Feature Article

Teacher, Student, and Textbook Approaches to Pronunciation in a Community-Based ESL Setting

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Abstract

This study investigated teacher cognition and practices, student perceptions, and textbook approaches to pronunciation instruction in a community-based ESL program. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with seven volunteer teachers and eleven students, classroom observations, and textbook analyses across proficiency levels. Findings indicated that teachers acknowledged the importance of pronunciation instruction but lacked training to implement it while students believed in the importance of learning pronunciation. Textbook analyses showed that the books provided pronunciation activities only in review units, which were often skipped by teachers. In conclusion, teachers in community-based ESL programs could benefit from professional development targeting pronunciation instruction to learn how to use, adapt, and supplement the activities found in the textbook and meet the needs of their students.

Keywords: *pronunciation instruction, teacher cognition, community-based ESL program, teacher training*

Introduction

Community-based English as a Second Language (ESL) programs have increased in number and popularity (Morgan, 2002) being offered mostly through churches or libraries for immigrant adults wanting to learn English. These classes are typically free of charge, allowing the adults who attend to better engage in their communities (Snell, 2013). Such programs, however, have not been the focus of as much general education research as other ESL programs, partially because they take place outside formal institutions of education (Morgan, 2002). This is also true concerning research about pronunciation, a language subskill that has, in general, received less attention in English

language teaching and learning research compared to grammar and vocabulary (Baker, 2011).

The weak emphasis on pronunciation research is reflected in the training teachers receive on this subject, with many teachers not having adequate preparation on how to teach pronunciation (Breitkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2001; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2012). This lack of pronunciation training has been shown across different English teaching contexts in various countries (e.g., Baker, 2011; Baker, 2014; Couper, 2016; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2012; Wahid & Sulong, 2013), and it can result in the teachers having low confidence in their ability to teach pronunciation (Couper, 2016). Better training in pronunciation instruction could lead teachers to incorporate this type of instruction with more quality and frequency.

Most research exploring pronunciation instruction has focused on teacher cognition, or "the knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that teachers have in relation to their actual teaching practices in a local or specific target context" (Baker, 2014, pp. 136-137), with studies focusing on students' perspectives about pronunciation lagging behind. English language learners, however, have been found to value pronunciation instruction and have expressed the desire for more pronunciation practice (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Tejeda & Santos, 2014). The fact that pronunciation instruction has been found to be absent in many classrooms (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002) may contribute to students' low confidence in their English pronunciation (Tejeda & Santos, 2014). In addition, students typically struggle to identify the pronunciation problems that cause miscommunication (MacDonald, 2018), which might lead them to want instruction on pronunciation elements that do not necessarily improve intelligibility. The lack of pronunciation instruction can also lead to students not having effective techniques to manage communication breakdowns (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002).

While teachers report that they include pronunciation activities in their lessons, only around half of the teachers interviewed in Foote et al. (2012) included supplemental materials for pronunciation activities outside the textbook, indicating that the presence of pronunciation activities in a textbook may be an important factor to promote pronunciation instruction in the classroom. ESL textbooks, however, vary widely in the quantity and quality of pronunciation practice included, and, when present, the activities tend to have the same format throughout the book or focus on the same pronunciation concept (Derwing et al., 2012). Teachers must possess pronunciation pedagogy knowledge to choose textbooks that include a variety of pronunciation practice if they work in programs that give them this choice, or to supplement the textbook they are given if the pronunciation practice included is not sufficient (McGregor & Reed, 2018). A variety of activities should include a focus on both segmentals - the single consonant and

vowel sounds also known as phonemes, and suprasegmentals - all other pronunciation features occurring at the word or sentence level, such as word stress and intonation. Research has shown that when teachers do integrate pronunciation lessons in their classroom, they usually focus exclusively on segmental instruction (Couper, 2016; Foote et al., 2012; Wahid & Sulong, 2013) although a balance between segmental and suprasegmental instruction should exist to make students' pronunciation intelligible (Levis & Grant, 2003), which is the ultimate goal of pronunciation instruction.

This study combines an investigation about teacher cognition and practices and student beliefs regarding pronunciation instruction in a community-based ESL program as well as textbook analyses from each proficiency level in the same program to provide information about the pronunciation materials available to students and teachers, addressing the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the teachers' cognition and practices regarding the teaching of pronunciation?
- RQ2. What are the students' perceptions on the pronunciation instruction they receive in the classroom compared to their self-reported pronunciation needs?
- RQ3. What pronunciation support do the ESL textbooks provide for students and teachers?

