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Blue-Sky Thinking About Pronunciation Research and Teaching

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Abstract

In the fall of 2024, Ron Thomson and Tracey Derwing invited 15 pronunciation scholars representing several subspecialties to participate in a full-day symposium to discuss directions for pronunciation research. To prepare for the symposium, held in conjunction with the Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference, 2025, participants received eight questions beforehand (some requiring teacher consultation). The responses were grouped thematically and shared with the researchers who then reflected together on a research agenda for pronunciation, taking into consideration the thoughtful suggestions each had made. Lynda Yates, the discussant, reflected on and added to the conclusions. These ideas are offered here as suggestions for graduate students, early-stage academics, and senior researchers alike. Pronunciation research has come a long way in the last three decades. Collaboration on future steps can ensure that the forward momentum is maintained.

Introduction

Until the 1990s, there was little empirical research in Applied Linguistics investigating second language (L2) pronunciation, and indeed, the communicative language teaching approach that had dominated the field for decades assumed that pronunciation would ultimately develop in the absence of explicit instruction. With the seminal work of Munro and Derwing (1995), empirical research offered support to David Abercrombie's (1949) decades-earlier observation that comfortable intelligibility is the only realistic goal for most L2 learners, rather than native-like pronunciation. By 2005, a critical mass of pronunciation research had emerged, leading to John Levis' special issue of *TESOL Quarterly*. In 2007, the annual Conference on Native and Non-native Accents of English (ACCENTS) began in Poland. 2009 saw the inaugural Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference (PSLLT) in North America and the accompanying proceedings. The first biennial English Pronunciation Issues and Practices (EPIP) conference was also held in 2009. In 2015, Levis became the founding editor of the *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation.* Since then, many handbooks and other volumes on L2 pronunciation have appeared, and pronunciation articles are regularly published in well-known second language acquisition journals. Given these developments, it is time to take stock, and to develop a more deliberate structure for what has been largely a disparate movement.

In 2021, an online PSLLT attracted a record number of attendees, resulting in a small financial windfall. Ron Thomson and Tracey Derwing, co-organizers, determined the funds would be best spent on an event with the possibility of moving a pronunciation research agenda forward. They asked the organizers of PSLLT 2025 if a symposium could be held at the conference, which they called a Blue-Sky Thinking Event. Since many of the invitees would likely attend

PSLLT, the symposium hosts presumed their dollars would go further by subsidizing rather than covering the full costs of the invitees. A list of 30 people was created, assuming some people would decline. However, everyone initially approached was enthusiastic about participating. Our list was developed considering geography and diversity in research interests. There were many people who would have made wonderful contributions, but time, space, and financial limitations left the organizers with some big coins to flip. In addition to the 14 participants in the symposium, we invited Lynda Yates to serve as a discussant and Michael Karas as a note-taker.

Procedure

In planning the event, we sent eight questions to 14 participants beforehand; two of the questions required the participants to consult with at least one language teacher engaged in pronunciation instruction (PI). These questions were developed by Tracey Derwing and Ron Thomson, based on their own curiosity about the future of pronunciation research. Each person was also invited to make a five-minute presentation on their own specialization including a) individual differences; b) crosslinguistic perception; c) PI for effective listening; d) comprehensibility; e) intonation; f) L2 spoken vocabulary; g) corrective feedback; h) technology-assisted pronunciation training; i) pronunciation assessment; j) pronunciation, intelligibility, and evidence-based teaching; k) research methods and open science; and l) replication in L2 pronunciation research.

Once the participants submitted their responses to the eight questions, Tracey Derwing and Ron Thomson organized them thematically first, then ordered the comments by frequency. They compiled a PowerPoint, summarizing the responses for presentation to the group.

The morning was devoted to the specialization presentations and the thematic summary of the participants' responses to the eight questions. The afternoon consisted of an open discussion in small groups of research priorities going forward. A designated notetaker in each group then presented to the whole group, followed by Lynda Yates' commentary. Ron Thomson, Michael Karas and John Levis presented a summary of the whole Blue-Sky Thinking event in a closing plenary session at PSLLT two days later.

