

What do Adult English Learners Say about their Pronunciation and Linguistic Self-Confidence?

By Jennifer Zoss

Adult English learners benefit from pronunciation instruction, reporting the importance of intelligible pronunciation for daily communication, employment, and higher self-confidence.

As a teacher, I want adult English learners (ELs) in my classes to have the language skills and confidence to use English outside of the classroom so they can participate in society, develop relationships, and thrive at school and work. Most ELs will tell you they want the same things, and they work very hard towards these goals. However, in my observations, even advanced-level ELs can struggle to achieve them because they lack intelligible pronunciation and linguistic self-confidence (LSC), especially when it comes to talking with native speakers (NSs).

The purpose my original study was to explore ELs' perceptions of their own pronunciation and the relationship between their perceptions and LSC. The mixed methods study addressed the following two primary questions: 1) What are advanced adult second language learners' perceptions of their English pronunciation? and 2) To what extent is there a relationship between second language learners' perceptions of their English pronunciation and their linguistic self-confidence? These research questions are explored in my original study, however they are not discussed in full in this article. Rather, the purpose of this article is to provide a brief summary of the major themes that emerged from data collected in my original study. This article features participants' first hand accounts of their perceptions of their English pronunciation and LSC. It also aims to provide practitioners with resources for teaching pronunciation.

Why is Intelligible Pronunciation and Linguistic Self-Confidence Important?

Intelligible second language (L2) pronunciation is important because ELs need it to function in daily life, participate in English-speaking communities, and develop relationships with people who do not speak the same first language (L1) (Gilbert, 1983; Murphy, 1991; Parrish, 2004). Managing daily life in an English-speaking environment involves communicating with native-speaking landlords, educators, and employers (Parrish, 2004). ELs are expected to be able to interact with their peers, teachers, co-workers, and bosses in different kinds of situations (Murphy, 1991). Moreover, ELs need intelligible L2 pronunciation to be successful at school and work. Even advanced-level ELs otherwise considered proficient in English often need to improve their L2 pronunciation in order to meet academic and professional requirements (Johnson & Parrish 2010; Murphy, 1991).

To clarify, intelligibility refers to “the extent to which the listener understands an utterance or message” (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 32), and pronunciation instruction that centers on intelligibility prioritizes pronunciation features that have the greatest impact on the speaker's communicative competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Research indicates that suprasegmental

pronunciation features including stress, intonation, and rhythm affect intelligibility more than segmental features (individual phonemic sounds) (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing 2003; Field, 2005; Gilbert, 1983; Hahn, 2004; Levis, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 2011; Parrish, 2004). Of course, individual learners have different pronunciation needs and can benefit from instruction on individual phonemic sounds as well (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Parrish, 2004).

The inability or unwillingness to use English outside of the classroom has been a challenge for many of the ELs in my classes. They lack the LSC to speak English with NSs, particularly in contexts that are ‘high stakes’ such as speaking to their boss at work. LSC is defined as “self-perceptions of communicative competence and concomitant low levels of anxiety in using a second language” (Noels, Pon, & Clement as cited in Hummel, 2013, p. 69). LSC is deeply connected to social contexts and social psychological factors, such as: motivation, identity, acculturation, anxiety, and the judgments of others (Dörnyei, 2003; Hummel, 2013; Noels et al., 1996). In fact, L2 communication can be blocked due to extreme anxiety experienced in certain communicative contexts (Woodrow, 2006). This is important because LSC is a significant part of language learning and relates to greater communicative competence and increased L2 usage (Noels & Clement as cited in Hummel, 2013).

Background and Inspiration for Research

My experience teaching intermediate to advanced-level ESL in adult education and teaching international teaching assistants (ITAs) in university settings has solidified my belief in the importance of pronunciation instruction (even at advanced levels) and fueled my curiosity to investigate the relationship between pronunciation and LSC. I was also inspired by Derwing’s 2003 study, “What do ESL Students Say About their Accents”. In Derwing’s (2003) study, participants were asked to give examples of instances when they had been discriminated against because of their accents, and there were more negative statements that reflected “lack of attention, rudeness, anger, and deliberate misunderstanding” (p. 557) than positive statements. What struck me the most about this study were the powerful firsthand statements from ELs about their pronunciation skills, so I decided to focus on ELs’ perceptions in my own study.

