

Huensch, A. (2018). Examining foreign language instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction. In J. Levis (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 9th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, University of Utah, September, 2017 (pp. 100-110). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

EXAMINING FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' DEFINITIONS OF PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION

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As part of a larger investigation exploring the training, beliefs, and practices of foreign language teachers (i.e., teachers of languages other than English), the current study examined how instructors defined pronunciation instruction and their reports of how their textbooks approached pronunciation instruction. Participants included 296 beginning-level foreign language instructors of French, German, and Spanish from large (over 15,000), public universities in the US who completed an online survey via Qualtrics. Results indicated that the most common themes from instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction (i.e., focusing on sounds and using listen and repeat activities) were the same as those reported in how their textbooks approached pronunciation. In addition, results indicated that fewer instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction included a mention of potential learning outcomes, and those that did comment on learning outcomes more often mentioned a goal of native-like pronunciation compared to goals of intelligible/comprehensible speech. Findings highlight the potentially influential role materials have in shaping instructors' conceptualization of pronunciation instruction and provide direct implications for materials developers to integrate pronunciation foci targeting intelligible communication as a goal.

INTRODUCTION

An important area of pronunciation research is that which explores the classroom practices and teaching beliefs of language instructors. This research is important because it illuminates what is occurring in language classrooms and can both provide (1) an understanding of how well research findings are making their way into language classrooms and (2) guidance for the creation and modification teacher training opportunities and teaching materials. While a relatively substantial body of literature exists investigating instructors in ESL/EFL contexts (e.g., Breikreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Buss, 2016; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2016; Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2013; Tergujeff, 2012), fewer studies (e.g., Delicado Cantero & Steed, 2015; Huensch, 2018) have investigated foreign language (FL) contexts, or those in which a language other than English is taught. But with millions of students enrolled in FL classes in the US and research suggesting that these learners think it is important to improve their pronunciation (Huensch & Thompson, 2017), instructors' beliefs and practices in these contexts should be better understood.

Several previous investigations of instructors' beliefs and classroom practices related to pronunciation have collected data using a survey first introduced in Breikreutz et al. (2001). These include Breikreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001 and Foote et al. (2011) in the Canadian ESL context, Buss (2016) in the Brazilian EFL context, and Huensch (2018) in the US FL context. These investigations focused on the amount and type of pronunciation instruction being delivered in language classes; instructors' prior training in pronunciation teaching (and language teaching in general); and instructors' beliefs related to the goals and importance of teaching pronunciation. Results for ESL/EFL and FL contexts have indicated that pronunciation does not

represent a major focus of language courses, which has been corroborated by classroom observation research in an ESL context (Foote et al., 2016). When asked to identify the most serious pronunciation problems faced by students, ESL instructors indicated a mix of both segmental and suprasegmental features whereas EFL and FL instructors tended to provide more mentions of segmental features. Regarding training, results from Foote et al. (2011) and Buss (2016) for ESL/EFL contexts additionally indicated that only about one third of instructors reported having taken a course focused specifically on L2 pronunciation teaching, but that most (e.g., over 90%) had formal TEFL/TESL training. In comparison, in the FL context, while similar to ESL/EFL contexts a minority of instructors indicated having taken a course focused specifically on L2 pronunciation teaching (13%), a striking difference was found regarding formal FL training such that 50% reported no formal FL teaching certification. Huensch attempted to explain these findings by pointing out that instructors of introductory-level FL courses typically have less teaching experience (two thirds of instructors in her study were graduate teaching assistants).

The fact that instructors in FL contexts are more likely to be novice teachers heavily reliant on teaching materials provided to them such as their course textbooks, understanding the place of pronunciation in those textbooks becomes a question of central concern. Previous research exploring how pronunciation is incorporated in introductory FL textbooks has been conducted with both Spanish (Arteaga, 2000) and German (Pittman, 2015) textbooks. Both studies indicated that pronunciation was not well-represented. For example, Pittman reported that five of the top ten most used German textbooks included no mention of pronunciation. Arteaga reported similar results for 10 introductory Spanish textbooks, and additionally reported that even when pronunciation was included, its presentation often lacked sufficient recycling, included inaccurate or confusing explanations, and did not assist students in developing self-monitoring capabilities. Missing from these textbook investigations, however, is information from instructors about their implementation and reception, which might be potentially enlightening given the lack of training of many instructors in these contexts. Therefore, the current study reports on FL instructors' textbook use and their understanding of how pronunciation instruction is presented.

