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## Feedback on Second Language Pronunciation: A Case Study of EAP Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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## **Feedback on Second Language Pronunciation: A Case Study of EAP Teachers' Beliefs and Practices**

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*Abstract: In the modern English language classroom, teachers are often faced with the challenging task of supporting students to achieve comprehensible pronunciation, but many teachers limit or neglect giving students feedback on their pronunciation for a variety of reasons. This paper examines the case of five experienced English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors who strive to provide feedback on specific features of pronunciation that negatively affect students' comprehensibility. Results derived from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews reveal that the teachers use similar approaches to select and provide feedback on problematic features of pronunciation. Naturally, these approaches sometimes differed to better suit their particular classroom needs. The paper concludes with a discussion of several practical solutions for providing corrective feedback and implications for teacher education programs.*

### **Keywords**

Second language teacher education, pronunciation, feedback, teacher cognition

### **Introduction**

One of the challenges faced by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers today is determining not just how to provide feedback on learner pronunciation, but when to actually do so. As pronunciation is an essential element of communicative competence (Goh & Burns, 2012), but a skill frequently given insufficient attention in many EAP classrooms (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002; Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2013), there is a clear need for teachers to enhance their knowledge of not only English phonology, but how to effectively teach and give learners feedback on it. This paper aims to investigate these questions by examining the beliefs and practices of experienced EAP instructors who attempt to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with feedback on their pronunciation.

For many teachers, faced with such uncertainty, plus a belief that teaching and giving feedback on learner pronunciation is too time-consuming a task (Khaghajnejad, 2015; Warren, Elgort, & Crabbe, 2009), teachers may choose to limit classroom time spent on pronunciation instruction or neglect it altogether. In the EAP classroom, teachers struggle with significant time

limitations as they are often required to meet the demands of a strict curriculum focusing on multiple language skills, of which pronunciation is typically viewed as only one small component. Failing to give sufficient attention to pronunciation is problematic, however, particularly in light of research demonstrating the positive impact that pronunciation instruction may have on student learning (Lee, Jang, & Plonsky, 2015; Saito & Lyster, 2012) and how important clear pronunciation is to achieving successful communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010). Given this classroom reality, how can EAP teachers successfully meet the needs of their students?

The answer to this question lies, at least in part, in the notion of comprehensibility, which is considered the main foci of pronunciation instruction (Munro & Derwing, 1995, 2015). This concept of comprehensibility is generally defined as the listener's perception of the degree to which second language (L2) speech is difficult to understand (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1997, 1998). With comprehensible pronunciation serving as the target for achieving successful communication, traditional concerns about the potentially negative effects of accentedness on effective communication have gradually lessened. Research has demonstrated that strongly accented speech does not necessarily interfere with comprehensibility (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Thus, the goal of classroom instruction is to enhance the spoken language of speakers whose pronunciation difficulties interfere with their comprehensibility.

Yet concerns over accented speech can pose a challenge for teachers from a different perspective. Increasingly, over the past few decades, advocates of international varieties of English have argued for the acceptance of diverse English dialects (Jenkins, 2007; Murphy, 2014a). But, in the classroom, it can be challenging for teachers to focus on comprehensible pronunciation without feeling that they may be failing to demonstrate appropriate levels of respect for the learner's particular variety of English. Even with guides on how to teach pronunciation (e.g., Celce-Murcia et al, 2010; Cox, 2012), many teachers may have concerns about what they can or should do when giving feedback on learner pronunciation.

Furthermore, many teachers may lack the knowledge of how to adequately assess pronunciation or even have access to tools to formally assess learner pronunciation (Macdonald, 2002). Without sufficient training in how to assess learner speech and identify features of pronunciation that cause communication breakdowns, teachers may lack sufficient knowledge on how to improve their pronunciation. Overall, any one or more of the concerns outlined above may lead to the neglect of pronunciation instruction in the classroom. What we need is to look at what EAP teachers believe and actually do, specifically those who do address pronunciation issues in their classrooms.

## **Goals of the Language Learners**

Achieving native-like pronunciation in English has been a long-term goal of many language learners. Numerous studies have demonstrated that English language learners have idealized some form of "standard" English, and have nurtured the desire to develop a native-like variety (Derwing & Munro, 2003; Kang, 2010; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006; Timmis, 2002). One of the reasons for these aspirations may be attributed to cases of employment discrimination, both in English and non-English speaking countries. The continued practices of many businesses and institutions world-wide to hire people with "native-speaker"

varieties of English has been well-documented over the years (e.g., Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Carlson & McHenry, 2006; Clark & Paran, 2007; Hosoda & Nguyen, 2012).

