

# Challenges and Opportunities for Methodologically Principled L2 Pronunciation Training in German Textbooks and Class

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The teaching of pronunciation in foreign language classes has experienced methodological waves of interest over the last century. Regarded as an insignificant part of language learning in the grammar translation approach, the teaching of pronunciation “grew in prominence with the rise of the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, only to be pushed again to the sidelines with the ascendancy of Communicative Language Teaching ... and the Natural Approach” (Jones, 2005, p. 178). Although phonetics has drawn more attention within the context of second language (L2) acquisition since the late 1980s, shortcomings inhibiting the teaching and learning of L2 pronunciation are still apparent, particularly within the realm of German as a Foreign Language (GFL), where a lack of appropriate pronunciation training and training material is observable (Dieling & Hirschfeld, 2000).

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### 1 Introduction

The teaching of pronunciation in foreign language classes has experienced methodological waves of interest over the last century. Regarded as an insignificant part of language learning in the grammar translation approach, the teaching of pronunciation “grew in prominence with the rise of the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, only to be pushed again to the sidelines with the ascendancy of Communicative Language Teaching ... and the Natural Approach” (Jones, 2005, p. 178). Although phonetics has drawn more attention within the context of second language (L2) acquisition since the late 1980s, shortcomings inhibiting the teaching and learning of L2 pronunciation are still apparent, particularly within the realm of German as a Foreign Language (GFL), where a lack of appropriate pronunciation training and training material is observable (Dieling & Hirschfeld, 2000).

The current output-oriented approach to language learning as, for example, set forth by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) places a strong emphasis on oral skills, paving the way for a greater awareness of pronunciation training among scholars, textbook authors, and teachers. However, this focus on output has had rather varying effects on the way pronunciation training has been incorporated into recent GFL textbooks and courses.

In the following, I will first illustrate the methodological background of teaching pronunciation according to the current state of the art, which I will then contrast with the implementation of pronunciation training in two textbooks. Specifically, the analysis of a recent GFL textbook developed in Germany, *studio d A1* (Funk, Kuhn, & Demme, 2005), and the latest version of the Canadian-American *Treffpunkt Deutsch* (Widmaier, Widmaier, & Gonglewski, 2008) will be used to illustrate disparities between the state of the art in research and the development of teaching material with regard to pronunciation training.

Both textbooks provide pronunciation exercises, while using different approaches. Whereas *studio d A1* is not directed towards a specific L1 and integrates pronunciation exercises into sequences of oral activities, *Treffpunkt Deutsch* is geared towards English-speaking learners and presents pronunciation training in separate blocks, appearing in regular intervals. In the analysis, I will consider the specific profile and exercise design of both an L1 neutral and an L1 bound textbook in meeting the main requirements of pronunciation training. Subsequently, detailed areas will be pointed out in which both approaches could be improved in order to incorporate current research results.

### 2 State of the Art: Research in L2 Pronunciation and Implications for Pronunciation Training

It is a well-established fact that pronunciation requires specific attention during the language learning process, because it influences the acquisition of both productive and receptive skills in the target language (Dieling & Hirschfeld, 2000). Although the importance of pronunciation training is undeniable, research reveals a lack of consensus regarding the exact outcome of pronunciation training.

Pronunciation research and pedagogy have long been influenced by the discussion and pursuit of two opposing principles, the *nativeness principle* and the *intelligibility principle* (Levis, 2005). Although researchers no longer advocate the nativeness principle, which defines a native-like pronunciation as the desirable and achievable target, it nevertheless appears to influence the ideology of training in class and teaching material, striving for an elimination of the foreign accent (Levis, 2005).