A final focus of previous research investigating instructors' beliefs and classroom practices has been related to instructors' reported beliefs about the importance of teaching pronunciation and what the goals for learning should be. All of the studies that have used the Breitzkreutz survey, regardless of whether in an ESL/EFL or FL context, indicated that a majority of instructors think it is important to teach pronunciation (Breitzkreutz et al., 2001; Buss, 2016; Foote et al., 2011; Huensch, 2018). Regarding goals for instruction, of potential interest is whether goals are related to nativeness or intelligibility principles (Levis, 2005)—the former emphasizing native-like pronunciation and the latter focusing on being understood despite the presence of a foreign accent. In recent years, researchers have argued for a prioritization of intelligibility and comprehensibility (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 9-10) and a question has been whether this prioritization is also present in language classrooms. In terms of the FL context specifically, Huensch demonstrated that while instructors strongly agreed that the goal of pronunciation teaching should be to increase learners' intelligibility, they did not as strongly disagree that accent reduction should not be a goal. In addition, when discussing assessment practices instructors indicated that pronunciation was not included because the course focused on communicative skills. The author argued that findings indicated that some instructors conceptualized of pronunciation instruction from a nativeness paradigm, perhaps viewing

pronunciation instruction as synonymous with accent reduction. Because of this definition, they thus regarded pronunciation teaching as incompatible with communicative course goals. In order to shed light on this question, the current study directly investigated how FL instructors define and conceptualize pronunciation instruction.

Based on the findings from previous research, the current study investigated two specific areas related to the beliefs and practices regarding pronunciation of beginning-level instructors of French, German, and Spanish from US universities. Instructors from this context were chosen both because explorations of foreign languages (as opposed to ESL/EFL) are underrepresented in the field (Thomson & Derwing, 2015) and because this population teaches millions of language learners in the US. The first goal of the study was to better understand how instructors define and conceptualize of pronunciation instruction. The second goal was to explore instructors' perceptions of how pronunciation instruction is approached in the textbooks they use. Following are the research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are the most frequent themes that emerge in beginning-level French, German, and Spanish instructors' definitions of the term 'pronunciation instruction'?
2. What are the most frequent themes that emerge when beginning-level French, German, and Spanish instructors describe the approach to pronunciation instruction taken by their textbooks?

METHODS

Participants

Instructors teaching basic language courses (the first four semesters) in French, German, and Spanish from 27 large (over 15,000 students), public universities in the US were identified via web searches and recruited via email to participate. Data in the current study come from the same set of participants as in Huensch (2018) and included 296 instructors: French ($n = 89$), German ($n = 80$), and Spanish ($n = 127$). While participants had a range of teaching experience and qualifications, a majority were graduate teaching assistants ($n = 197$) who were teaching first or second semester classes ($n = 187$). Participants received a \$10 Amazon gift card for completing the survey.

Materials and Procedure

The online survey was adapted from the instrument used in Foote et al. (2011) and included 81-103 questions (depending upon whether additional questions were triggered as follow-ups), took approximately 30 minutes to complete, and was delivered via Qualtrics. Response types included multiple-choice, open-ended responses, and Likert-scale ratings. The complete survey is available on IRIS.

Data Analysis

Data in the current study come from multiple-choice (e.g., "Do you use pronunciation activities regularly or sporadically?") and open-ended response (e.g., "What should your textbook do differently, if anything, to improve its approach to teaching pronunciation?") questions. Responses from the multiple-choice questions are reported as percentages, separated by language

group (French, German, and Spanish) to allow for comparison but also reported as a total percentage for the entire 296 instructors. Percentages are used because the sample size in each language group was not the same. In analyzing the open-ended responses, the author and a research assistant each coded all of the data based on a rubric developed by the author which was compiled based on emergent themes. These codings were compared and any instances of disagreement were discussed and resolved. The coded responses were then tallied for frequency to determine the most common themes among the instructors' responses; themes that were reported by greater than 10% of the instructors were included in the current analysis. Representative quotations from the open-ended responses were then selected and are reported to illustrate the themes.