It is generally acknowledged, however, that modifying one's pronunciation to achieve native-like status is exceedingly difficult for a large majority of adult L2 English speakers (Loewen, 2015; Scovel, 2001). Following the onset of puberty – the “critical” age –, it appears that adult learners may experience increasing difficulties with adopting native-like pronunciation in English. Reasons for these observed difficulties may not necessarily result from a critical age per se, but rather from sociocultural factors that can impede the acquisition of an L2. Perhaps first and foremost is the choice of the learner to interact in the L2. Research has demonstrated, for example, that adults who spend more time interacting in and using their L2 are considerably more likely to acquire target-like pronunciation than those who spend more time interacting with speakers of their L1, regardless of the country they live in (Flege, Frieda, Walley, & Randazza, 1998; Riney & Flege, 1998). Even for adult learners who have been speaking English as a second language for years, it is possible to change their pronunciation, especially by increasing their language awareness and through corrective feedback (Derwing & Munro, 2014).

Another significant obstacle is one that directly conflicts with the learners' claimed desire for native-like pronunciation: their desire to maintain their sense of personal identity (Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005). A person's identity is intricately and rather intimately connected to their pronunciation. This connection raises concerns that in helping learners to modify their pronunciation, teachers are simultaneously casting negative judgements on the learner's identity rather than helping learners to communicate successfully with other English speakers. Derwing and Munro (2009) argue

*If someone wishes to retain his or her identity through accent, that is a personal choice. But denying students help with intelligibility on the basis of protecting their identity seems not only misguided but paternalistic. Identity and intelligibility are both obviously important, but when it comes to sacrificing intelligibility FOR identity, there is no reason to believe that many learners will make that choice. Surely, if one is intelligible and comprehensible, one's expression of identity will come through more clearly (p.485).*

Ultimately, teachers need to support students to achieve a level of English pronunciation that is comprehensible to listeners from diverse language backgrounds.

### **Limited L2 Pronunciation Instruction**

Another important barrier to a learner's acquisition of a clear L2 pronunciation may be attributed to a lack of instruction in English pronunciation. This neglect may result from the teachers' level of comfort in teaching pronunciation or a deficiency in L2 teacher education as discussed below. In the case of “non-native” speakers of English, one of the main contributing factors can be a lack of confidence in their own L2 variety of English (Jenkins, 2007). Yet, this lack of confidence in teaching pronunciation is not limited to only non-native speakers, but to native-speakers as well, but for different reasons. For the native speakers, their limited confidence is frequently attributed to insufficient training in pronunciation pedagogy (Baker, 2011a, 2011b; Fraser, 2001; Macdonald, 2002; Murphy, 2014b). Even though they may have confidence in speaking their particular dialect of English, without this training in pronunciation

pedagogy, they may have a limited understanding of the mechanics involved in the production of sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation and how to describe these processes to students. In addition, for all teachers in EAP settings, there is the added complication of teaching ESL students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, as it can be difficult to identify their specific pronunciation-oriented needs (Schaetzel & Low, 2009) and to determine how to best prioritize these needs in the classroom. More specialized training in pronunciation pedagogy in teacher education is clearly needed to support teachers to address these challenges and give greater attention to pronunciation in the classrooms.

### **The Powerful Influence of Teachers' Cognitions on Classroom Practice**

The successful implementation of any particular curricular content, teaching approach or technique is largely dependent on the strength of teachers' cognitions in relation to its implementation. Teacher cognition, defined as teachers' beliefs, knowledge and perceptions in connection to what they actually do in the classroom (Borg, 2003), can play an integral role in the degree to which pronunciation may be taught or addressed in the classroom. Investigating teachers' cognitions is an essential component of any research into classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, thoughts and opinions (their cognitions) ultimately influence what they do in the classroom and, conversely, what teachers learn from their experiences in the classroom further informs their perceptions, knowledge and practice. Thus, understanding teachers' cognitions provides insights into the how and why behind choices teachers make. The neglect of pronunciation instruction, as discussed earlier, is a classic example of how limited knowledge of pronunciation pedagogy may have a negative impact on what teachers choose to focus on (or not focus on) in the classroom.

However, little empirical research has emerged on the beliefs and practices of L2 teachers in the realm of pronunciation pedagogy (Baker, 2014), but especially as relevant to providing feedback on learner pronunciation, which is the focus of the current paper. This lack of research is problematic given that many teachers struggle to determine how to give pronunciation-related feedback to learners. These teachers would benefit from gaining insights into the beliefs and practices of experienced teachers who have a certain degree of success in feedback-related pedagogy. Nevertheless, there has been some research, albeit limited, into this area.