Methodology

Context

This study took place in a community-based ESL program housed on a college campus, which has been serving the local Latino community since 2008. Classes are 90 minutes long, are taught twice a week, and offer five proficiency levels: Basic to Level 4, based on the *Ventures* textbook series classification. In the semester when the study took place, due to registration numbers, levels 3 and 4 were grouped together, and there were two sections of the Basic level. All other levels had one class each. The only cost for students is the optional purchase of the textbook and the workbook – every other aspect of the program is free of charge, including childcare offered during classes. The first author, Victoria Millard, collected all the data and was the program's student director at the time of research, when around 90 students were registered with about 40 students attending classes each night. Most students are adults, with about two-thirds of them being from Guatemala and the remaining mostly from Mexico and El Salvador.

Teachers in our program are college undergraduate students, most of whom study Spanish and have been introduced to the program through a volunteer component of a required Spanish class. Many of the teachers do not have any formal training in teaching, except for those majoring in teacher education and/or minoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). During the research, six lead teachers taught the five levels while six assistant teachers volunteered one night a week. The only formal training offered to teachers each semester is an hour-long workshop led by the second author, Dr. Eliana Hirano – an education professor with a Ph. D. in applied linguistics and expertise in ESL, who also coordinates the TEFL minor. The topic of each workshop is chosen based on teacher feedback as well as observations made by the student director.

Data Collection

As the primary researcher, Victoria invited all the ESL students and teachers to participate in this study. Those who agreed met individually with her, usually before classes began. After going over the approved college human subjects research protocol and obtaining consent, participants engaged in 10-minute-long semi-structured interviews regarding pronunciation instruction. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and in full. To ease communication, the student interviews were conducted in Spanish, the students' L1 and a language that Victoria speaks well, while the teacher interviews were conducted in English. The interview guidelines can be found in the Appendix.

Teacher Participants

Seven teachers teaching at each level offered were interviewed. The table below provides information for each teacher's role (lead or assistant), gender, time they had spent teaching ESL at the time of the interview, their major(s) and minor(s), and the ESL level they taught.

Teacher Role	Gender	Time Teaching ESL	Major/Minor	Level Taught
Teacher 1 Lead	Male	A semester and a half	Communications	Basic
Teacher 2 Lead	Male	A year	English, Spanish, TEFL	Levels 3/4
Teacher 3 Assistant	Male	Two years	Political Science, Spanish	Basic
Teacher 4 Lead	Female	A year	Sociology, Anthropology	Basic

Teacher 5 Lead	Male	Two weeks	Early Childhood Education, TEFL	Levels 3/4
Teacher 6 Lead	Female	A year	Spanish, TEFL	Level 2
Teacher 7 Lead	Male	Two and a half years	Political Science, Spanish	Level 1

Table 1: List of Teacher Participants

Student Participants

Eleven students, representing all proficiency levels, participated in this study. They all spoke Spanish, and some also spoke indigenous languages from their home country. The table below lists the participating students, their country of origin, the class they were taking at the time of the study, and number of years in the United States.

Student Information	Country of Origin	Enrolled ESL Class	Years Spent in the United States
Student 1	El Salvador	Level 2	6
Student 2	Guatemala	Basic	19
Student 3	Guatemala	Levels 3/4	10
Student 4	Guatemala	Level 1	4
Student 5	Mexico	Level 2	15
Student 6	Guatemala	Level 1	18
Student 7	Guatemala	Level 1	6
Student 8	Bolivia	Level 2	20
Student 9	Guatemala	Levels 3/4	5
Student 10	Mexico	Level 2	28
Student 11	Guatemala	Levels 3/4	11

Table 2: List of Student Participants

After the interviews, Victoria observed the participating teachers' classrooms to compare their stated and actual classroom practices, in an attempt to establish a relationship between teacher practice and teacher cognition and assist in triangulation for this qualitative study.

She also conducted a textbook analysis of the *Ventures* series. All levels from Basic through Level 4 were analyzed to identify the pronunciation activities provided in each textbook as well as the guidelines for teachers in the accompanying teachers' manuals. The textbooks were analyzed page by page to find each pronunciation activity. The pronunciation topics, the length of the activities, and the format of the activities were all

recorded. The activities were examined to determine the amount and variety of pronunciation practice provided as well as the pronunciation focus, especially in regards to segmental and suprasegmental practice.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed through a recursive, inductive, and on-going process (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) using open coding to identify emergent themes (Mackey & Gass, 2005) that were pertinent to the research questions.