Results

Summary of written responses to the eight guiding questions

1. **What do you see as the most important accomplishments so far in L2 pronunciation research?**

The most dominant theme was a consensus that the field had shifted from "native-speaker" ideals toward more practical, inclusive goals of intelligibility (how much of an intended message the listener understands) and comprehensibility (how easy or difficult it is for the listener to understand a given message), following Munro and Derwing's (1995) and Levis's (2005) influential papers. Given that some features of an L2 accent do not interfere with understanding, research and teaching priorities have been reshaped by many to focus solely on those aspects that impede a listener's comprehension.

Teachability of pronunciation came next. Pronunciation can be taught effectively, especially through targeted interventions leading to lasting improvements. Methodological advances were also mentioned – for instance, the wide range of well-established methods for testing and measuring L2 pronunciation learning (see Kang & Thomson, 2026, and Nagle, 2024, for comprehensive reviews). Furthermore, it was noted that there is now a critical mass of studies for research syntheses and meta-analyses.

The emergence of the field itself was highlighted. John Levis was lauded for his leadership in establishing an annual conference with associated proceedings and an academic journal dedicated to L2 pronunciation.

Some respondents noted the rising recognition of perception in pronunciation learning. Others mentioned the importance of theoretical models such as SLM-r (Flege & Bohn, 2021) and PAML2 (Best & Tyler, 2007); they also commented on the theoretical renaissance centred on comprehensibility and intelligibility versus accentedness (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 1995; Derwing & Munro, 1997). The field has integrated insights from other areas such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, broadening its scope and applicability. Some respondents commented on individual differences: for example, the realization that age is not the only factor that influences pronunciation. Finally, a few people emphasized mutual speaker-listener roles in successful communication and how accents can influence social perceptions of speakers.

2. What do you see as the most important accomplishments so far in L2 pronunciation teaching?

Responses largely mirrored those to the question about research. Many mentioned a shift in focus to intelligibility. Further, integration of PI into communicative classrooms is essential. Several people cited the growing access to materials: the field has amassed quality, research-informed textbooks, exercise books, and online resources providing guidance on lesson sequencing, diagnostics, and assessment. These resources make pronunciation teaching more accessible, though availability varies by language. Technology was another theme; visual feedback software can enhance pronunciation learning by supporting learner autonomy and enabling practice outside the classroom. Under teacher training, some respondents were quite optimistic, noting increased teacher training, including dedicated courses in applied linguistics programs. Perceptual training, particularly high variability pronunciation training (HVPT), has gained prominence for improving perception and production. HVPT helps L2 learners form new phonetic categories by exposing them to target sounds spoken by multiple talkers in a variety of contexts. Explicit corrective feedback is provided on a token-by-token basis. Several individuals mentioned www.englishaccentcoach.com (Thomson, 2026) and platforms like TP (Rauber et al., 2013) and Gorilla (Anwyl-Irvine et al., 2020) that make HVPT accessible. Research has confirmed the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching, particularly in controlled speech, although challenges persist in transferring gains to spontaneous speech.

3. In an ideal world, with all the money needed available, all the time you need, and access to participants, what pronunciation research project would you like to do?

Two thirds of respondents want to conduct longitudinal studies, because there continues to be a dearth of such work (Nagle, 2021). One respondent suggested that time from controlled speech to emergence in spontaneous production should be measured, but most current studies are too short and typically examine controlled speech only.

The desire to conduct larger scale multi-site intervention studies was frequently expressed. A third of participants wish to pursue research involving technology and AI. Some want more collaboration with teachers. Others suggested exploring individual differences such as motivation and cognitive variables, social contexts, type of learner, and lifespan development. A corpus of learner data to identify learning trajectories was nominated. Finally, sequential perception training followed by production training should be investigated.

