice as the most useful component ($n = 14$; 45%), followed by critical listening ($n = 4$; 13%), phonetic instruction with video materials ($n = 3$; 10%) and authentic talks ($n = 1$; 3%). The perceptual exercises were regarded as a new approach that helped with sound discrimination. Those favouring critical listening emphasised the necessity of hearing one's own mistakes. As one participant highlighted:

When you hear yourself, and the mistakes you make, only then you know how much practice you need, what exactly you have to pay attention to. (M29)

When asked whether they would change anything about the perceptual training approach, the majority (84%) replied they would not; M03 advised that the perceptual exercises should be faster and more difficult, M17 recommended longer breaks between the words, M30 suggested authentic talks with native speakers speaking more slowly, M18 proposed listening to the talks first and then completing the exercises, and M16 posited that critical listening should not be included. Also, most participants (74%) reported that the training was carefully organised and surpassed their expectations. Contrary to this view, the rest recommended more student interaction, phonemic transcription practice and production practice. Further recommendations included developing lists of commonly mispronounced words, and offering practice with sentence repetition, individual correction or conversations.

Discussion

Our research question concerned participants' opinions regarding the different components of the perceptual training approach. With respect to the phonetic instruction component, the results show that participants favoured visual materials and detailed teacher explanations as they helped them better understand theoretical concepts and compare L1–L2 vowel differences. The use of visual materials in phonetic instruction supports

current teaching trends. Hardison (2012), for instance, emphasises the importance of facial expression when processing speech and turns our attention to new technologies and visual platforms that have shifted focus from the dominant auditive modality to audio-visual modalities, such as videos and computer/phone applications. The participants in this study preferred videos. Based on their comments, these teaching materials offered a realistic picture of what was being taught, the abstract concepts became tangible, and the effect was educational. In line with McCrocklin (2012), videos raised learners' phonological awareness about the distinctive features of English vowels. As for detailed teacher explanations, such preference is also in line with the overarching view of the teacher as an important factor in the learning process (Fraser, 2006; Pennington, 2015) – the teacher facilitates the development of learners' functional communicability, increases their self-confidence and encourages them to start caring about their own pronunciation. To conclude, videos only or teacher explanations only are not sufficient for presenting new pronunciation structures; it is the combination of these two approaches that learners favoured because they complement each other; rules are repeated; hence, learning is more successful.

Participants' self-reports regarding the usefulness of the critical listening component revealed that they understood its overall benefits. Unexpectedly, hearing their own voice caused profound anxiety; yet, once they got used to the format of the activity, participants experienced its positive effects: by comparing their own speech to the speech of native speakers and their classmates, each participant could reflect on their L2 pronunciation. In his research, Couper (2009) arrives at the same conclusion. His respondents also highlighted the benefit of this teaching technique because it allowed them to hear the difference between what they thought they had pronounced, what they actually pronounced, and how they should pronounce it. With regard to the preferred approach to analysing speech, our participants valued Approach #3 as the most useful, which indicates that they relied on teacher feedback more than on peer feedback. In fact, the attempt to encourage learners to give peer feedback proved ineffective. The explanation may be connected to the specific nature of pronunciation as a language skill, which, according to the participants, requires a high level of expertise from the assessor. The reasons reported against such activities included distrust in peers' linguistic competence or indifference to pronunciation errors resulting in casual comments. Similar findings are reported in Dłaska and Krekeler (2008): even highly experienced learners have difficulties evaluating pronunciation. A possible solution is offered by Sato and Lyster (2012), who believe that learners should be trained first to give corrective feedback. This way, they learn how to foster the acquisition of new knowledge or strengthen already acquired knowledge (Lyster *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, Fraser (2006) considers that the critical listening technique yields effective results no matter what approach is undertaken

because it enables learners to bridge the gap between their cognitive/unconscious knowledge and their actual physical capabilities. To summarise, critical listening may not have proved entirely successful, but it did prompt learners' awareness of their own pronunciation errors.