Findings

The main findings will be presented following the order of the research questions: teachers' cognition and practices, students' perceptions, and textbook analyses.

Teacher interviews

Every teacher stated that they included pronunciation practice in their classes with most of them recognizing the importance of teaching the pronunciation of key vocabulary as indicated in the textbook. All mentioned that their students ask pronunciation questions and want their pronunciation corrected each time an error is made; however, teachers feel it is not feasible to correct every pronunciation error, so they choose what to focus on.

Half the teachers gave examples of segmental errors to explain why they teach pronunciation. The two Levels 3/4 teachers dedicated an entire lesson to English tongue twisters because of their students' expressed interest in learning more about pronunciation. These tongue twisters focused on segmental production with no attention to suprasegmentals. Teacher 2 even stated, "I know intonation isn't as important in English as it is in other languages, where a different intonation can be a completely different word whereas it's mostly not a thing in English," indicating his incomplete knowledge of the English sound system.

Teachers understood how their lack of training affected their classroom instruction. Most thought that they could benefit from more training in pronunciation instruction; however, those who are not going into education did not want more training, viewing their job as short-term and not realizing how training might make a difference for their students. For example, Teacher 3, when asked how he would benefit from more training in pronunciation instruction, explained:

> "I mean, I would benefit from it, but with teaching not being what I want to go into, I'll be perfectly honest with you, it would matter one day a week and that would be it. For some of the others who are actually going into teaching Spanish

or English, that would be really important for them, but for the field of study that I'm going into, it's just not going to be important for me."

This teacher regarded the training as potentially beneficial to himself but did not seem to realize how it might have positively impacted his students. In addition, one of the teachers, Teacher 7, believed that the additional pronunciation training was no longer necessary. Having taught in the program for almost three years, he felt that this training would have been more useful when he first became a lead teacher because he has since learned to anticipate pronunciation problems based on his experience and his Spanish and English pronunciation knowledge.

One strategy that all teachers mentioned that they use regarding pronunciation instruction is repetition of key vocabulary words or words students ask about. Two teachers mentioned a slight focus on word stress if students transferred Spanish stress patterns to English words. The teachers are aware of their students' pronunciation needs and wants but feel that they cannot address them without more knowledge of implementation strategies for pronunciation teaching.

Observations

The classroom observations showed that teachers varied widely in how much time they devoted to students producing oral English, practicing pronunciation, and receiving corrective feedback. Some classes had students conversing throughout, while others had quiet, non-interactive students with lessons mainly focused on grammar topics found in the textbook. The main pronunciation practice observed in all classes was repetition of single words after the teacher.

One of the basic level classes had students practicing the difference between "in, on, under" independently through a fill-in-the-blank textbook exercise. Any conversation among students occurred in Spanish. Most of the teacher's help was also in Spanish, and the only English pronunciation practice consisted of students repeating the unit's key vocabulary words after the teacher.

The other basic class had more pronunciation practice while students did choral repetition of words used for family members. No individual or small group repetition accompanied this. Most pronunciation issues involved the use of an incorrect segmental sound, as in /fəmili/ instead of /fæmli/ or /uŋkəl/ instead of /ʌŋkəl/, which were either not addressed by the teacher or were corrected using recast, with the teacher repeating the target word with the correct pronunciation, but not prompting the student to do the same.

The Level 1 class had more student output while focusing on the difference between "is" and "are" in the present continuous. Students worked in pairs to complete textbook exercises, and these conversations occurred in English. The students also read a passage aloud in their book with the teacher. Although no explicit pronunciation correction happened during the reading, the teacher made various corrections at the end and had students repeat the correct pronunciation. Two explicit whole-class pronunciation mini-lessons were present repeating the initial consonant sound in the words "thirty" or "thirsty" as well as the sounds at the end of the words "seventeen" and "seventy." The teacher explained this last example as "seventeen" ending in the "n" sound while "seventy" ends in an "e" sound but did not address the shift in word stress.

Few pronunciation errors were present in the Level 2 class. However, one of the student pronunciation errors led to a whole class discussion on the vowel difference in the minimal pair "want" and "won't." The teacher emphasized the two vowel sounds so students could hear the difference. An accompanying visual on the board illustrated the meanings of the two words with a heart drawn next to "want" and an X drawn next to "won't." The few other segmental mispronunciations were not addressed and suprasegmental errors, such as pronouncing the monosyllabic word "aren't" as trisyllabic, were not addressed either.