Maria was an adult student in my advanced-intermediate ESL class years ago, and a prime example of an intermediate-level learner who struggled with pronunciation and LSC. During conferences, I asked Maria how she felt her English was progressing, she became very emotional as she described her problems communicating. She said, “My co-workers don’t like the way I talk. They don’t understand me. My pronunciation is so bad. They say ‘What? Huh?’” Then she told me she recently turned down a promotion because the new position involved speaking English to customers. Now she regretted the decision and felt disappointed in herself for being too scared to take the job. The promotion would have meant a higher wage and more hours, which she needed to send more money home to her mother who was caring for her children. It also would have been a chance for Maria to interact with more people and perhaps feel less isolated at work.

Maria's problems with low LSC caught me off guard because she was generally intelligible and appeared confident in class. She was friendly, talkative, and even willing to get up in front of the class and do role plays with other students. It had never occurred to me that she struggled to communicate outside of the classroom.

In Maria's case, low LSC was a greater barrier than her pronunciation. However, ELs have problems in both areas. Even those who are proficient in English but speak with an accent may struggle with pronunciation and LSC (Hummel, 2013). This became clear to me when I taught pronunciation to international students who were preparing to be teaching assistants for undergraduate students in the science, math, and engineering departments at a local university.

The majority of ITAs in this program were from countries such as India and China, and they were very knowledgeable in their fields and technically proficient in English according to the tests they had to take to enter the American university system. In the context of their home countries, they were probably considered highly intelligible in English, and perhaps had never experienced judgements of their pronunciation. This was specifically true for the Indian ITAs, who spoke a variety of English as a native language. In the context of studying and teaching in an American university, however, many were considered unintelligible.

One day before class, I heard a small group of ITAs discussing the anxiety they felt about their upcoming micro-teaching exam and about teaching in English to NSs. They said their speaking was the only thing that made them feel stupid. They were nervous that undergraduates would not respect them and thought they would be hostile towards them because of their accents. It was clear they perceived their pronunciation as a problem that negatively affected their ability to stand up in front of a classroom and deliver lessons. The next day in class I reassured them that their pronunciation was not a major barrier, and we practiced role play scenarios dealing with problems in the classroom and projecting confidence while teaching. The ITAs reported that these activities made them feel more prepared for real-world teaching.

The Study

Primary research was done at a local urban language institute with advanced-level adult learners from the two highest level ESL classes. Participants consisted of six women and four men from a variety of countries including: Iran, India, Colombia, Thailand, Spain, and Somalia. All of them were highly educated in their home countries, and two completed advanced degrees in the US. The majority of the participants were employed at the time of this study.

The research tools were a questionnaire and one-on-one interviews. Ten participants completed the questionnaire, which consisted of 22 ranked choice questions using a 4-point Likert scale of *strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree* about pronunciation skills, feelings about pronunciation, and experiences using English outside of class. Eight of those ten completed

one-on-one interviews, which focused on topics similar to the questionnaire and encouraged participants to give personal examples. Data from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed and reported individually, then data from the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed to find major themes. In this article, only major themes and selected samples of participants' comments are presented.

Theme One - Pronunciation and Quality of Life

ELs report a perception that their L2 pronunciation affects the quality of their lives in terms of their general communication skills, relationships with NSs, and, most notably, career advancement. Participants in this study reported using English on a daily basis in a variety of contexts. Most use English with colleagues at work, other ELs in their classes, and NSs in the community. A few of the participants are married to NSs, and use English at home. Moreover, data collected in this study showed that ELs are keenly aware of the role of pronunciation for academic and professional purposes. Participants reported they would need to speak English for educational and employment purposes. They indicated that they would qualify for a wider range of jobs, present themselves better in job interviews, have more professional job offers, and be able to advance at their current places of employment if their pronunciation was better.

Malee spoke of the work opportunities and the confidence she would have if her pronunciation was better. She said, "My life would be easier, especially for working. In my opinion, this country is all English, and people want to hire people who speak English, and writing. If we have clear speaking it would be benefit to help customers and clients. Also in daily life-shopping. More people would understand and I would feel more confident."