RESULTS

Research question one explored how instructors of beginning-level language courses defined pronunciation instruction. The first prompt given to participants when completing the online survey was the following: "Please take a moment to think about what the phrase 'pronunciation instruction' means to you in the context of foreign language teaching. In the space below, please briefly explain how you define pronunciation instruction and provide a few examples that come to mind." Emergent themes from the responses were related to three broad themes: (a) course content (i.e., what is being taught such as segmentals/sounds, sound-spelling correspondences), (b) instructional techniques (i.e., how the course content is being taught such as using corrective feedback, listen and repeat), and/or (c) learning outcomes (i.e., what outcomes would be desirable such as increased intelligibility, improved listening skills). Across all three categories and languages, the most frequently mentioned element was a course content theme: 64% of the definitions (64% French, 64% German, 65% Spanish) made reference to the teaching/learning of sounds/segments/consonants and vowels. The second most frequently mentioned element was an instructional technique: 33% of the definitions (43% French, 40% German, 21% Spanish) mentioned using a listen and repeat technique. Figures 1, 2, and 3 indicate the themes that 10% or more of the instructors mentions separated by language group.

Figure 1 summarizes the results for the themes related to course content and demonstrates that after sounds and words, the most frequently mentioned items were related to making cross-linguistic comparisons and teaching about sound-spelling correspondences.

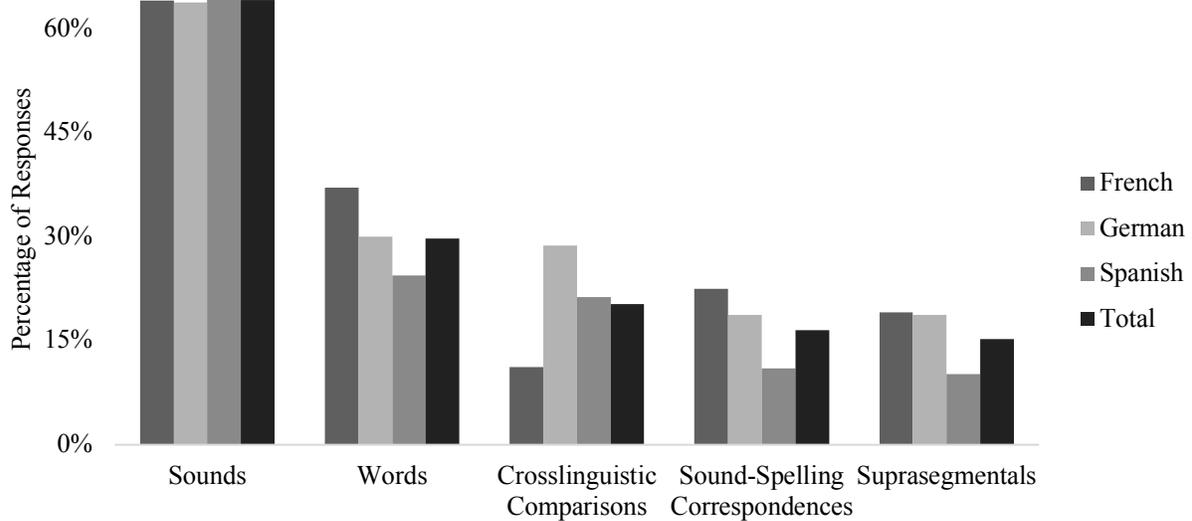


Figure 1. Course content mentioned in instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction.

In definitions (1) and (2) from French instructors, for example, mentions of the 'phonetic system' and of 'particular sounds' were coded as *sounds*. An example of a statement coded as cross-linguistic comparison can be seen in definition (2) where the instructor mentions 'making parallels with similar sounds in the student's native language'. Results were relatively similar across the language groups, except perhaps that the French instructors were less likely to mention cross-linguistic comparisons. For all the groups, suprasegmentals were the least often mentioned.