4. What role can AI play in pronunciation teaching and research?

Personalized feedback and practice were the strongest themes here: AI can provide real-time, adaptive feedback, personalized instruction, and interactive practice through chatbots, tutors, and conversational partners, enhancing learner engagement and addressing individual challenges. Whether AI can currently do this effectively is uncertain; many studies have mixed results (see McCrocklin & Colclasure, 2024; Sonsaat-Hegelheimer & Kurt, 2024), but the speed at which AI is progressing suggests that this could come to fruition. The second role mentioned for AI was materials generation. AI can create teaching materials, activities, dialogues, texts, and research stimuli, saving time and enabling customization for specific pronunciation features. This function already seems plausible, in the hands of someone who is knowledgeable

about pronunciation. The third theme was using speech tools: AI enables advanced speech recognition, synthesis, voice cloning, resynthesis, and avatars for training, assessment, and input variability, potentially improving error detection and models. AI was also viewed as being able to analyze large datasets, to speed up coding, annotation, and processing speech data, and to aid pattern discovery. All of this said, some expressed serious environmental concerns about AI[2].

5. How can pronunciation instruction be made more engaging?

Ten respondents mentioned technology and apps to make pronunciation instruction and practice more engaging. Automatic speech recognition (ASR), virtual reality (VR), and tools like Wordwall (an automated teaching activity producer), or Unity (a multiplatform game developer), can deploy interactive learning activities, providing immediate feedback, progress tracking, point systems, and leaderboards. Half of the respondents mentioned gamification, incorporating elements such as sound discrimination challenges, timed drills, and role-playing games (e.g., HVPT in fantasy worlds) to make learning fun and motivating. Nearly half of respondents suggested task-based, communicative activities, such as real-world scenarios, or group discussions (e.g., opening a business) which can engage learners by linking pronunciation to meaningful outcomes. Some participants suggested better use of authentic materials like movies, TV shows, songs, and social media, or using humour and pop culture (e.g., misheard lyrics, captioned videos), to make pronunciation practice more engaging. Finally, learner autonomy was mentioned: Encouraging learner choice (e.g., selecting structures/models), peer feedback, and low-stakes practice fosters engagement by personalizing learning and rewarding improvement. Several experts cautioned that “using only one resource for a long time is monotonous and perhaps not very effective, as it is unlikely that a single resource can provide

learners with all the types of practice they need, to the extent they need it." This point brings to bear teacher training or lack of it.

Another expert noted that despite the promise of technology, "apps now available are not very good or very principled in how they approach learning pronunciation, but apps that include both explanation and practice on perception, production, and prediction would be helpful if designed by teachers and researchers who know something about the field." Finally, another participant suggested that games be developed that are so much fun that pronunciation learning becomes almost incidental. It was also recommended that whatever new approaches are developed, they should be at least as effective as other existing techniques, activities and instructional programs to warrant the resources necessary to create them.

6. **Please contact a teacher who includes pronunciation in their classes. What would they like to know from researchers?**

Not everyone responded to this question, but for those who did, the most dominant theme was the importance of prioritizing and selecting pronunciation features for class. Teachers are unsure what to focus on (e.g., vowels, phrasing, specific sounds) to prioritize for intelligibility. Further, they do not know how best to consider learner L1, proficiency, or context, and what can be learned through exposure versus explicit instruction. It is a highly specialized skill to listen to a speech sample and determine which errors impede comprehensibility. It is helpful to know something about the learners' L1, but as one participant pointed out, there is a tremendous amount of individual variation even within L1 groups. Teacher training to develop diagnostic skills is important. This is challenging in a mixed L1 class but doable. Another mentioned that

explicit pronunciation instruction is useful. A recent study (Stratton, 2023) of L2 learners of German comparing explicit and implicit instruction confirms that explicit instruction is superior and preferred by learners.

A second theme emphasized practical methods, including effective, engaging techniques to teach pronunciation. Teachers want to know how to integrate PI with other skills (e.g., vocabulary, speaking/listening), and how to cope with less-than-ideal settings such as large classes or short sessions. Third, teachers inquired about effective, standardized ways to assess pronunciation progress, especially for beginners or in varied contexts, to confirm teaching effectiveness. A fourth theme involved teachers' desire for high-quality, expert-validated, engaging resources for classroom and home use to support pronunciation practice. Finally, some teachers sought to improve their own pronunciation and sound discrimination skills to model effectively for students. One expert suggested that "we need to curate a set of activities with a one-pager or a two-minute implementation video for instructors. These activities would need to be specific enough to be meaningful but general enough to be used across different target languages and learner populations."