The analysis of participants' responses shows that participants considered the perceptual practice useful, but not entirely interesting. They either regarded it as a positive challenge (especially for the motivated and proficient learners) or a cause for frustration and difficulty (mainly for the less proficient learners). In particular, the two types of minimal pair exercises which they felt were most beneficial were word recognition and AXB; the latter was also regarded as the most difficult. It is precisely exposure to multiple native speakers that proved to be the most positive experience as it helped them adapt to speaker variation, required greater concentration, and developed their sensitivity to subtle vocalic differences. These results echo findings from studies on high variability phonetic/pronunciation training (e.g. Lively *et al.*, 1993; Ortega *et al.*, 2021; Thomson, 2018). Furthermore, the results indicate that conventional minimal pair exercises are well accepted by learners, despite arguments that their frequent use is not linguistically justified as mispronouncing any of the members rarely causes misunderstanding (Levis & Cortes, 2008). Bearing this in mind, it can be inferred that perceptual activities with minimal pairs practiced in different exercise formats are the most useful when the aim of the exercise is to direct the learner's attention to sound discrimination only and not to word meaning.

Results also indicate approval for the use of authentic talks for communicative practice. Participants found these exercises interest-provoking and helpful as they adjusted to rapid speech. Such results are in line with research conducted by Cauldwell (2013), who argues that listening to authentic speech helps learners get used to the sound substance and connected speech processes, resulting in learners' comprehension of utterance meaning. However, the participants approached these exercises as listening comprehension tasks, i.e. they found it more relevant to understand what the speaker was saying rather than focusing on the proper pronunciation and discrimination of the front vowels targeted for instruction. Therefore, it appears that the sequence 'sound discrimination → meaning' does not follow that order, as suggested by Cauldwell.

Finally, the overall findings from this study reveal a general feeling of improvement and the ability to identify mispronunciations. It appears that the acquired knowledge resulted in raised awareness that pronunciation is a skill crucial to successful communication. Such reasoning is consistent with the intelligibility principle vis-à-vis the nativeness principle: learners should aim to achieve a fair degree of accurate pronunciation that will allow them to be comfortably intelligible (Levis, 2018). Though all components were appreciated as beneficial, the perceptual practice component was singled out as the most useful. A possible explanation that can

account for such preference is the varied format of the exercises which appealed to the participants. Unsurprisingly, the need for more speech production, student interaction and individual correction was pointed out as the type of activities that participants identified as lacking. In other words, the participants did not feel that exposure to perception only was sufficient; such an outcome is in support of current approaches to pronunciation teaching and learning (Pennington & Rogerson-Revell, 2019; Sardegna, 2022). Nevertheless, the training was seen as having a positive effect on participants' perception.

In summary, the qualitative analysis suggested participants' increased sensitivity to their pronunciation errors resulted in a general feeling of raised awareness and concern for their own L2 speech. Furthermore, the perceptual training was evaluated favourably with a preference for AXB minimal pair activities, critical listening practice and individual corrective teacher feedback from the teacher.

A few limitations need to be mentioned. Given that the researcher was also the instructor, the participants might have been tempted to present a more favourable image of themselves even though care was taken for maximum objectivity. The specific institutional context may also be seen as restrictive. Further investigations are needed to test whether such type of training is effective in different teaching/learning contexts.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study give valuable insights into learners' personal beliefs and expectations. They are particularly relevant for teachers as they can be encouraged to include more activities for pronunciation practice. Taken together, these findings suggest some useful guidelines for teachers:

- Explicit instruction with a focus on L2 phonetics appears to raise learners' phonological awareness.
- Exposing learners to authentic speech with high variability stimuli (different speakers, situations or native/nonnative varieties) and training them on how to critically listen to and then evaluate their L2 speech tends to enhance learners' noticing skills.
- To change learners' attitudes towards their pronunciation skills, pronunciation learning should be individualised and supported with corrective feedback.

Pronunciation can be modified with consistent practice. Teaching students strategies for self-evaluation and self-correction may help them become autonomous learners (Sardegna 2012, 2020, 2022). Providing practice inside and outside the classroom could be done through

computer/phone-assisted applications, by using tools such as audio recording software or video-sharing social networks.

Conclusion

This classroom study aimed to perform a qualitative evaluation of a perceptual training approach for improving English front vowels. The participants were interviewed post training, and their views were analysed. The results revealed one important finding: while the participants were unaware of their English pronunciation prior to training, they became more self-critical of it post training. They demonstrated enhanced phonological awareness about the English front vowels and reported increased confidence in their ability to discriminate between them. They also showed a growing interest in improving their own pronunciation skills. Finally, they expressed that exposure to multiple speakers and good exemplars of authentic speech helped improve their comprehension of rapid speech and their ability to distinguish between different English varieties.

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Notes

- (1) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/>
- (2) <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/wordscope/wordlist/minimal.html>
- (3) <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>, <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>

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