

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

Language Awareness

What is it?

Language awareness has been defined in a number of ways. For this guide, the definition provided by the Association for Language Awareness will be used: “explicit *knowledge about language*, and *conscious perception and sensitivity* in language learning, language teaching and language use” (italics mine) (http://www.languageawareness.org/?page_id=48). In the following, the majority of research findings are focused on English as a second or foreign language (L2), which is still the most commonly studied L2 in research on pronunciation teaching.

Why is language awareness important for pronunciation teaching?

For pronunciation, *knowledge about language* can include explicit knowledge of, for example, how to produce specific sounds or how particular intonation patterns are typically tied to particular communicative functions in a language. This knowledge can affect how learners learn and how teachers teach second language pronunciation. For instance, a language learner may know that in European Portuguese, the second-last syllable in individual words is the one that is typically stressed. The learner can use this knowledge when reading new words in order to guess where to place lexical stress. *Conscious perception and sensitivity* can include the noticing of certain pronunciation patterns. For example, a learner of Japanese might notice that some words, such as *nifi*, are sometimes pronounced with a longer middle consonant and seem to have a different meaning. This perception might help the learner pay attention to the duration of consonants and vowels, which can sometimes be a key feature which differentiates two individual sounds in Japanese (e.g., the <f> sounds in *nifi* and *niffi*).

Knowledge about language and *conscious perception and sensitivity* are important for language teachers as well. Even if teachers do not provide much explicit pronunciation instruction to learners, it is very helpful for teachers to know which aspects of pronunciation might be challenging for learners, or how learners’ developing pronunciation can sometimes show partial improvement across contexts or can vary over time. Furthermore, teachers should be aware of the fact that their goal should be to focus on those aspects of their students’ pronunciation that interfere with comprehensibility and intelligibility, rather than correcting every deviation from a local norm.

These aspects of language awareness are linked to the construct of *noticing* (Schmidt, 1995). Schmidt proposed that, “what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning (1995, p. 20). It might seem that the most effective way for learners to notice something about pronunciation is for teachers to explicitly teach learners about it (such as telling learners of European Portuguese that the second-last syllable in individual words is the one that is typically stressed). When working on pronunciation with their learners, teachers do frequently give explicit instruction, but *this is not the only way to help learners notice something*. Other approaches are discussed below.

Conscious perception and sensitivity can also include attitudes towards languages and beliefs about general or specific aspects of language learning and teaching. These attitudes and beliefs can affect how learners and teachers feel about learning or teaching particular languages (e.g., believing German sounds “harsh”), or what learners and teachers believe to be effective techniques for learning or teaching (e.g., showing learners how individual sounds are made in the mouth).

Selected research findings about awareness and pronunciation

Most classroom research studies which mention language awareness and pronunciation do not directly measure language awareness (i.e., *explicit language knowledge* or *conscious perception and sensitivity*), but this research often shows that learners’ pronunciation changes after explicit instruction and/or corrective feedback on pronunciation. The few studies which do examine the language awareness of L2 pronunciation learners typically find that: (a) learners’ pronunciation is often tied to the nature or level of language awareness (e.g., learners with relatively more developed language awareness produce pronunciation which is easier to understand or more nativelike); and (b) learners could expand their awareness of L2 pronunciation through various techniques, such as self-assessment.

Only a few classroom studies have focused on ways to raise learners’ awareness which replace or add to explicit pronunciation instruction. In Couper (2011), L2 English learners were guided by the teacher, after explicit instruction, to work together to create descriptions of how particular English sounds were different from sounds in learners’ L1s (see *Critical Listening* under Teaching Techniques on this website). The students significantly improved in producing those English sounds. In Saito and Lyster (2012), L2 English learners underwent brief form-focused instruction (FFI), which was designed to help learners notice the characteristics of English /ɪ/ without explicit instruction on that sound. Learners received meaning-based instruction to learn English argumentative skills, with learning materials which were created to present /ɪ/ sounds in meaningful tasks. Some learners also received corrective feedback on their production of /ɪ/. After instruction, the learners who had received both FFI and corrective feedback were able to produce more recognizable /ɪ/ sounds. In Lappin-Fortin and Rye (2014), self-assessment was used together with teacher assessment to help students identify strengths and weaknesses in an L2 French pronunciation course using explicit instruction. By the course’s end, students used more nativelike pronunciation and were better at identifying their strengths and weaknesses, especially for aspects which had been extensively worked on during the course.

Although less prominent than classroom research, survey and interview studies show a wide variety of pronunciation-related beliefs and attitudes, which often vary according to the teaching and learning context. With regard to learners’ and teachers’ beliefs about and knowledge of important aspects of pronunciation, these have sometimes been fairly narrow in scope and focussed on the perception and production of individual sounds (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2012). For learners, lower pronunciation accuracy is often linked to negative attitudes and beliefs about the L2 they are learning or about their L2 proficiency, with the converse finding for positive attitudes and beliefs (Polat & Schallert, 2013; Roccamo, 2014). Teachers’ and learners’ beliefs can range quite widely when identifying appropriate norms for

pronunciation teaching and learning (i.e., trying to attain natively-like pronunciation or some other alternative); however, some learners may state that they want to attain a native norm, but still widely accept teachers with noticeable non-native accents (Buckingham, 2014).

One increasingly studied aspect of awareness is teachers' awareness of pronunciation teaching and learning. In both second and foreign language contexts, in-service teachers have typically reported using mostly traditional instructional practices, such as listen and repeat, metalinguistic instruction, or drilling isolated words and phrases (Alsofyani & Algethami, 2017; Couper, 2017; Foote et al., 2012; Tergujeff, 2012). There is still little research on the changing awareness of teachers who are undergoing pronunciation-focused teacher education. Buss (2017) and Burri, Baker, and Chen (2017) reported that native-speaker teachers often became more appreciative of non-native teachers' accents and of non-native teachers' theoretical knowledge of L2 pronunciation. In general, teachers became more aware of different techniques and activities for teaching pronunciation and often more confident about their ability to teach pronunciation, but had difficulty understanding how to integrate newly-learned techniques.

Key points

- Learners may have little explicit knowledge about or sensitivity to aspects of L2 pronunciation, especially aspects which are challenging to learn and important for communication. Teachers can help learners become more aware *not only* through explicit instruction and corrective feedback, but also through self- and peer-assessment, small-group discussion, communicative, form-focused learning materials, and other techniques which can direct learners' attention to specific pronunciation features and patterns.
- The beliefs and attitudes of learners and teachers toward pronunciation norms and pronunciation learning and teaching can vary quite widely. As much as is feasible, teachers should explain their own beliefs and attitudes to learners and allow learners to explain theirs, in order to promote shared teaching and learning goals.
- Although many teachers are aware of traditional techniques for pronunciation teaching, it is a challenge to become proficient with unfamiliar techniques and approaches. It is important that teachers learn theoretical aspects of pronunciation, but also become skilled at learning autonomously and also at modifying and developing their pronunciation teaching. Pronunciation-related teacher education must therefore include a practical teaching component which incorporates self-assessment or reflection.

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