(1) French instructor

*Pronunciation instruction is helping students to understand **the phonetic system of a language** [sound] or the **pronunciation of a specific word** [word]. Sometimes I have my students **repeat words after me** [listen and repeat] as a group or individually. Other times we have discussed the unique vowels that French has and **how to both pronounce and recognize them** [listening discrimination].*

(2) French instructor

*Giving clear example of how to pronounce **particular sounds** [sound], making parallels with similar sounds **in the student's native language** [cross-linguistic comparison], **providing constant feedback** [corrective feedback]*

Figure 2 summarizes the results for the instructional techniques focus and demonstrates that the most common mentions after 'listen and repeat' were using corrective feedback, providing an articulatory description of a sound, and acting as a model in the classroom.

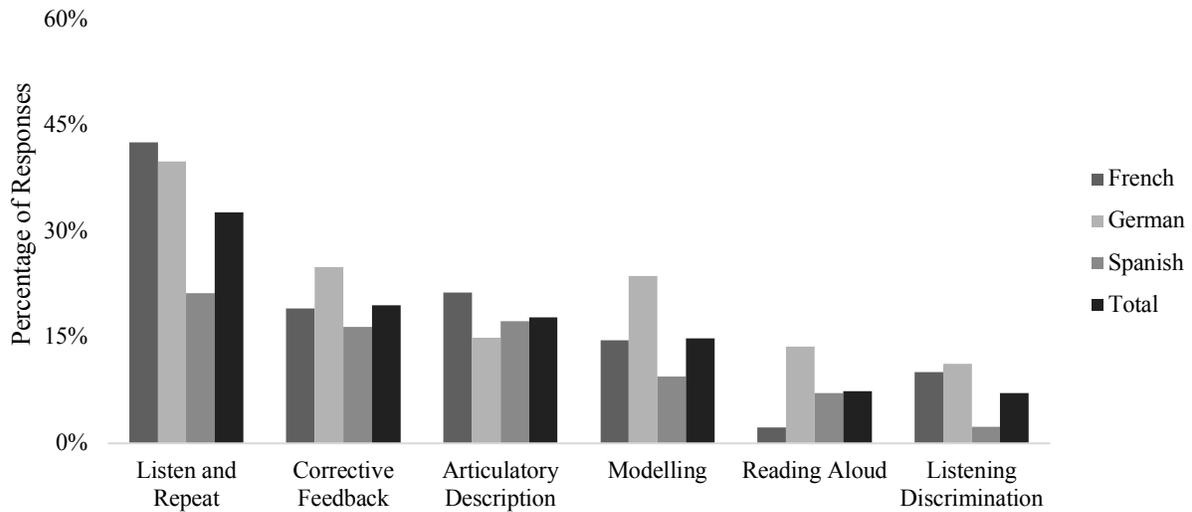


Figure 2. Instructional practices mentioned in instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction.

Definitions (2) and (3) provide examples that were coded as corrective feedback with their mentions of 'providing constant feedback' and 'correcting students' pronunciation'. Definition (3) includes mentions of modelling, listen and repeat, and articulatory description.

(3) German instructor

*Pronunciation instruction means teaching students to pronounce a foreign language so that their pronunciation at least **does not impede comprehension** [intelligible] and **ideally is that of a native speaker** [native-like pronunciation]. Pronunciation instruction includes, for example, **modelling native pronunciation** [modelling], **correcting students' pronunciation** [corrective feedback] (e.g. during reading [reading aloud] or communication exercises), and also specific targeted exercises, such as tongue twisters and word pairs/groups to practice pronunciation.*

Figure 3 summarizes the results for the learning outcomes focus and demonstrates that learning outcomes were mentioned overall less than course content and instructional techniques. Approximately 20% of responses mentioned of 'correct'/native-like pronunciation, as shown in definitions (3) and (4) whereas approximately 10% of responses mentioned intelligible/comprehensible pronunciation, as shown in definitions (3) and (5).