A study by Mori (2011) of two teachers in Japan (one native and one non-native speaker of English) found that their cognitions in regards to their provision of corrective feedback (CF) were influenced and mediated by their prior learning experiences and by their knowledge of sociocultural factors, such as awareness of Japanese societal and institutional norms. This study is useful in that it provides a window into teachers' cognitions in the area of CF, but the focus on pronunciation specifically is limited; it only mentions that one of the participants used recasts as a way of providing feedback on learning pronunciation.

Three studies, however, have recently emerged with a much stronger emphasis on pronunciation pedagogy in relation to teachers' cognitions with at least some consideration given to feedback. In the context of public schools in Greece, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) found that primary school teachers gave considerably more feedback on learner pronunciation than secondary school EFL teachers, who rarely gave feedback, at least according to their stated beliefs. One of the shortcomings of Sifakis and Sougari's research was that observations of classroom practices were not included. As previous research has demonstrated, teachers' stated

beliefs and actual classroom practices may frequently differ (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Collie Graden, 1996; Zacharias, 2005); thus, inclusion of observed teaching is important to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the two and to determine why these divergences may occur. In a study conducted in Turkey (Phipps & Borg, 2007), which involved both interview and observation data of teachers in a DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults) course, research revealed additional insight into the area of oral error correction. The researchers found that, even though some teachers consider explicit oral error correction to be desirable, due to “a lack of confidence and concerns about learners’ feelings” (p. 17), they may be hesitant to correct students in class. Finally, in the case of university level students in an ESL context, research has shown that students seem to prefer to receive feedback on their pronunciation more frequently than teachers deemed necessary (Cathcart & Olsen, 1976); however, this study was conducted more than three decades ago, prior to the inception of communicative language teaching, an approach which underlies the teaching philosophy of many English language programs today, especially in ESL contexts.

### **Research into Pronunciation-Focused Feedback**

Although research into teacher cognition and pronunciation feedback is limited, there has been considerable research conducted into the effectiveness of feedback. In Hattie’s (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses in the area of student achievement, he describes feedback as

*...information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, or one’s own experience) about aspects of one’s performance or understanding. For example, a teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response. Feedback is a “consequence” of performance” (p. 174).*

Hattie further argues that feedback is “one of the most powerful influences on learning, occurs too rarely, and needs to be more fully researched by qualitatively investigating how feedback works in the classroom and learning process” (p. 178). This argument provides an excellent springboard into an examination of what happens in the EAP classroom with a specific look at pronunciation feedback. In ESL circles, the main area of research focuses on what is termed ‘corrective feedback’:

*...the form of responses to learner utterances that contain an error. The responses can consist of (a) an indication that an error has been committed, (b) provision of the correct target language form, or (c) metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or any combination of these. (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006, p. 340)*

Research has shown that corrective feedback (CF) on errors facilitates pronunciation improvement of language learners (Lee et al., 2015). Of the numerous forms of CF strategies available to teachers (e.g., repetition, explicit correction, clarification requests, metalinguistic information, elicitation), one of the most dominant and well-researched types of CF typically employed in the ESL classroom are recasts (Ellis & Sheen, 2006). Although classroom-based research into other areas of language such as morpho-syntactic recasts have shown limited

impact on learners' development (Al-Surmi, 2012; Lyster & Saito, 2010), research into pronunciation-specific recasts has achieved more promising results. Observational (Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000) and quasi-experimental (Saito & Lyster, 2012a, 2012b) studies have demonstrated significant impact on learners' pronunciation development. Recasting appears to be particularly beneficial when it is used to draw students' attention to the problematic pronunciation feature, giving students the opportunity to listen to the teacher's model and then immediately practicing the target pronunciation aloud (Saito & Lyster, 2012b). Simply recasting the target feature without the student practicing the correct form may not result in any noticing of the incorrect form (Yoshida, 2010). Perhaps the most optimal form of CF, however, is when CF is used in tandem with form-focused instruction (FFI). Saito and Lyster's (2012a) research, exploring the pedagogical effectiveness of form-focused instruction in conjunction with CF on the pronunciation of Japanese learners of English, revealed that the combination of FFI+CF had a significant impact on the pronunciation development of Japanese learners of English. This approach could potentially be further enhanced by incorporating cues (e.g., prosodic emphasis, interrogative intonation) that draw the learner's attention to communication break downs (Loewen & Philp, 2006).

As is apparent from the literature review above, feedback is one of the most important contributing factors to a learner's pronunciation development, but teachers' cognitions and actual classroom practices remains an area that is insufficiently researched. As teachers' beliefs, knowledge and attitudes have a strong influence on their classroom decision-making and actions, and thus their use of feedback, this gap in the research merits close attention, especially if we hope to equip teachers who may be reluctant to teach pronunciation or have insufficient pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) to successfully give feedback on learners' speech.