The issue of adjusting for different contexts also arose. For instance, little is known about working on pronunciation with literacy students. Another teacher raised the issue of the role of listeners, particularly in the workplace. "Accent discrimination is still a very real experience for many newcomers. Do you think that on-the-job pronunciation instruction alongside listening to accented speech training for L1 speakers could not only reduce this bias but improve the situation for newcomers on the job?" There has been limited research on this topic but Derwing

et al. (2002) and Derwing and Munro (2009) carried out some preliminary studies suggesting that instruction for L1 listeners can be beneficial.

7. What are the primary obstacles for teachers in terms of integrating pronunciation into the classroom?

Almost all respondents cited limited class time; rigid curricula focused solely on grammar, vocabulary, and exam-driven skills; and lack of focus on pronunciation in formal assessments. These, together with the absence of pronunciation activities in most published materials, makes the integration of pronunciation challenging, especially given the lack of teacher training specific to pronunciation, unless the teacher is strongly motivated to do it.

The second theme was a lack of teacher training. It does not always take much time to help a student, but a teacher must have the knowledge to recognize when an intervention would be useful. Teachers lack training in phonetics, phonology, and pronunciation pedagogy, leading to insecurity, reliance on outdated methods, and unfamiliarity with pronunciation's role in communication. Adding to the problems are large, heterogeneous classes, student anxiety (e.g., fear of standing out), and low student prioritization of pronunciation due to a lack of focus on pronunciation in exams

The third theme that emerged was teachers' struggle with how to integrate pronunciation into non-pronunciation-focused classes, including what to teach, how much, how often, and how to assess progress, often requiring a needs analysis or collaboration.

8. How can these obstacles be addressed?

In response to systemic limitations including time and program requirements, program directors, curriculum developers and teachers are encouraged to embed PI into the existing curriculum. PI tasks should be blended into existing lessons, communicative tasks, and other skills (e.g., grammar/vocabulary), with short activities and feedback to make goals practical.

Many participants emphasized the need for comprehensive teacher training, workshops, and ongoing support to build teachers' confidence, knowledge, and skills in pronunciation pedagogy. A whole-of-program approach with input from program administrators, curriculum writers and teachers would ensure that PI does not continue to fall through the cracks (Macdonald et al., 2026). This approach could address the concern of time constraints on PI, since teachers find it difficult to make changes within an existing curriculum on their own.

One of the participants offered the following list of PI knowledge requirements for teachers: familiarity with related metalanguage terms; knowledge of IPA; how to connect pronunciation to new vocabulary; how to identify syllables; how to identify and represent stress; how to identify and represent sentence/speaker stress; how to identify and represent intonation; how to provide controlled, guided, and communicative practice; how to provide targeted feedback and finally, how to measure outcomes.

Another theme was the development of easy-to-use, affordable technology (e.g., AI, apps, HVPT) and materials for self-paced practice outside class to reduce in-class burden and enhance

accessibility. Even with greater focus on pronunciation in class, some learners may require significant interventions beyond what class time allows.

Group Discussions

Following the presentation of the themes from the pre-meeting questions and answers, the participants met in groups to discuss common research interests, focusing on multi-site collaborative studies, longitudinal studies, teacher involvement, and technology/AI.

1. Multi-site Collaborative Studies

Participants elaborated on the benefits of multi-site studies, noting that too often research is conceived in ways that are locally relevant but difficult to compare with studies elsewhere. Working together to create shared study designs flexible enough to accommodate local factors was recommended. A benefit of multi-site studies is that working collaboratively makes it easier to attract and retain a larger and more diverse participant pool.

Some emphasized the need for developing shared research protocols across sites and planning ahead to share research materials and data. Researchers should agree on a core set of methodologies and variables, allowing for more coherent cross-site comparisons. For example, ongoing misunderstanding exists regarding appropriate scale length in measures of comprehensibility, fluency and accentedness. Often, principles borrowed from a formal assessment context are applied to these pronunciation dimensions, resulting in inappropriate scale lengths such as 1-5 or 1-7. Munro (2018) has demonstrated empirically that scales of at least nine points or higher are most valid, yet shorter scale lengths continue to be used.