Likewise, Julia, Carlos, and Rajan stressed the importance of their pronunciation for career advancement. Julia said, "I would get a really good job [if I spoke English better]. Part of the interviews in Spain are in English, so if you speak well they will be interested in you." Carlos commented, "It will improve my job because I have a Master's degree, but I'm inspector. It's lower level job. I need to improve my speaking and listening. In my interviews my English is broken. Companies want to hire people with good English" Rajan reported, "I would have gotten a job earlier. It matters for professional jobs. Maybe it matters when I speak at interviews. I don't get the job because of my pronunciation. Maybe they don't tell you up front, but it's a factor. I had two job interviews and I didn't get. They might think I'm a competent person, and I can deal with situations if my pronunciation is good."

Theme Two - Self-awareness of Pronunciation

ELs often do not understand what their pronunciation problems actually are in terms of the features that research suggests contribute most to intelligibility because they have not been taught. At the time of the study, nine out of ten of the participants were enrolled in English classes, and three of the participants were taking a pronunciation class. Those enrolled in the standard ESL class were studying grammar, reading, and writing.

Pronunciation instruction was not part of their class. The three who were taking pronunciation specifically seemed to enjoy their class and felt they were improving their speaking in general. However, when asked how their teacher incorporated pronunciation into the class, the majority reported learning a variety of segmental features (individual phonemic sounds) not suprasegmental features (word stress, intonation, and rhythm, for example). These findings are concurrent with those in Dewing's (2003) study, in which she suggests the fact that her participants claimed segmental problems were the root cause of their communication problems indicates that they do not know what their pronunciation problems really are.

When asked what they do in pronunciation class, the majority of participants reported listening and repeating activities and practicing individual sounds. Only one participant mentioned working on the suprasegmental feature: stress. For example, Carlos said, "The teacher works with individuals to suit their language needs. You know how Asians needs /l/ and /r/ and for Spanish, we need /I/? We also listen to the CD and repeat pronunciation." Malee reported, "We listen and repeat dialogs, work on individual sounds, and some stress."

Theme Three - NSs Attitudes towards L2 Pronunciation

ELs report perceiving positive attitudes among NSs towards people with accents, and they do not perceive that they have been treated differently because of their accents. However, ELs think Americans would respect them more if they pronounced English well. Farid did not think he had been treated differently because of his accent, and he talked about respect as he compared discrimination in the US and Iran. He said, "No, I have never had that reaction here. Compared to the racism and discrimination in Iran, there is no racism here. Farsi speakers treat people with Azerbaijani accents poorly and tell jokes about them. It's offensive to speak Azerbaijan with a Persian accent."

Rajan did not report discrimination based on his accent, but he recounted a time he felt disrespected by a NS and wondered if it was because of his accent or a variety of other factors. He said, "No, I don't think I've been discriminated against. I had sometimes disrespect. I was on the bus. I was talking with some other Indians in English-with Indian accents. That persons didn't like it. He yelled at us 'AHHHHH.' Maybe it was because he had a bad day or he didn't like my accent. He thought it was a bunch of noise."

Theme Four - Pronunciation and Identity

ELs do not perceive that their native language or culture would be in jeopardy if they pronounced English better. However, there was evidence of a relationship between pronunciation, group identity, and acculturation. For example, Natalia and Malee were certain they would never lose their culture or language. Natalia said, "No, you always remember [my culture and language]. Maybe you forget some words, but you always remember your culture." Malee said, "No I don't think so. I think if I go back to Thailand every year I will remember. She said if she has kids she will teach them about Thai culture."

Farid also agreed that his native language, Farsi, was not at risk if his English pronunciation improved. However, he also told a story that suggested he perceived a relationship between pronunciation, group identity, and acculturation.

“I was walking on campus and I saw a man looking at me that I didn’t know. I knew he was Azerbaijani and he was going to talk to me, so I prepared myself to speak only Azerbaijani because it’s bad to speak English to someone who is Azerbaijani...like you’re trying to hide that you’re from Iran or trying to show off or something. So, I was focusing on speaking only Azerbaijani, but then I said ‘Do I know you?’ in English, and he was shocked, and I was shocked. At work I accidentally said something in Azerbaijani instead of English, so it happens both ways. This is because I’m only 80% with my English and Azerbaijani. This won’t happen with Farsi because I am 100%. It’s like swimming. You never forget. About culture, I’m not worried about that.”