## **The Research Study**

### **Research Questions and Aim**

In light of the limited classroom research on teachers' beliefs and actual practices when teaching pronunciation, including the provision of feedback, the purpose of the study was to explore the following two questions:

1. What do experienced ESL teachers in an EAP context believe about providing feedback on learner pronunciation?
2. How do these teachers provide feedback on students' pronunciation in the ESL classroom?

Providing answers to these questions will serve to better inform the preparation of teachers in L2 teacher education programs. Based on the results of this study, recommendations for L2 teacher educators will be made as to how to support classroom teachers in providing effective, targeted feedback on learner pronunciation.

### **Context and Curriculum**

The research took place in an EAP program in North America. The overall aim of the program is to prepare learners to cultivate English language skills needed to succeed in their

future tertiary studies. The current study focused on 14-week courses specifically designed to develop L2 Oral Communication (OC) skills. The program has five levels of English: Level 1 (High Beginner); Level 2 (Low Intermediate); Level 3 (Intermediate); Level 4 (High Intermediate) and Level 5 (Advanced). OC courses from Levels 1-2 focus on Conversational English skills, and the curriculum is relatively flexible, allowing teachers to choose the types of tasks to use with learners. Levels 3-5 focus on Academic Oral English, and the curriculum is considerably more structured, meaning that the teachers follow a content/task-based curriculum that has been developed by a committee. The courses are taught with either commercially published textbooks (Levels 1-2 & 4) or in-house developed study guides (Level 3). Unlike the English language programs discussed in the literature review, this program has an explicit focus on pronunciation as integrated with the teaching of other academic-oriented OC skills. Pronunciation is mainly targeted with the lower levels, especially in Levels 1-3 and, to a lesser extent, Level 4. Pronunciation is not explicitly taught in Level 5. Features taught in Levels 1-4 (as outlined by the teachers who participated in the study) are listed below.

- *Level 1:* Syllables, word endings, consonants, vowels, word stress, rhythm, intonation, connected speech
- *Level 2:* Vowels, consonants, syllables, word endings, word stress
- *Level 3:* Syllables, rhythm, vowels, word stress
- *Level 4:* Syllables, word stress, word endings

### **Participants**

The five participants were all experienced ESL teachers with at least six years teaching experience (either based solely in the USA or overseas as well). Each of the participants had taught their respective OC courses at least once in a previous semester: Vala (High Intermediate); Ginger and Abby (Intermediate); Laura (Low Intermediate) and Tanya (High Beginning). All names are pseudonyms. These five teachers were chosen based on both their education qualifications and experience; they all held a Master's degree in TESOL (or a related field).

### **Methods**

Over the course of a semester, the five teachers participated in three types of data collection procedures: three semi-structured interviews, five classroom observations, and two stimulated recall interviews. The overall purpose of these interviews and observations was to gain insight on the everyday teaching of pronunciation in courses dedicated to OC skills in the EAP classroom. The three semi-structured interviews took place at the beginning (70-90 minutes in duration), 3/4 point (30-40 minutes) and end of the semester (30-40 minutes). The interviews examined a variety of aspects of the teachers' professional learning and teaching histories as well as their current teaching practices and the rationales underlying how and why they teach, focusing specifically on pronunciation-related practices. For the purpose of the current paper, which focuses on feedback, data collected from the first and second interview are most relevant to the present analysis. Part of the first interview focused on the teachers' typical practices when teaching English pronunciation, including how they normally assess students' pronunciation and



provide feedback on their pronunciation. The second interview focused more specifically on the teachers' beliefs regarding the students' beliefs in relation to pronunciation instruction. For the present analysis, this involved questions that asked teachers to provide details on whether they believed the students wanted feedback on their pronunciation. It also examined teachers' perceptions about what form the students might want to receive this feedback as well as in what way the teachers provided this feedback.

The classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews served to complement this data. Each teacher was observed five times throughout the semester with Observations 1-3 involving consecutively held lessons in the first half of the semester and Observations 4-5 involving consecutively held lessons in the second half of the semester. These 50-minute lessons were video-recorded and all components related to the teaching/learning of pronunciation were transcribed verbatim. Immediately after each of these two rounds of observations (usually within 48 hours), a stimulated recall interview was conducted. Each stimulated recall interview was approximately 60 minutes in duration. This interview involved the teachers reviewing pre-selected pronunciation-related instructional moments in the video footage and commenting on what they believed they were thinking at the time of instruction. The teachers also occasionally provided additional rationale for why they chose to give feedback on students' pronunciation at a certain time or in a particular way.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyse the data, a coding system was first developed to classify the teachers' cognitions and practices. This coding system drew on a modified version of Shulman's (1986, 1987) theoretical model of seven categories of teacher knowledge and Baker's (2014) classification of 25 pronunciation activities (which was adapted from work of Crookes and Chaudron, 2001, Brown, 2007, and Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010). Shulman's model proved beneficial to identify diverse, but interrelated components of the teachers' knowledge, particularly their pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., how to teach English pronunciation), subject matter content knowledge (e.g., knowledge of features of pronunciation), knowledge of learners and knowledge about curriculum. For example, the various techniques that a teacher might use to provide feedback on learner pronunciation would all be broadly classified as the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, whereas the teachers' beliefs about what the type of feedback they felt their students wanted would be categorized as knowledge of learners. Baker's classification of pronunciation techniques then provided a way to further categorize some of the complexities of the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, focusing on what types of techniques the teachers used to teach English pronunciation, broadly classifying them in terms of controlled, guided and free activities. For the purposes of this paper, data categorized as Checking activities (a type of Controlled activity involving the teacher examining student speech and providing feedback on their performance) and Review activities (another type of Controlled activity where the teacher reviews content taught in a previous lesson) were the primary codes analysed, encompassing both interview and observation data. The data was initially coded by the first author and then a second coder analysed 10% of the data. This data included transcripts of pronunciation-focused episodes from the observational data and transcripts from the semi-structured and stimulated recall interviews. An inter-rater agreement level of 95% was achieved and any differences in coding were discussed and a final code was agreed upon. Major themes

identified in the Findings section below are based on the importance given to feedback-related issues or practices by the five EAP teachers.

## **Findings**

Results of the study highlighted several key themes from the interview and observation data that demonstrated both the teachers' beliefs about providing feedback on learner pronunciation as well how they actually provided this feedback in the EAP classroom.

### **Common Ground: Feedback is Key to Enhancing Learner Comprehensibility**

One of the major themes that surfaced in the five teachers' descriptions of why they provided explicit feedback on their students' pronunciation and how they assessed learner speech is the issue of comprehensibility. Although this is a common theme in theoretical and anecdotal research in modern classroom teaching, it is nonetheless important to highlight because it serves as evidence of what is happening in actual EAP classrooms. All five teachers, but especially Ginger, Tanya and Laura, stressed that the purpose of their classes was not to produce learners who sounded like native speakers, but rather to enable learners to speak comprehensibly. Tanya explained that "it is more important to be comprehensible than to get everything correct." Laura added that "students need to be comprehensible, especially [those] in our program who want to go to university and need to make presentations and need to be able to communicate with their peers." Finally, Ginger highlighted that she does not expect learners to produce native speaker-like speech, but rather achieve an "acceptable pronunciation" which she defined as spoken language that was comprehensible to other English speakers. Thus, the teachers believed that the goal of feedback should be to enhance learner comprehensibility, regardless of their level of language proficiency, helping learners to communicate successfully in academic OC-oriented tasks. With this foundational belief established amongst all five teachers, the more interesting question of how they believed comprehensible English can be achieved can be explored.

### **Peer Feedback on Comprehensibility is Important**

Whenever possible, the five teachers encouraged negotiation of meaning among peers. This was particularly true for Vala and Ginger who taught higher proficiency students who were more capable of longer oral exchanges. Negotiation of meaning typically occurs when some kind of communication breakdown takes place (Swain, 1985), resulting in the listener requesting clarification from the speaker; thus, when the communication breakdown results from problematic pronunciation, the speaker might need to adjust his/her pronunciation to be more comprehensible to the listener. In class, during pronunciation-focused pair work, students were encouraged to give feedback on each other's pronunciation, especially when problematic pronunciation interfered with successful communication (as opposed to "correct" pronunciation). During the second stimulated recall interview with Ginger and the first author, in which we watched two students discuss the pronunciation of a word, Ginger remarked,

*That's a productive situation when they're just actually trying to figure out how you say it as opposed to 'you're wrong and you're right', which*

*sometimes happens with [these two particular students]. And that's why I say that it's not a 'you're wrong, I'm right'. It's a 'Are we saying this in a way that we're going to be understood by other speakers of the language?'*

Ginger's satisfaction with the students' efforts to negotiate the meaning of the pronunciation of a word was similar to Vala's strongly held beliefs about peer negotiation. Vala believed that students should be encouraged to work with other students to address difficulties with pronunciation, and not to always rely on the teacher for help. Vala and Ginger's preference for student-negotiated pronunciation work reveals that the field of English language learning has, at least with these teachers, moved away from the period in time in which providing 'correct' models (as opposed to student self-identification of issues with comprehensibility) was the norm in some ESL classrooms (e.g., Cathcart & Olsen, 1976).

