Study Circles to Improve Adult ESL Teachers’ Pronunciation Expertise

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Turn and Talk

How do you address learner pronunciation issues in your context?
Background/previous research

• The gap in teacher knowledge/lack of preparation and training (Baker, 2014; Crandall et al, 2008)

• Meeting the demands of today’s world (Parrish, 2015; Yates, 2011; Zielinski, 2012)

• Benefits of pronunciation instruction (Thompson & Derwing, 2015)

• Choice of study circle for our professional development model (Smith, 2010)
Research questions

RQ1: How does a study-circle model affect adult ESL teacher knowledge regarding pronunciation issues within their teaching context?

RQ2: How do teachers’ perceptions of and practices for teaching pronunciation in their adult ESL classrooms evolve through participating in the study circle?
Participants

- 12 Adult ESL practitioners (11 teachers, one volunteer coordinator)
- Varying teaching backgrounds
- Varying contexts: Large urban ABE and small community-based programs
- Learners with over 15 different language backgrounds, a variety of proficiency levels, and varying levels of prior schooling
Study circle components and process

• 3 face-to-face meetings
  • Speech sample analysis
  • Setting priorities
  • Building meta-language
  • Activities workshop

• Readings on research with guiding questions

• Outside tasks
  • Peer observations
  • Classroom applications
Data collection/data analysis

- Pre- and post- surveys
- Three sets of language analysis logs
- Delayed focus group
Key Findings

• A shift away from a focus on segmentals to including surprasegmentals/other phonological phenomena
• Focus on intelligibility and prioritizing pronunciation needs
• Building learner awareness of pronunciation breakdowns
• Integrating pronunciation routines in their classes
• Impact of research on beliefs, attitudes and practices
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note examples of pronunciation issues. If you know the IPA, use that. If not, note what the learner language ‘sounds like.’ Use whatever convention you like to indicate misplaced stress or intonation in words and sentences. Just make it clear through bolding, ALL CAPS, underlining, arrows, etc.</th>
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| **Example:**  
Learner says - MinnesOTAH  
- say  
- ( )  
- help-y  
- meet-y. | **Example:**  
Learner is stressing wrong part of word.  
- dropping the final consonant  
- dropped the article "a"  
- adding a syllable at end of word  
- switches ‘i’ for ‘ee’ |

Note examples of pronunciation issues. If you know the IPA, use that. If not, note what the learner language ‘sounds like.’ Use whatever convention you like to indicate misplaced stress or intonation in words and sentences. Just make it clear through bolding, ALL CAPS, underlining, arrows, etc.

Example:  
Learner says - MinnesOTAH  
00:00 - 00:07 3 sentences
- 00:13 youguum (+)  
- 00:19 help-a-mew  
- 00:27 - 00:30 They didn’t understand... understand me.
- 00:45 Google, I am finding  
- 00:43 the Google. 00:46 I say I need... I am confused what they understand.

Note how you would classify this (or describe this) pronunciation issue. Use terms with which you are comfortable.

Example:  
Learner is stressing wrong part of word.  
- 00:14 sentences spoken in one long, rapid thought group  
- student drops final sound  
- student adds syllable  
- one thought group w/ contradictory information  
- low pronounced as /ow/  
- one continues, thought group, no pauses between sentences
Surprasegmentals/other phonological phenomena

Focus on the stuff that’s going to give them the most bang for their buck. Not so much the th or the minimal pairs.

So it would be focus on those kinds of things [suprasegmentals] rather than focusing on getting rid of the accent or the -ths. See I was a big -th person.
Focus on intelligibility and prioritizing pronunciation needs

Everyone’s going to have an accent... what really matters is intelligibility...

Recognize the *majority problem area*. So finding out what is the area that the majority of my students have a problem with and that will help as many students as possible.
Building learner awareness of pronunciation breakdowns

They’re becoming aware. It’s crazy. They’re aware. They’ll recognize it now. I’ll say did you say no? Or nose? Oh, yeah. Oh, nose. Just that piece of it is a huge change that regularly now they’ll realize that now they’re not saying that last sound.

I think because we spent so much time on the awareness and the activities that they really got it. They knew they couldn’t understand their friend, but they didn’t know why.
Integrating pronunciation routines in their classes

Survey: Gains shown in items related to instructional practices.

Focus Group quotes:

*Word stress is becoming a routine.*

*I have scheduled in about 15 minutes everyday where I do something with pronunciation*

*...in addition to the vocabulary words, learning what they mean, organizing the words by word stress and practicing pronouncing the words correctly*
Impact of research on beliefs, attitudes and practices

Survey: Gains shown in items related to politics of accent, pronunciation instruction advocacy.

I was in [their] presentation before [and] I brought up this fossilization business. After now reading Myths, I am so embarrassed about that. I was throwing that myth out there. Live and learn.

For me it’s just the confidence that I have when I talk about this. Because just to have some knowledge behind why we would do a certain thing...actually having some of where is this coming from, it gives me confidence, to push it.
Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Repeat the study circle
- Use more common speech samples
- Record same learner throughout

Gather additional data
- Seek permissions from learners and analyze samples
- Record group discussions

Pronunciation Study Circle, Part 2
Post-study circle outcomes

• Participant as co-facilitator for next offering

• Professional Panel

  ...teaching it intentionally...that is a shift in my understanding

  [My takeaway was] myths and having a whole different way of looking at this

  ...it’s had a huge impact

• Emails

  I found the study circle extremely useful as a teacher. It transformed my teaching – completely. With ease I use word stress and other pronunciation skills in lessons all week.
I was in line at Dairy Queen the other night and asked for a banana malt. The kid behind the screen asked me if I had said banana or vanilla? I immediately thought about a number of things, was it the b and the v? Was it because they are both voiced or was that unvoiced? Was it the identical stress pattern, o0o? Is this what my students experience? Then I realized - I CAN’T TURN THIS OFF!!! Thank you so much for letting me participate; I’m a better teacher because of it. - Jake
Sounds Great, Now What?

Free Facilitator Guide online at atlasabe.org

• Guide includes:
  • Detailed facilitator notes
  • Boilerplate language for communication with participants
  • Appendix containing all handouts
  • List of materials

• Online videos demonstrating pronunciation activities
Language & Literacy Institute

This event is a two-day intensive training for ESL and ABE instructors and administrators from across the state. The next Institute will take place in January 2018.

This conference replaced the former ESL Institute, bringing together ESL and basic skills/GED practitioners to collaborate with and learn from one another. With the advent of CCRS (the College & Career Readiness Standards), a new emphasis on academic language, and continued attention to transitions skills across all levels, the Language & Literacy Institute provides one way to address the persistent professional divide in our field between ESL and ABE, and to leverage the many assets adult educators bring to our work.
Pronunciation Instruction Videos

MN ABE Professional Development Youtube Channel: Pronunciation Instruction
Wrap-Up Discussion

1. How could you use the study circle format in your professional context?

2. In what ways can you imagine using the resources available to support and grow your teaching practice?
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References