The combined Levels 3 and 4 class had multiple repetition drills for students reviewing comparatives and superlatives. Sentences the students had completed for homework were reviewed chorally. If a pronunciation error occurred, the teachers provided the correct pronunciation, but did not prompt students to say the word again. This was the only class observed with some element of explicit suprasegmental practice with a discussion surrounding the number of syllables in adjectives to determine how comparatives and superlatives are formed. At one point, a student pronounced "superlative" with the wrong stress which made the word unintelligible to the teachers. They asked the student to repeat and then addressed his question, not the mispronunciation due to word stress.

Student Interviews

All students believed pronunciation was very important or the most important aspect of language to learn because they felt they could not communicate effectively if they had poor pronunciation. Student 5, for example, felt self-conscious about her pronunciation and discussed its importance in her daily life. She mentioned that when she started learning English, she went through a quiet period during which she refused to produce the language fearing embarrassment if she said something incorrectly. She still views pronunciation as a valuable language asset as she continues to learn more about it in her ESL class.

All students provided examples of when they believed their pronunciation was the reason an interlocutor did not understand what was said, with the examples being related to either segmentals or word stress. For example, Student 8 stated that "I need to improve my pronunciation to pronounce English better because there are small consonant differences that make a difference between words." Most students believed that these segmental mispronunciations caused interlocutors to misunderstand their speech.

Students mainly viewed pronunciation as segmental, only mentioning suprasegmental elements if one was mentioned specifically by the interviewer. For example, in response to Student 9's request for clarification regarding possible aspects of pronunciation that might be included in the classroom, the interviewer mentioned single letter pronunciation and word stress, and the student then said that word stress was something taught in class. Students were not able to describe communication breakdown due to suprasegmental pronunciation errors beyond those related to word stress and were only aware that an interlocutor did not understand them if the person asked them to repeat themselves.

All interviewed students enjoyed the pronunciation practice in their classes with repetition being the most commonly reported strategy used by their teacher. Student 2 mentioned that her teacher showed how to produce single sounds by emphasizing mouth formation whenever the students struggled to produce a specific sound correctly. Student 4 explained that she benefitted from her teacher writing a loose phonetic spelling on the board with Spanish sounds to transfer that knowledge to English.

One student stated that she wished for more corrective feedback when there was a pronunciation error instead of the teacher dismissing it if the meaning was understood. She believed corrective feedback would allow her to have better English pronunciation. The other participants stated they were pleased with the instruction received.

Textbooks

The textbooks adopted in this ESL program are from the *Ventures* series (Bitterlin et al., 2017). In the table of contents for each book, the only pronunciation focus in each unit is the pronunciation of key vocabulary. In addition, there are pronunciation activities in each review unit, which happens every two regular units, for a total of five review units in each textbook in the series. The table below shows the focus of the pronunciation activities for each level.

Pronunciation Topic	Basic	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
/e/ vs. /o/	X				
/i/ vs. /ai/ vs. /u/	X				

/æ/ vs. /ɑ/	X				
/ɛ/ vs. /ɪ/ vs. /ʌ/	X				
Plural -s		X	X		
Past tense -ed		X	X		X
Voiced vs. voiceless "th"				X	
Initial -st				X	
Number of syllables in a word		X			
Stressed syllables in a word		X	X		
Intonation		X	X		X
Stressed word in a sentence			X	X	X
Linking sounds				X	X
Unstressed vowels				X	

Table 3: Focus of Pronunciation Activities in the Ventures Series

As can be seen on the table, considering the series as a whole, there are six types of activities related to suprasegmentals while the other eight all have a segmental focus. In each review unit, there is a page dedicated to these pronunciation activities, except for the Basic level in which only a half page is given to the practice of segmentals. The format was the same throughout, starting with listening and repeating examples, followed by exercises that varied in format depending on the pronunciation topic included. The complexity of the pronunciation topics increased as the proficiency levels grew in the series, and, considering the series as a whole, there is a good balance of segmental and suprasegmental practice. It is important to note, however, that these exercises are only beneficial if teachers use them with their students. As discussed above, none of the participating teachers mentioned these pronunciation practice pages in their interviews.

Discussion

This study investigated teachers' cognition and practice, students' perceptions, and textbook support regarding pronunciation instruction in a community-based ESL program. This three-pronged approach helped us identify ways to better meet the pronunciation needs of our students. The seven teacher participants recognized the importance of pronunciation instruction, especially when their students asked questions about the pronunciation of specific words. They also discussed their lack of training for pronunciation instruction, replicating findings in other studies (e.g., Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Foote et al., 2012). In addition, the teachers did not have many opportunities for ESL pedagogy training, reflecting a common challenge in community-based ESL programs taught by volunteer teachers (Dytynyshyn, 2008). For the most part, the

teachers believed they would benefit from more training on how to include pronunciation instruction especially since their students value it so highly.