### **Feedback Feasibility and Feedback on Targeted Features**

Striving to enhance learner comprehensibility also involved problems related to feasibility and giving feedback for all of the teachers. Vala explained that "There's so much that goes on within a single speech sample that there's so much to assess", a comment similar to the one expressed by Laura earlier in the findings. With classes comprising learners from multiple L1 backgrounds, addressing even the most common needs of specific L1 groups, let alone the needs of individual learners, was a challenging task for the teachers.

Nevertheless, the five teachers all utilized the same strategy to address learners' needs. Their approach was strongly connected to their knowledge of the curriculum; it involved focusing on the target feature for a given unit. Thus, if the focal feature for a unit was word stress, the teacher would typically only give feedback on that feature of pronunciation. In the case of Ginger and Abby, assessment was cumulative, meaning that features of pronunciation addressed in earlier units were also assessed in the current unit. Abby explained how this process worked in her class:

*In this first unit I did, I just had them give me seven words and they were supposed to give me how many syllables there were. And then I told them that in their recording I would listen to see if [they] said three syllables. I want to hear those three syllables, so I'm not worrying about word stress...And then next, a voice recording homework. I'll have them do the same thing again... Take the same words, identify the stress patterns and then tell me the story again, making sure they have added the stress to those [seven] words... When we get to unit three, then I'll have them [do] the sentence-level stress. Identify those words, correctly stress those words in the sentence, reducing the other words, making sure they have all the syllables, just building on that.*

One of the disadvantages with the approach of focusing on target features, however, as Laura pointed out, is that these features do not always correspond to those that may cause the most issues with comprehensibility. In one of the interviews, she described a time when she was listening to students' pronunciation at home and her husband said, "What are they saying?" After his comment, she reported thinking: "I know sometimes it's hard to understand." Even with Laura's efforts to improve the comprehensibility of these seven words, the student's story remained difficult to understand by Laura's husband. This anecdote illustrates how challenging it

can be for language teachers to determine what type of feedback to give to learners. However, by giving feedback on important target features, as identified by the curriculum, the teachers believed they could achieve at least a certain level of success in supporting the students to produce more comprehensible pronunciation.

### **Providing Explicit Feedback on Voice Recordings**

Explicit feedback on audio recordings of the learners' speech was a major source of feedback that students received on their pronunciation by all five teachers. Feedback was provided either in written form or as a teacher-produced audio recording. Vala, Abby and Laura all used a written-based method for conveying feedback, typically in the form of a rubric or as comments written on a printed transcript of the students' speech. Only Ginger and Tanya used an online tool (called Wimba) to provide oral feedback on the students' pronunciation. In either case, the teachers would comment primarily on target features. The reason for the difference in the delivery of feedback was directly related to the time commitment involved in providing oral feedback. Laura, with a class of 17 students, explained that her officemate, Tanya, who had a class of four students, "is doing oral feedback, and [...] that's a good idea. But I've tried it and it's time-consuming, so I've given up. I need to figure out a way to make it less so but I haven't yet." Tanya, however, found that the oral feedback was easier, feeling it would be less time-consuming to explain her feedback orally than to provide written descriptions for her high beginning students. Ginger, who also provided oral feedback, appeared to agree with Laura. Even though Ginger provided feedback using voice recordings with each of her 13 students, she commented that she spent "a lot of time giving feedback" and that she was worried that some of her students failed to listen to it. Ginger, as with some of the other teachers, was unsure as to whether the feedback actually impacted the students' pronunciation. These fears, however, are likely unfounded given Lee et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis indicating the positive impact of feedback on learner pronunciation development.

### **Whole Class Feedback**

In addition to the feedback provided on the audio recordings, the teachers placed a strong emphasis on giving feedback orally in class as well. They believed that the mainly generic, positive feedback would be a source of encouragement for students. The classroom observations revealed that, during various pronunciation-related activities, all of the teachers frequently gave whole-class, typically positive, feedback on their performance using words such as "excellent", "very good" or "good". Abby noted that most of her feedback "comes from when [they]'re practicing in class", usually as feedback for the whole group, but occasionally 'one-on-one' as well. However, one of the concerns that Ginger expressed in relation to whole-group feedback was that, as a group, their pronunciation seemed more than adequate, but individually, their pronunciation might be less comprehensible. During one stimulated recall interview, Ginger remarked on her "very good" feedback to the class:

*I remember thinking at the time that as a collective group that it sounded really nice compared to previously...like in the first unit. I remember thinking oh, that's some nice English rhythm going on here. Individually,*

*not so sure. But I remember thinking at the time, wow, that sounds really like some nice English rhythm!*

When addressing the whole-class, Ginger and Vala found it difficult to identify pronunciation problems of individual students who were frequently unheard amidst the voices of the whole class. Thus, for these two teachers, feedback on pronunciation was most effective for students when done on an individual basis.