Participants also acknowledged challenges to multi-site studies. Coordinating research across institutions requires substantial funding. Building successful research teams requires developing rapport across team members, necessitating more deliberate attention and time across sites. Despite such challenges, participants agreed that such collaborations represent an important direction for future research. Nagle (2026) provides a more detailed synopsis of these issues, including his own attempt to build such a network.

2. Longitudinal Studies

There was a broad consensus that advancing our understanding of L2 pronunciation development requires a commitment to more longitudinal research, ideally spanning years, not weeks or months. Admittedly, this type of research is difficult to conduct because of constraints such as funding (e.g., the length of grants), the semester system in universities, participant attrition, changes to teaching staff, changes to research teams, challenges of collecting data "in the wild" (that is, outside the lab or the classroom) and so on. Nonetheless, such studies offer incredible value; moreover, advances in communication tools make longitudinal research more feasible than it has been in the past.

Related to this are questions around measurement. Are measures of change in features of pronunciation meaningful to listeners? We also need to determine which factors contribute to change over time. For example, to what degree does pronunciation change result from instruction, as opposed to naturalistic development outside of the classroom in specific social contexts (see Thomson et al., 2024; Zielinski & Pryor, 2020).

3. Teacher Involvement

Participants emphasized the importance of greater teacher involvement in collaborative rather than top-down studies, i.e., studies that are imposed by researchers. A recurring theme was that researchers often conduct studies *on* teachers rather than *with* them. Often researchers may be further removed from the classroom than they realize. At the same time, teachers may lack basic pronunciation teaching and research knowledge. This potential disconnect should be carefully addressed to facilitate strong and effective teacher-researcher collaboration. For researchers, this means listening to teachers' priorities. Furthermore, teachers' need for professional development should be addressed by accessible means. Researchers are encouraged to develop online training modules for teachers acknowledging local realities and tailoring approaches. For instance, researchers could frame and "package" recent research insights (e.g., HVPT) clearly for teachers, administrators and coordinators, using videos, podcasts, and short, accessible texts on how to use existing materials, both within and outside the classroom.

A more sustainable collaborative approach to research was advocated, moving beyond one-off interventions by creating iterative cycles of data collection → communication of results → implementation of findings → feedback → further data collection. Such an approach could help to institutionalize pronunciation teaching within language programs and support long-term program improvement (see Macdonald et al., 2026).

4. Technology/AI

Participants devoted considerable time to a discussion of the role of technology and AI in second language pronunciation research and teaching. While there was some disagreement on

the advantages of AI, everyone agreed that it will reshape the field. Some feel AI could reduce the need for language teachers altogether. Others highlighted the possible benefits of AI as a tool to augment instruction, expand access to resources, and help support new avenues for research and assessment.

In terms of teaching, all agreed that AI will increasingly be able to adapt to learners' individual needs. At present, AI remains limited in its ability to accurately assess learners' production errors, which requires ongoing teacher input. For example, AI chatbots are currently less than satisfactory in improving learners' speech (McCrocklin & Colclasure, 2025; Sonsaat-Hegelheimer & Kurt, 2024). As Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technologies advance, the need for teacher involvement may be reduced. It is also unclear to what extent AI will be able to reflect real world listeners' reactions to foreign-accented speech. With respect to teaching materials, the group noted AI's potential to provide training targeting specific L2 accents.

While AI has not yet reached its potential, other proven technologies could benefit from higher profiles and more extensive development. For example, HVPT is currently a hot topic, but is not widely accessible to end users. English Accent Coach is one notable exception. It is accessible to learners worldwide, but many teachers are unaware of its existence. Focussing on consonants and vowels, it provides HVPT training which has been shown to improve both perception and production (Uchihara et al., 2024; 2025). The www.englishaccentcoach.com website also offers a Simon Memory game-like interface, called Echo. A classic asteroids arcade-style game is

available as an iOS App (Thomson, 2024). Unfortunately, fully developed HVPT platforms for other languages are not widely available.