Theme Five - Perceptions of Pronunciation and LSC

There is an apparent relationship between ELs’ perceptions of their own pronunciation and LSC, however to what extent is unclear. As previously mentioned, LSC refers to the speaker’s self-perceptions of their ability to communicate in their L2 and the levels of anxiety they associate with it (Noels, Pon, & Clement as cited in Hummel, 2013). Participants in the study described a variety of thoughts and feelings about their L2 pronunciation that suggest anxiety and a lack of LSC when speaking to NSs. For example, Raha said it bothers her that she cannot communicate her ideas because she is an educated person with many valuable things to add to conversations. She said most of the time she remains quiet because she feels she cannot say what she really means.

Rajan also expressed frustration because NSs think he knows less than he does when he pronounces English incorrectly. Farid said he would be more content if he knew others understood him. He said, “It’s not something external. It’s more internal. I was never treated badly because of my accent, so I don’t think it would affect me externally. Internally, you feel more satisfied, more comfortable when people understand you.” Nasrin reported that she feels too nervous about her English to speak to NSs and make friends. She said, “It’s a good feeling. You live in this country and you can speak like them. I feel better.” Yes [I would like to make American friends], but I can’t because of my English. It’s my problem, I know. I don’t try to make friends. I can’t make sentences. I’m too nervous.”

Theme Six - Effects of Context on Linguistic Self-confidence

Speech communities and speech acts have effects on ELs’ perceptions of their pronunciation as it relates to their LSC. Natalia, Rajan, and Farid reported feeling generally confident about their pronunciation, but they said their confidence is affected by who they are talking to and subject matter of their conversations.

Natalia

“I feel confident when I hang out with the other girls in my program. They are au pairs from Germany and Switzerland, and we have to talk in English. We talk about the job and I know a lot about that.”

Rajan

“I feel confident speaking to people my age my peer group. My colleagues are okay. When I speak with my boss I’m not confident. Or in a meeting when there are many people talking. I’m not comfortable jumping in and giving my ideas. I don’t know the words or the social situation to do it. What I lack is confidence. Several things are mixed here. There’s a fear factor. I’m not an outgoing person. I think, ‘What if they think I’m stupid?’ So, I talk slowly and make sure I say things correctly, or they think I don’t know anything.”

Farid

“It depends on who the people are and what the topic is. At work I have two Chinese coworkers, and sometimes I feel more confident, not confident-comfortable talking to them because they have the same problems. Sometimes they need to take their time to make their sentences, so I feel free to do the same. But when I’m speaking to a NS or my supervisor I feel stressed because I want to do better. I’m not that bad, but I’m never satisfied-not only with pronunciation. The language in general. It’s a daily challenge. I face that challenge every day. After three years and graduating from an American university, my colleagues still have a hard time understanding me. It’s not about them though. I have high expectations for myself. I always want to keep learning. My English can never be equal to Farsi. I was a very good presenter in Farsi. When I spoke in Farsi I had everyone’s attention. I saw a presentation in English and the speaker was so good. I’m not that in English. When I saw that presentation it made me regret leaving my country. I see the difference and I’m disappointed.”

Implications for Instruction

Pronunciation research advocates suprasegmental instruction (stress, rhythm, and intonation) over segmental instruction (individual phonemic sounds) because suprasegmental features have a greater impact on overall intelligibility (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing 2003; Field, 2005; Gilbert, 1983; Hahn, 2004; Levis, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 2011; Parrish, 2004). Additionally, research suggests that it is more practical for most ESL teachers to focus on suprasegmental features because the majority of ELs need suprasegmental instruction of some kind, and it might not be realistic to teach segmentals to a classroom that consists of a multiple L1s and L2 pronunciation needs because ELs have different needs in terms of individual phonemes. (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing, 2003).

In my experience teaching large classrooms of diverse ELs, it is difficult to diagnose individual segmental problems and provide instruction to suit everyone’s needs. It is generally not practical

because there is not enough time or staff to devote to this type of instruction. On the other hand, I have found that suprasegmental instruction is possible with large groups of diverse ELs. As Suzanne McCurdy, a local teacher trainer, phrased it, “Teachers and students get more bang for their buck by focusing on suprasegmentals” (S. McCurdy, personal contact, July 23, 2015).