The intelligibility principle, on the other hand, defines mutual understanding as the overall target, implying that different features of the foreign accent influence the intelligibility to different extents. Since intelligibility can be defined as “the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance” (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 385), this principle quantifies neither the amount of achieved understanding nor the invested effort on behalf of the listener. Additionally, the didactic application of this principle appears rather vague, stating that “instruction should focus on those features that are most helpful for understanding and should deemphasize those that are relatively unhelpful” (Levis, 2005, p. 370f.). However, the intelligibility principle provides a realizable learning target, which may also allow students to retain a noticeable L1 accent in order to maintain identification and loyalty towards their ethnic group. As Gatbonton, Trofimovich, and Magid (2005) emphasize, teachers should be tolerant towards accented speech and consider the impact of group-engendered forces in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation accuracy. It should be noted, however, that despite the intelligibility principle’s openness towards foreign accents, it must not be confused with a *laissez-faire* attitude pertaining to teaching pronunciation, but rather initiate the definition of concrete and reasoned learning objectives.

The gradual and logical selection and sequencing of phonetic components, therefore, is an asset for pronunciation training. Specifically, it appears important that not only segmentals (vowels and consonants) but also suprasegmentals (intonation, word accent, rhythm etc.) are included in pronunciation training. As Chun (2002) points out, suprasegmental elements of speech have an important impact on negotiating discourse meanings inside and outside the classroom. Hence, suprasegmental practice should be incorporated into the discourse activities in the classroom “in the earliest stages of language learning, [so that] students may not fossilize at level 2” (Chun, 1988, p. 87). Regarding the selection of segmental features, the recent functional load approach has been examined by Derwing and Munro (2006), who suggest sound errors with high functional load deserve priority over low functional load errors.

The L2 segmentals and suprasegmentals then have to be established as listening and articulation patterns, which the learners have flexibly at their command. The acquisition of these perceptive and motor sequences proceeds in successive phases from rough to exact auditory analysis and articulation, requiring memorization and automation (Meinel & Schnabel, 2004). As Gehrman (1999) points out, in order to avoid learning problems, the pronunciation training necessarily has to follow this sensomotor acquisition process by attuning exercise typologies to the articulatory acquisition phases. Dieling and Hirschfeld (2000) suggest such an exercise typology, which categorizes listening and articulation exercises according to the degree of difficulty and automation. Following this typology, the first step in pronunciation training is composed of introductory listening and articulation exercises, comprising the recognition, discrimination and imitation of the new sound. With increased articulatory quality, the level of difficulty and complexity is raised by replacing reproductive exercises with more productive and pragmatic contexts.

In contrast to the introductory training, pronunciation exercises at the advanced level are not constructed solely for phonetic purposes but provide a stronger focus on the content of the exercise. In this way, pronunciation training enables the learner to automatize the L2 pronunciation beyond the accuracy-focused "Listen and Repeat" context in which it was initially introduced (Bygate, 2005). This methodologically principled approach can be achieved, for example, by integrating phonetic material into sequences of oral activities that also focus on other aspects of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary. Such an approach not only increases the efficiency of the learning process considerably, but also offers the important opportunity to present material in holistic and communicative contexts.

Thus, the first criterion of the following textbook analysis refers to exercise design and arrangement, investigating how the two textbooks attempt to go beyond the drill of isolated sound patterns. The second criterion then considers the quality of selection and sequencing of the phonetic learning material with regard to the needs of potential learning groups.

### 3 Analysis of Exercise Design and Arrangement

#### 3.1 Textbook *studio d A1*

Analyzing the L1 neutral textbook *studio d A1*, the effort employed to connect pronunciation training with the lexical and grammatical material becomes obvious, revealing a strong focus on communicative contexts. The interrogative sentence stress and melody, for example, are practised with structures such as "Waren Sie schon mal in Italien?" (Funk, Kuhn, & Demme, 2005, p. 46), reflecting the thematic and pragmatic context of the textbook unit about "Städte-Länder-Sprachen". Moreover, most pronunciation exercises use everyday vocabulary, which allows for meaningful practice.