#### **Recasting: Use Versus Non-Use**

One specific type of feedback the five teachers mentioned using on occasion was recasting. In the interviews, either semi-structured or stimulated recall, the five teachers, but especially Abby, Ginger, Laura and Tanya, commented on using recasting by repeating a word with problematic pronunciation back to the student while hoping to increase student awareness of the desired pronunciation. However, both Ginger and Abby acknowledged that using recasting did not always succeed with learners, and sometimes a more direct approach was necessary. As an alternative to recasting, Abby sometimes encouraged her students to produce the correct pronunciation of a word without her modelling (as would be typical of recasting). During one observation, Abby tried to enable students to figure out the pronunciation of the word 'Libya' for themselves by pointing to a picture of a fish on the animal vowel chart (thus illustrating the vowel sound shared by both words). But, in this moment, her approach was unsuccessful. She found that she had to use more direct feedback. Abby explicitly told her class "No" (their pronunciation was unsatisfactory) and that a different pronunciation was needed for the problematic vowel, which she then subsequently modelled for the class. When watching herself in the video recording of this episode during the second stimulated recall interview, Abby commented on her brusque-seeming manner with her class:

*I watch myself and I say, 'Wow, Abby. You could really say it a little more politely or something.' But, polite doesn't work. You really do have to cut to the chase because, like I said, I was trying to point on the chart so I'm not confronting them you know in that way, but if it doesn't click, it really has to be cut and dry.*

In comparison to the other four teachers, Vala expressed a distinct preference for avoiding recasts in class, but particularly in cases where she considered the information to not be important for the rest of the class. While watching one teacher-student interaction during a stimulated recall session in which she decided not to recast an item for a student, she explained:

*I try not to do too many recasts, because I feel that it could be a little patronizing to students who are like 'why is she always repeating what I say' especially when her question, I don't think I thought her question was relevant for everyone, you know. And if I recast everything, I'm never going to get anywhere, you know. Also it goes back to that idea, they have to listen to one another, don't always just listen to the teacher, listen to your classmates too. [...] So I try to pick my recasts carefully, as a teacher, so that's why I didn't [recast it].*

Vala's overall dislike for recasts is also interesting in light of her preference for providing individual feedback to students given that recasts are one way in which a teacher may provide individual feedback. What seems to be an inconsistency in the teacher's preferences thus provides an excellent example of the complexity underlying teachers' beliefs. Overall, however,

all the teachers use recasts to varying degrees, but they all agree that recasts are not an effective approach to giving feedback on learners' pronunciation. In most situations, they believe that direct, individualized feedback is a more successful model to follow.

## Discussion

The study provided insights into the cognitions of five experienced EAP teachers, focusing on their beliefs, *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman, 1987), and actual instructional practices, in relation to pronunciation-focused feedback in the classroom. The teachers shared the same belief that feedback is an essential part of the process in enabling students to achieve comprehensible pronunciation. As feedback is considered to be one of the most significant factors contributing to learner development (Hattie, 2009), this belief can be viewed as a pillar of the teachers' cognitions about pronunciation pedagogy. To achieve this end, the teachers used similar approaches, namely peer feedback on comprehensibility, whole-class feedback, recasting, and either oral or written feedback on voice recordings. Regardless of the specific techniques the teachers used, a targeted approach to pronunciation was integral to their decision-making about how or when to provide feedback. As such, the teachers focused, for the most part, on features of pronunciation that were central to the unit that the class was working on at the time. What makes this finding significant is its alignment with research indicating that FFI coupled with CF can have a powerful influence on the successful development of learner pronunciation (Saito & Lyster, 2012a). By focusing feedback on phonological features that were given explicit instruction in the curriculum, teachers provided learners with optimal conditions for pronunciation development.

While it was apparent that the teachers were equipped with a variety of techniques for giving feedback on students' pronunciation, concerns were raised by participants throughout the study about the time-consuming nature of giving feedback and the overall effectiveness of the feedback provided. These fears were certainly not unfounded. In the case of implicit feedback, such as the use of recasts, research has shown that the feedback can frequently go unnoticed by the learner (Yoshida, 2010). However, when recasts are used with cues, learner uptake can be greatly increased (Loewen & Philp, 2006). Thus, when recasts are used with systematic cues, the implicit feedback becomes more explicit and more recognizable by the learners, and therefore potentially more effective. All five of the teachers, but especially Abby and Laura used cues systematically (as expressed through either instructional gestures or images) throughout their lessons and when giving feedback specifically. For example, Abby used pictures to indicate what sound she heard the class say after asking them to differentiate between /ʃ/ and /s/. If asked to produce a word with the sound /ʃ/, such as in *shape*, and the students produced a /s/ sound instead, she would recast the appropriate pronunciation of the word and hold up a picture of a sheep to make them aware of their problematic pronunciation. The use of systematic cues along with recasts and FFI can be a critical tool in improving the effectiveness of pronunciation feedback, and thus also potentially reducing the time involved in providing this feedback.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that general feedback, such as "excellent", "well done" or "good" may have little or no benefit to the learner (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and may even prevent additional opportunities for learning to occur (Wong & Waring, 2009). Yet, the classroom observation transcripts are filled with instances of teachers giving this type of general feedback to students. It is used by the teachers to provide encouragement on an aspect of the