In my opinion one of the easiest ways to teach pronunciation is to integrate it into existing lessons you are already comfortable teaching. One way to do this is to make it a habit to teach word stress every time you teach new vocabulary. Learners can be taught how to count syllables, listen for the strongest or stressed syllable, discriminate between different stress patterns, and say stressed syllables louder, longer and higher in pitch. I have found that learners pick up on this quickly and enjoy learning how to pronounce new words.

Another practical way to integrate pronunciation is to teach rising and falling intonation in questions. Questions that elicit YES/NO (Do, Can, Will etc.) answers generally have rising intonation, whereas questions that are answered with more information, such as who, what, when, where, or why questions have a falling intonation. Once you feel comfortable teaching word stress and question intonation, you may decide to try teaching other aspects of pronunciation as well. Please see the Sample Pronunciation Lesson Plans section below for a word stress lesson plan and an intonation lesson plan.

Sample Pronunciation Lesson Plans

Below are two separate sample lesson plans that can be used to introduce and practice pronunciation skills. In my experience, these lessons are a good place to start if pronunciation instruction something new in your classroom. The first lesson plan focuses on word stress and can be used any time new vocabulary is introduced and adapted for most levels, whether you are teaching a beginning or advanced level class. The lesson has four main parts, marked by numbers 1-4, and steps under each part are marked by a bullet points. It should be noted that the first and second parts of lesson one that use circles to indicate syllable stress is common and be found in various pronunciation texts.

Lesson 1 - Integrating Word Stress into a Vocabulary Lesson

This activity was used to integrate pronunciation into a lesson for a high-intermediate EL Civics Class of adult learners. In this activity, students work through a four part lesson, which is shown in numbers 1-4 below. First, students will be able to identify word stress by listening for syllables that are longer, louder, and higher in pitch and practice saying the words with correct stress. Next, students sort the vocabulary words into categories. Then, students think of their own words to sort into the categories. Finally, students will be able to take turns dictating the vocabulary words to a partner and marking word stress.

Introducing word stress, listening discrimination, and oral practice

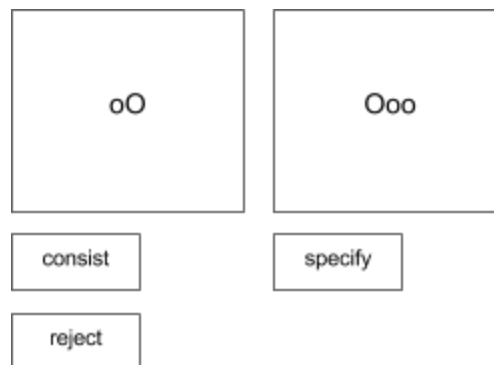
oOoo	Ooo	oO	oO
establishment	specify	reject	consist
Oo	Ooo	ooOo	oO
framework	documents	fundamental	remove
oO	ooO	oOo	Oo
maintain	guarantee	assistance	conflict

Introduction - Listening Discrimination

1. Write each vocabulary word on the board (but not the circles), hum them out, and ask students how many syllables they hear. Say *maintain* couple of times, have them hum it out a couple of times, and ask which syllable is stronger, the first or second. “The second syllable is stressed.”
2. Continue this process with all twelve words, having students listen, repeat, and say how many syllables there are and which one is stressed.
3. Finally, start with *maintain* again and model using the circles o O to show stress.

Guided Practice - Word Sort

1. Erase the board and give groups get a stack of cards with the same vocabulary words on them. Also give students papers that show possible stress patterns (in circle form), for example:
2. Groups work together to say and sort the words based on their stress pattern.



3. Teacher walks around to monitor the students' work and help pronounce words if needed.
4. Give each group some blank papers and ask them to think of new words that can go under each stress pattern. These can be simple words students use in regular conversation, like *classroom* (Oo). If there is time and wall space, hang up the stress patterns and vocabulary words on the wall for practice the next day. Students can add new words to each category before class starts or as a warm up activity.