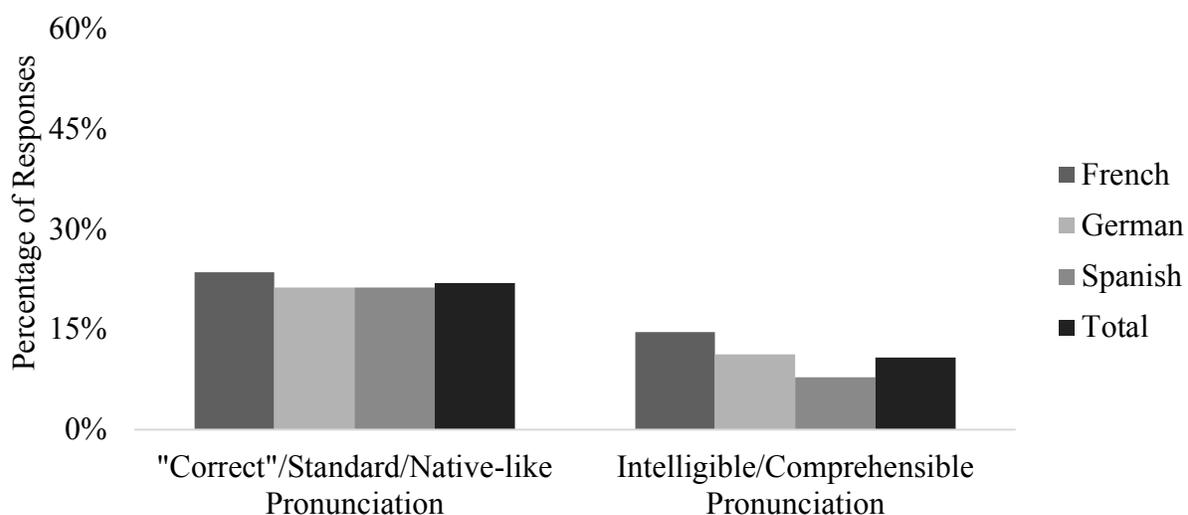


Figure 3. Learning outcomes mentioned in instructors' definitions of pronunciation instruction.

(4) Spanish instructor

*Training a secondary language learner to speak and **enunciate words** [words] **as closely as possible to a native speaker** [native-like pronunciation]. -**Explicit correction** via correct pronunciation [corrective feedback]. -**Rephrasing into correct pronunciation**. -**Exposure/induction by listening to authentic audio** in the target language [modelling].*

(5) Spanish instructor

*Pronunciation Instruction makes me think of how we teach the production of the **sounds** [sound] of a language with input and other goal-oriented methods so the speaker is **comprehensible** [comprehensible] and fluent in a language.*

Research question two explored how instructors characterized their textbooks' approaches to pronunciation instruction. Instructors were first asked whether they used any of the pronunciation activities from their textbook. Twenty-eight percent (22% French, 28% German, 32% Spanish) reported that their textbooks did not include pronunciation activities. Forty-three percent (54% French, 49% German, 32% Spanish) reported using pronunciation activities. The 128 instructors who reported using the activities were then asked whether they use the activities regularly or sporadically, and an open-ended question about the approach to pronunciation teaching taken by the textbook. Forty-two percent (56% French, 36% German, 32% Spanish) reported using the pronunciation activities regularly. Regarding instructors' characterization of their textbook's approach to pronunciation instruction, the 125 instructor comments showed similarities to the definitions of pronunciation (see the Appendix for the complete data table). For example, similar to the definitions, mentioning a focus on sounds was the most frequent theme (44%; 51% French, 44% German, 36% Spanish) and the technique of listen and repeat was the second most common (26%; 27% French, 31% German, 21% Spanish). The next most common mentions were related to the content or delivery of the textbook with 20% (16% French, 21% German, 24% Spanish) mentioning the inclusion of audio/video recordings and 18% (13% French, 5% German, 33% Spanish) identifying the homework/practice as being online. However, in the case of the latter, the result appears to be driven by the Spanish instructor responses. A

theme that emerged that was not present in the pronunciation instruction definitions was that 10% (11% French, 8% German, 12% Spanish) indicated that the textbook connected pronunciation with vocabulary learning, as in comment (6).

(6) Spanish instructor

*Charts with explanations of the **sounds** [sound] and letters of some words specially difficult for **English native speakers** [cross-linguistic comparison]. Also it encourages us to pronounce carefully and focused on pronunciation the **vocabulary section** [vocab] through **repetitions and make students repeat** [listen and repeat]*

Another theme included highlighting the short or incidental nature of the textbook's approach as in comment (7).

(7) French instructor

It tries to teach it as a "by the way" phenomenon. "Just for your information"

There were very few mentions related to learning outcomes and none of them reached 10%. Comments (8) and (9), however, both reference communicative language teaching, but comment (8) explains that pronunciation is not incorporated because the class uses a communicative method while comment (9) explains how pronunciation is incorporated communicatively.