In spite of noticeable positive aspects, however, almost half of the exercises in this textbook are of a similar reproductive pattern, asking the student to listen to and repeat the material. Most of the other phonetic exercises combine reproductive and productive components by adding cognitive elements such as marking, completing or comparing. In contrast to the textbook, the handbook for teachers (Bettermann & Werner, 2005) calls explicitly for changing suprasegmental features and including gestures, body movements, and games, in order to increase the students' motivation by practising pronunciation in more complex and realistic situations.

Yet, these suggestions could be better incorporated into the textbook itself in order to facilitate their employment in class. Hence, *studio d A1* does not exploit its potential in terms of creative and varying exercises, although it establishes an advantageous basis by combining the practice of different aspects of language learning.

#### 3.2 Textbook *Treffpunkt Deutsch*

*Treffpunkt Deutsch*, which is geared towards English-speaking learners of German, approaches pronunciation training in a partly different fashion. Each *Aussprache* section is isolated from the rest of the unit and follows a similar pattern, consisting of an explanatory introduction to the sound using contrastive comparisons between English and German or general articulatory descriptions. The explanations are followed by a collection of single words or short sentences, exercising the particular sound.

The strict adherence to the exercise schema reveals hardly any traces of variation. The absence of a thematic connection to the context of the concerned textbook unit increases this impression. The pronunciation training of the section "Wohnen" and "Kultur", for example, practises the *sp* and *st* sounds with sentences such as "Hast du Lust auf eine Wurst und auf Most für deinen Durst?" (Widmaier, Widmaier, & Gonglewski, 2008, p. 297). The content of the pronunciation exercises is constructed specifically for training purposes, offering little opportunity to incorporate pronunciation training into vocabulary and grammar learning. Moreover, the exercises are also restricted to the pattern of "Listen and Repeat" with little methodological variation.

Unlike *studio d A1*, however, *Treffpunkt Deutsch* offers descriptions of how to articulate a certain sound, thereby raising awareness about specific sound differences. In the case of sounds, which are unknown to monolingual speakers of English, *Treffpunkt Deutsch* employs imitable explanations. Teachers, however, should employ the German-English comparisons carefully and draw on the multilingual background of Canadian classrooms, which allows for awareness raising comparisons beyond the German and English language.

### 4 Analysis of Selection and Sequencing of Training Material

#### 4.1 Textbook *studio d A1*

Regarding sequencing guidelines, *studio d A1* bases productive tasks on receptive ones, and increases the level of difficulty systematically. A successful example of such a sequence is the training of the [f] vs. [v] opposition (Funk, Kuhn, & Demme, 2005, p. 100). First, the two sounds are introduced by a discriminative listening exercise, training receptive skills. Subsequently, the textbook offers a first productive attempt at pronunciation. Here, a text, which was the subject of previous exercises, is to be read carefully with regard to the sound opposition. Finally, the phoneme-grapheme-relations of the two sounds and the letters *f*, *v*, and *w* are practised, using a contrastive table to be completed with examples the learners have to find themselves. As the

pronunciation exercises generally use word and sentence examples that are often included in further tasks and exercises, the learner practises the new articulation mode in pragmatic contexts, supporting automation.

Regarding the selection of phonetic material, *studio d A1* starts at the suprasegmental level, covering intonation and accentuation rules. Each unit then provides a different focus on the segmental level organised according to sound classes with mainly high functional load. Therefore, the textbook exhibits a systematic and extensive progression, covering both typical sound and intonation problems for learners of German, which could inhibit intelligibility.

Consequently, both selection and sequence in *studio d A1* appear systematic and elaborate by introducing the learner successively to the stumbling blocks of the German pronunciation system. As an L1 neutral textbook, however, it forgoes the opportunity to encourage learners to use their existing language knowledge and skills pertaining to sounds and pronunciation in languages other than German. Such an opportunity might lead students to play with contrastive sounds and to reflect on German pronunciation, which is likely to facilitate its acquisition.