Free Practice - Pairs Listening Dictation

1. Model what the students are supposed to do at the board using a random word and showing them how to write it and show syllable stress. Ex. *Dictionary Oooo*
2. Pairs receive a list of the vocabulary words and a blank piece of paper for dictation. One student reads the word (teacher monitor for correct stress) and students write the word and stress pattern. Switch roles so both students have the chance to write. Teacher and volunteers circulate to help students with stress patterns.
3. Review the answers as a class.

Questions with Rising and Falling Intonation

This lesson was used in an intermediate speaking and listening class for adult learners as well as a college level class for international students. The purpose was to introduce raising and falling intonation in questions. I used *Is the Post Office Open Tomorrow?* From the book *Small Talk: More Jazz Chants* by Carolyn Graham (Graham, 1986).

Introducing the Jazz Chant - Listening and Speaking Practice

Give each student a copy of the Jazz Chant. Play the Jazz Chant using the CD provided with the book. If you do not have the book you can easily do this yourself using your own voice. Start by modeling the Jazz chant for students, then they can listen and repeat as many times as wanted.

Guided Practice - Identifying intonation patterns

1. Students identify the questions in the Jazz chant and listen to the recording (or teacher) again. Tell them to listen to the end of the question and decide if the intonation goes rises or falls. Model this on the board with practice questions. Ex. *What time is it?* and *Is the weather warm today?* Play the Jazz Chant again and while students write up or down arrows next to each question. Here is an example Jazz Chant (Graham, 1986, p. 63).

Is the Post Office Open Tomorrow?

- A: Is the post office open tomorrow?
B: It's open from nine to five.
A: Is the post office open tomorrow?
B: It's open from nine to five.
A: What time does it open?
B: It opens at nine.
A: What time does it close?
B: It closes at five.
A: It opens at nine and closes at five.
B: It's open from nine to five.
A: Are the stores open tomorrow?
B: They're open from nine to five.
A: Are the stores open tomorrow?
B: They're open from nine to five.
A: When do they open?
B: They open at nine.
A: When do they close?
B: They close at five.
A: Are the stores open tomorrow?
B: They're open from nine to five.

2. Ask students which questions have rising intonation and which have falling intonation? Why? Give students a few minutes try to find the pattern. Discuss as a class, then explain that questions that have Yes/No responses (is, do, have etc.) generally have a raising intonation and questions that elicit more information (what, when where etc.) have a falling intonation. As a class, using the board, make various different kinds of questions and practice rising and falling intonation.

Free Practice - Role Plays

Pairs create role plays (modeled after the Jazz chant) that include questions and perform role plays for class. Class listens for raising and falling intonation and provide feedback to performers. For example:

Links to Resources you can Use Now

One of the best ways to learn about pronunciation instruction is to attend professional development events focused on the subject, because you can not only learn about teaching methods and activities, but also practice them and take home sample materials. The online resources below are from the [ATLAS ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System \(ATLAS\)](#). They are handouts and presentations from professional development events in

Minnesota put on by ATLAS. The links below provide clear actionable pronunciation activities you can try in your classroom.

[Uncovering Hidden Pronunciation Possibilities: Integrating Pronunciation into your Lessons by Suzanne McCurdy and Colleen Meyers](#)

[No Tech and High Tech Ways to Practice Outside of Class by Colleen Meyers - 1](#)
[No Tech and High Tech Ways to Practice Outside of Class by Colleen Meyers - 2](#)

[Building Connections: Pronunciation for Educational and Professional Settings by Suzanne McCurdy and Andrea Echelberger](#)

[Listen Up and Speak Out by Betsy Parrish](#)

[The Academic Word List](#)

Conclusion

This article provided a brief summary of major themes that emerged from data collected in an original study and highlight participants' first hand accounts of their perceptions of their English pronunciation and linguistic self-confidence. The study found that adult English learners benefit from pronunciation instruction, reporting the importance of intelligible pronunciation for daily communication, employment, and higher self-confidence. In order to help learners improve their intelligibility, practitioners should consider teaching suprasegmental pronunciation features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing 2003; Field, 2005; Gilbert, 1983; Hahn, 2004; Levis, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 2011; Parrish, 2004). The two sample lesson plans included in this article are intended to be jumping off points for practitioners who want to integrate suprasegmental pronunciation instruction into their curriculum. Additional pronunciation activities can be found through the online links above.

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