(8) Spanish instructor

it is a communicative method, so I think the emphasis is not on the pronunciation, however, I use repetition when my students cannot say a word accurately.

(9) French instructor

CLT; pronunciation is incorporated into activities surrounding a film that the students watch throughout the semester. They are asked to describe their reactions to the film, and each section focuses on particular phonetic pronunciation in French. Their responses and vocabulary surrounding their responses emphasize these pronunciation lessons.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question explored FL instructors' conceptualization of pronunciation instruction via definitions and examples they provided of the concept. Results indicated that a majority of responses included mentions of focusing on sounds as course content and using an instructional technique of listen and repeat. The finding that sounds were more often mentioned than suprasegmental features corroborates previous work in EFL/FL contexts (Buss, 2016; Huensch, 2018) in which instructors more often indicated that difficult problems for students were segmental rather than suprasegmental. Of interest in the current study was how, if at all, instructors discussed course goals from either nativeness or intelligibility principles. Fewer instructors overall indicated learning outcomes in their definitions as compared to course content or instructional practices. When they did, they more often referred to a focus on 'correct' or native-like pronunciation (22%) than intelligible/comprehensible pronunciation (11%). While this result speaks to how instructors conceptualize of pronunciation instruction, it does not necessarily represent their personal teaching beliefs. In other words, it is possible that they believe course goals should be communicative and that pronunciation instruction as a practice entails a goal of native-like pronunciation. This perhaps explains statements such as (8) in which

the instructor explains a lack of pronunciation focus by indicating that their course adopts a communicative method. Thus, a first step in providing better pronunciation instruction training for instructors should include a discussion of the role pronunciation plays in intelligible communication and practical ideas for integrating pronunciation instruction into activities with a communicative focus.

The second research question investigated how textbook approaches to pronunciation are characterized by instructors. Instructors' comments about their textbooks echoed the findings of previous research that directly examined pronunciation foci in textbooks (Arteaga, 2000; Pittman, 2015). Results also indicated that there was a parallel in the findings from research questions one and two in that the most commonly mentioned themes were a focus on sounds and the use of a listen and repeat instructional technique. One possible explanation for this finding could be connected to the fact that instructors of beginning-level FL courses are more often novice teachers with little training or background language teaching, generally, and pronunciation teaching, specifically. Thus, their conceptualization of pronunciation instruction may well be influenced by how teaching materials approach the topic. These findings also speak to the need for better pronunciation instruction training for foreign language teachers, which includes developing skills for evaluating instructional materials and practice in supplementing those materials.

While this study has provided some insights into pronunciation instruction in beginning-level FL classes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as data were gathered via an online questionnaire, the findings might not necessarily be representative of teachers' actual practices and they might not accurately reflect the textbook content. The use of additional data collection methods such as classroom observations and updated investigations of textbooks would be beneficial. In addition, the study was limited to beginning-level classes (i.e., those at the first four semesters of instruction). Given that it is typical for FL degrees to offer a phonetics class as an upper-level required course or elective, understanding the goals and materials used in these courses would also be beneficial. Despite these limitations, this study has provided a better understanding of an understudied population: foreign language instructors of beginning-level language courses. This study also provides directions for future work. An important next step is designing and testing teacher training materials to help instructors integrate pronunciation foci targeting intelligible communication as a goal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was funded by a University of South Florida New Research Grant. I am grateful to Jennifer Foote, Amy Holtby, and Tracey Derwing, who allowed me access to their survey to adapt it for the current project. I would also like to thank the participants and my research assistant, Aneesa Ali.

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APPENDIX

Emergent Themes from Survey Question about Textbook Approach to Pronunciation Instruction

Category	French	German	Spanish	Total
Sounds	51%	44%	36%	44%
Listen and repeat	27%	31%	21%	26%
Audio/video recordings	16%	21%	24%	20%
Online implementation	13%	5%	33%	18%
Words	11%	18%	14%	14%
Vocabulary connection	11%	8%	12%	10%
Incidentally approached	16%	3%	10%	10%
Recording of student voices	9%	5%	14%	10%
Rule-learning	11%	8%	7%	9%
Cross-linguistic comparisons	7%	3%	12%	7%