#### **4.2 Textbook Treffpunkt Deutsch**

*Treffpunkt Deutsch* is geared towards English speaking environments, and bases its selection and sequencing on a contrastive comparison of the English and German pronunciation system.

Regarding the selection, the textbook trains a range of monophthongs and diphthongs, as well as selected consonants, chosen according to the contrasts between German and English with high functional load (Rug, 2005). Each sound is considered within one or two exercises consisting of either a list of words or short sentences. The [f]-[v] opposition, for example, is only practised with the following eight word pairs: "Vetter – Wetter, vier – wir, viel – will, voll – Wolle, Farm – warm, fein – Wein, Fest – West, Felder – Wälder" (Widmaier, Widmaier, & Gonglewski, 2008, p. 363). This amount of exercise is not sufficient, since it neither follows the gradual progression of articulation training outlined above, nor does it prepare learners for mastering communicative situations. Hence, the exercises are unlikely to enhance the quality of the students' sound production (Gehrmann, 1999; Fiukowski, 2004). Since the textbook also fails to focus on suprasegmental differences, this approach requires the teacher to provide extra material and develop communicative contexts to complement the textbook exercises.

As a result, although *Treffpunkt Deutsch* provides a reasonable selection of segmental learning material, the need to practise suprasegmentals remains unaddressed. The sequence of exercises also needs to be extended to include more complex and pragmatic listening and articulation tasks, which can be achieved by stronger integration into the thematic frame of the concerned unit, for instance. Only then will the learner be adequately prepared for employing an intelligible pronunciation in a fluent and automated fashion.

### **5 Future Directions for Pronunciation Training in Textbooks and Class**

In summary, while pronunciation training in both textbooks is largely based on monotonous imitation exercises, *studio d A1* compensates by embedding pronunciation exercises within communicative contexts and connecting them with cognitive tasks as well as grammatical and lexical learning material. In this way, the students' focus shifts from articulation to more complex learning aims, supporting automation. *Treffpunkt Deutsch* could improve its exercise design in this respect by placing more emphasis on pronunciation throughout the textbook and by extending the scope of sequences. Nevertheless, it does offer a helpful approach to the imitation of new sounds by means of intuitive explanations, which are absent in *studio d A1*.

Pronunciation training in textbooks should reveal a solid design, selection and sequencing of phonetic exercises. The analysis of the two textbooks has revealed some strengths but also some serious shortcomings in that respect. It is left to instructors to deal with such issues by providing additional material and exercises. One possible approach to enriching exercise sequences and design is, for example, to raise the learners' awareness towards phonetic differences between their first language, other acquired languages and German. The Canadian multilingual context is particularly well-suited to take existing language knowledge, skills and learning experience into account.

As summarized in Table 1 below, the extension of the "Listen and Repeat" pattern in pronunciation training in textbooks and class is largely connected with creative, communicative and learner-oriented exercise design. In this vein, training sequences should be extended in scope by means of integration into other learning material, as well as by reflecting on existing pronunciation skills and learning strategies. Specifically, raising the learners' awareness regarding pronunciation may help not only to emphasize the importance of intelligible speech but also to focus on specific training methods and pronunciation difficulties. Textbooks need to develop awareness of the importance of suprasegmental elements of speech by providing sufficient training from the start of the learning process.

*Table 1*

Checklist for the Employment of Pronunciation Training in Class with Sample Exercises



1. For reasons of space, other North American textbooks which are commonly used at Canadian universities cannot be considered in this article. However, textbooks such as *Deutsch: Na klar!* (Di Donato, Clyde, & Vansant, 2008), *Fokus Deutsch* (Delia et al., 2000), *Kaleidoskop* (Moeller, Adolph, Mabee, & Berger, 2007), *Kontakte* (Terrell, Tschirner, & Nikolai, 2004), *Vorsprung* (Lovik, Guy, & Chavez, 2007), and *Wie geht's?* (Sevin & Sevin, 2003) have less pronunciation training than *Treffpunkt Deutsch* or none at all.

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