English language that the teachers acknowledge as very difficult to learn, and consequently can be discouraging for students to try to learn. Nevertheless, a slight modification to this technique can be much more effective; that is, providing targeted feedback that explicitly describes what was positive about the students' performance is key (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), in this case with their pronunciation. Instead of saying "That was good pronunciation of the word *bin*", the target feature should be named. For example, when focusing on helping students articulate problematic vowel sounds like /i:/ and /i/ and the student successfully articulates the sound, the teacher would specify that "that was good pronunciation of the vowel sound /i/.

## Conclusion

Overall, the beliefs and practices of the five EAP teachers demonstrate that the combination of explicit and targeted feedback along with effective, systematic instruction of pronunciation can be a powerful force in assisting learners to achieve clear and comprehensible English. In essence, the goal for effective pronunciation-focused feedback should revolve around the following:

Explicit FFI of a specific target feature from the curriculum  
(a feature that has an observable impact on comprehensibility)

+

Cued CF

+

Immediate Practice

The findings from this study provide teachers, especially inexperienced teachers or teachers who are reluctant or unsure of how to teach pronunciation, with some of the fundamental tools they could use to address pronunciation in the classroom. Insights such as these with representative illustrations of actual classroom practices thus need to be readily integrated into second language teacher education (SLTE) programs. Such insights may be of further benefit to teachers of advanced EAP students, a learner population not represented in this study as pronunciation was not explicitly targeted in the level 5 (advanced) curriculum.

Expanding on the immediate findings from this study, additional recommendations for inclusion in SLTE can be made to further enhance pronunciation-focused feedback in the L2 classroom. First, as mentioned earlier, the systematic use of cues to make recasts more explicit is essential for improving learner uptake of a language feature. One type of cue that may have potential for enhancing learner uptake is the use of body movement or gestures during recasting. Body movement has long been promoted as an effective tool for language learning (Baker & Burri, 2016; Burri, Baker, & Acton, 2016; Acton, Baker, Burri, & Teaman, 2013; Asher, 2000). Systematically using specific gestures with particular features of pronunciation provides not only a visual and an audio stimulus to increase student awareness of a feature to be learned, but is likely to result in improved muscle memory and subsequent L2 acquisition. For example, when providing feedback on intonation, and the learner uses a rising tone instead of a falling tone

when making a declarative statement, gestures can be used to indicate which tone should be used.

A second recommendation is the incorporation of oral journals into the curriculum. Oral journals (Chernen, 2009) can be used to provide students with detailed and explicit feedback on their pronunciation. Free online software programs, such as Vocaroo (<http://vocaroo.com/>), provide a useful avenue for this purpose. In advanced OC classes, teachers can direct students to design an action plan for how to improve their own pronunciation and then have them discuss their experiences in an oral journal. Here, students are asked to identify one problematic feature in their pronunciation. Learners then design an action plan they follow regularly over a certain period of time (e.g. two weeks) in an attempt to improve the targeted problem area. Afterwards, students record their oral journal in which they discuss the identified pronunciation problem, action plan and subsequent results. Once satisfied with the content and quality of the clip, students submit it to the teacher by email (an integrated feature of Vocaroo). The teacher finally records oral feedback on the students' action plan and their pronunciation and returns it – electronically – for the students to listen to.

A final recommendation is to use notational techniques on audio recordings. The use of notational systems can assist teachers to reduce the time needed for providing feedback on audio recordings of student speech. Notational systems can be developed for many features of English pronunciation, especially vowels and word stress. In class, teachers can assign numbers to each of the vowels (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010) and then use these numbers when giving oral feedback on the recordings. Instead of spending a great deal of time re-explaining how to produce a particular vowel sound, the teachers can use phrases such as 'I hear you producing vowel #1, but instead, this should be vowel #2.' Similarly for word stress, depending, of course, on the nature of the pronunciation issue, notational systems can be used as well (Murphy & Kandil, 2004). For example, consider the case of a learner who incorrectly places primary stress on the first syllable instead of the third syllable in the word *economic*. Using Murphy and Kandil's system, the teacher can briefly explain that '*Economic* is a 4-3-1 word and not a 4-1-3 word'. (*Economic* is a four syllable word with primary stress falling on the third syllable and secondary stress falling on the first syllable).

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