Teachers claimed to use repetition as their main strategy to teach pronunciation with some opting to write the Spanish pronunciation for students to compare Spanish pronunciation to English pronunciation and others choosing to show the shape of their mouths as they produce a specific sound. In the classroom observations, however, repetition was the only pronunciation practice. One teacher focused on the difference between two segmentals through minimal pairs during the lesson. No suprasegmental practice was present except for the syllabification explanation in the highest proficiency level class, consistent with findings that there is more focus on segmentals than suprasegmentals in pronunciation instruction (Couper, 2016; Foote et al., 2012; Wahid & Sulong, 2013).

The eleven students interviewed across five proficiency levels stated the belief that pronunciation is very important or the most important aspect of language to be learned. Most students lacked confidence in their English pronunciation, especially when they felt that their mistakes were not corrected by their teachers. A similar situation was reported by Tejeda and Santos (2014), whose student participants lacked confidence resulting from the perceived absence of pronunciation practice. The participating students, however, did not express a desire for more pronunciation practice, stating that they were pleased with the in-class practice they were receiving. This finding differs from other studies (e.g., Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Tejeda & Santos, 2014) that reported that students wanted more pronunciation practice in their classrooms. This could be reflective of the fact that students participating in this study attend classes free of charge and, being very grateful for this opportunity, do not want to say anything that might be interpreted as a criticism or complaint.

The analyses of the *Ventures* textbooks showed a good balance between segmental and suprasegmental activities. These activities were part of review units and followed the same pattern: listen and repeat examples and exercises. Derwing, Diepenbroek, and Foote (2012), who analyzed 12 ESL textbook series comparing quantity and variety of pronunciation activities, suggest that textbooks would benefit from including a wider range of pronunciation tasks and offering explicit explanations of pronunciation rules and features. We believe this recommendation also applies to the *Venture* series.

Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' cognition and practice, students' perceptions and needs, and textbook inclusion of pronunciation instruction through student and teacher

interviews, classroom observations, and textbook analyses. The results indicated that students were satisfied with the pronunciation instruction they received, even though the teachers admitted to a lack of knowledge about how to incorporate this instruction in the classroom. The textbook analyses showed that the *Ventures* series as a whole provides a good balance between the necessary segmental and suprasegmental practice for students.

The limitations of this study include the fact that the identified students' needs may not be representative of the entire program since only 11 participated in the interviews. The classroom observations also give a partial representation of the variety of pronunciation instruction provided since only one lesson per class was observed. Results may also be skewed by the fact that the teacher interviews occurred before the observations, potentially leading the teacher to adjust instruction accordingly.

One of the challenges for volunteer teachers in community-based ESL programs is to have access to pedagogy training in general, and training in pronunciation instruction in particular so that they can implement the best instruction for their students. ESL programs should strive to provide their teachers with resources, including workshops and recommendation of ESL websites, to promote professional development, and teachers should be encouraged to use, adapt, and supplement the pronunciation activities found in their textbooks to help increase their students' level of intelligibility and confidence in their English pronunciation.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for ESL Students

- Where are you from?
- How long have you been in the United States?
- How often and when do you use English outside of the classroom?
- How important do you think learning pronunciation is in an English class?
- When there is a problem with communication, do you believe it is normally because of a pronunciation issue or some other language issue?
- How hard is it for other people to understand your pronunciation based on your experiences either inside or outside the classroom?
- What aspects of pronunciation are addressed in your classroom and how are they taught?
- What aspects of pronunciation do you wish were included in your class?
- What do you believe are your biggest difficulties when it comes to English pronunciation?
- What techniques best help you learn English pronunciation?

Interview Questions for ESL Teachers

- How did you first get introduced to ESL?
- How long have you taught ESL? What levels have you taught?
- What training have you had to teach in ESL?
- Do you teach pronunciation in your classroom?
- What strategies/activities do you find the most beneficial for teaching pronunciation?
- How can pronunciation instruction be combined with other instruction in the classroom?
- How could you benefit from more training in the various aspects of teaching pronunciation?
- What do your students want to focus on the most when it comes to pronunciation?
- What support does the textbook provide you in offering pronunciation lessons to your students?

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