One ongoing criticism of HVPT is that it is boring. Several participants noted the need to gamify HVPT and pronunciation technology more broadly. AI has the potential to advance this approach, through creation of games where pronunciation learning becomes incidental (e.g., game players need to be able to accurately perceive L2 sounds to survive). Others noted a role for pronunciation training avatars to make learning more engaging.

Participants also discussed the potential for technology and AI in pronunciation research. For instance, crowdsourcing programs are increasingly being utilized to access research participant pools. Others noted the ability of AI to create training stimuli for experiments. As with instruction, AI is only a tool and requires human researcher oversight to ensure validity.

5. Big Question Research

Some of the discussion involved big picture questions such as investigating what "pronunciation" means to different stakeholders. Unlike vocabulary and grammar, which all language learners need, not all learners require PI. Many are already intelligible, sometimes because their L1 phonology better aligns with the L2 phonological system. In other cases, individuals have a strong aptitude for learning a new sound system. Such learner variability can lead to teachers' uncertainty about how to approach PI. Similarly, government funders may not understand the importance of PI because it is not a common need across all learners. However, PI is crucial for those individuals whose speech is unintelligible. A foundational shift is required in terms of how pronunciation is valued in L2 education.

To accomplish this shift, one first step is to agree to a common understanding of key speech constructs, such as intelligibility, comprehensibility, acceptability, accentedness, and fluency. To date there continues to be inconsistency in how these concepts are operationalized, which makes it difficult to compare findings across studies. Greater uniformity would allow for more meaningful, systematic reviews of research.

Another big issue discussed is related to working with SLA researchers whose primary focus is outside of pronunciation. There are natural connections between pronunciation and grammatical features in many languages. Similarly, pronunciation and listener comprehension are connected to concerns with pragmatics. Assessment was also mentioned as a critical factor; currently testing agencies influence what features of pronunciation are prioritized which may not be appropriate in the long run.

Some participants argued that motivation, learner factors and sociocultural issues are also important topics for ongoing pronunciation research. Others suggested that an important goal would be the development of a large, shared corpus of stimuli to enable targeted data selection, controlling for specific variables.

Discussant Comments

The day closed with comments from the discussant, Lynda Yates, who reflected on the enormous strides we have made in the field, but also on the challenges that we face in pursuing our primary aim of improving learners' communication skills, given the complexity of different

learning contexts and communicative situations. She highlighted the huge range of variables that affect both what we can and do focus on in our research, and on the transferability of our findings into the lives of different learners. These included learner variables (e.g., age; educational background; language learning experience; level of motivation; self-concept; time available to devote to learning; living circumstances; and various sociolinguistic factors, including opportunities for using the new language); teacher variables (e.g., willingness to adopt different teaching approaches; level of training, skills, beliefs and confidence; the testing regime, curriculum, and facilities in their teaching contexts; and the degree of peer and manager support and access to professional development); and the researchers' own contexts (e.g., funding sources; time; access to participants; institutional priorities; possibilities for collaboration; research methods favoured; the research facilities available; and how career trajectories and external pressures might influence research goals). Given such complexity, there is clearly a need to maintain a wide range of research contexts and goals. Finally, to ensure the relevance of our work, Lynda stressed the need to disseminate our findings to teachers and learners and, additionally, to work with the broader community to better understand pronunciation-related communication issues and how we can address them.

Conclusion

Participants expressed the necessity of bridging the research-practice divide. Better dissemination of research in accessible formats (e.g., summaries, videos, demonstrations) and collaborations to make evidence-based practices practical for teachers are necessary, perhaps using the Pronunciation For Teachers website (pronunciationforteachers.com) or SLA Speech

Tools (sla-speech-tools.com) . Despite the progress in PI, systemic changes are needed to match the research advancements made in the last three decades.

Endnote

[1] The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Naval Academy, Department of the Navy, the Department of War, or the U.S. Government.

[2] The respondents did not explicitly mention concerns regarding the ethical handling of data and manuscript preparation using AI; they no doubt assumed that only responsible use of AI should be employed.

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