The Pronunciation Teaching Practices of University-Level Graduate Teaching Assistants of

French and Spanish Introductory Language Courses

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Abstract

This study combined evidence from survey, interview, and classroom observation data to better understand the amount and type of pronunciation instruction and corrective feedback practices in French and Spanish introductory language courses (i.e., the first four semesters) at the university-level in the United States. Data consisted of responses (n=142) to a national survey and audio-recorded interviews (6 hours) and classroom observations (22 hours) of seven graduate teaching assistants of French or Spanish from two different large (i.e., more than 15,000 students), public universities. Survey results indicated that TAs believe that when correcting pronunciation, mistakes that impede comprehension or change meaning should be prioritized. Classroom observations demonstrated that, on average, 2% of instructor talk was pronunciation-focused, with a majority of pronunciation episodes categorized as corrective feedback in the form of recasts. In addition, only one instance of pre-planned pronunciation teaching occurred in the data. The findings suggest that current pronunciation teaching practices in this context are rare and largely reactive.

Keywords: French, Spanish, phonetics/phonology/pronunciation, beliefs and philosophy

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Introduction

It is generally understood that improved pronunciation plays an important role in learner progress toward higher levels of proficiency.[1] In addition to studies providing evidence of the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction for improving the comprehensibility of ESL learners (e.g., Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Gordon & Darcy, 2016), recent empirical work has also demonstrated that teaching aspects of prosody can benefit the learning of a grammatical structure (Martin & Jackson, 2016). Pronunciation has also been linked to understanding connected speech, recognizing and processing language when reading, and spelling accurately when writing (for an overview, see Darcy, 2018). Pronunciation is thus closely related to other aspects of language and the benefits of pronunciation instruction reach beyond improving pronunciation itself.

However, despite the many potential advantages of focusing on pronunciation, reports from surveys of instructors demonstrate that only a small proportion of instructional time is devoted to developing it (Buss, 2016; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Huensch, 2018) and that instructors report a lack of, and desire for, training in ways to teach it (Huensch, 2018; Murphy, 2014). While there is a growing body of survey research that investigates instructors' beliefs and attitudes regarding the teaching of pronunciation in both English as a Foreign/Second language (EFL/ESL) (e.g., Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Buss, 2016; Foote et al., 2011) and in languages other than English (e.g., Huensch, 2018; Nagle, Sachs, & Zárate-Sández, 2018), much less is known about instructors' actual classroom practices. Among what is a very small number of such studies, few have included classroom observations (e.g., Baker, 2014; Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, Urzúa, 2016) and those that did exclusively examined the practices of

experienced ESL instructors. Studies that document instructors' practices for teaching

pronunciation in languages other than English are lacking.

The current study reports data from a national online survey (*n*=142) as well as data that

were obtained from audio-recorded interviews with, and classroom observations of, seven

graduate teaching assistants of French and Spanish who were teaching introductory language

courses (i.e., the first four semesters) at two different, large (i.e., more than 15,000 students),

public universities in the United States. Data from the classroom observations provide direct

evidence of the amount and type of pronunciation instruction that occurred in this context. By

triangulating data from survey responses, interviews, and classroom observations, the current

study provides a richer, more complete picture of how these instructors conceived of and

approached pronunciation teaching and the extent to which their beliefs coincided with their

classroom practices. The data have the potential to inform multiple aspects of foreign language

teaching, including teacher training.

Literature Review

How Often is Pronunciation Addressed in Language Classes?

Much of the research on the amount and type of pronunciation instruction has come from

surveys of instructors. Studies have shown that a majority of respondents who taught ESL (Foote

et al., 2011), EFL (Buss, 2016), and French, German, or Spanish introductory language courses

in the US (Huensch, 2018) reported that they thought such instruction was important and that

they addressed pronunciation in their lessons, although they devoted little instructional time to

doing so. For example, Foote et al. (2011) calculated the average amount of class time spent on

pronunciation to be 6%. Such self-report data must be interpreted with caution, however, because

what constitutes "teaching pronunciation" can be defined in a variety of ways, as observed by

Buss (2016), who found that some instructors' responses implied that *any* speaking task could be

considered to focus on pronunciation. In another study, Foote et al. (2016) measured the amount

of pronunciation-focused language-related episodes of three experienced ESL teachers via a

corpus derived from 40 hours of grade 6 intensive ESL classes in Canada. In total, episodes[2]

focusing on grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary comprised 17% of the instructor input in the

corpus, calculated in number of words. Of these 879 language-related episodes in the corpus,

only 86 (10%) focused on pronunciation.

In addition to examining the frequency with which pronunciation is taught, previous

research in ESL contexts has indicated that, when pronunciation is taught, it is rarely systematic

and pre-planned and more often provided in the form of *ad hoc* corrective feedback (Couper,

2017; Foote et al., 2016; MacDonald, 2002). MacDonald's (2002) interviews with eight ESL

instructors in Australia revealed that participants viewed pronunciation instruction as peripheral

and only needing attention if/when students had difficulties. In their survey of Spanish

instructors, Nagle et al. (2018) found that instructors valued both proactive and reactive

approaches to teaching pronunciation. In the Canadian ESL context, Foote et al. (2016)'s

classroom observation data indicated that between 67% and 93% of pronunciation episodes were

incidental, with a majority of those that were pre-planned coming from a single tongue twister

activity. As pointed out by Couper (2017) and Foote et al. (2016), a lack of pre-planned focus on

pronunciation and a reliance on what is often implicit corrective feedback might be problematic

given that the empirical research showing the effectiveness of pronunciation-focused recasts

included pre-planned, form-focused instruction (Saito & Lyster, 2012a; 2012b). Missing from

much of the previous research investigating beliefs and practices regarding pronunciation instruction is a focused exploration of instructors' corrective feedback habits.

Types of Pronunciation Targets

Another important body of work addresses the types of pronunciation targets that are considered to be important by instructors and/or are, or should be, the object of instruction and/or correction. Regarding segmentals and suprasegmentals, in a survey of ESL teachers in Canada, Foote et al. (2011) reported a growing awareness of the importance of suprasegmental instruction for intelligibility in English; however, the observation data in Foote et al. (2016) indicated that 100% of pronunciation teaching episodes were focused on segmental, as opposed to suprasegmental, targets. In Huensch (2018), instructors of French, German, and Spanish reported that a majority of the most serious pronunciation problems for their students were segmental, followed by spelling-based and crosslinguistic influences, with suprasegmentals mentioned least often. It remains unclear what targets are actually focused on in practice in foreign language classes.

Considerable discussion has also focused on the extent to which learning goals should prioritize native-like, or intelligible, if accented, speech (Levis, 2005). Proponents of a shift toward goals that prioritize intelligibility have emphasized that they are more appropriate for learners both because they are achievable and because empirical evidence shows that foreign-accented speech can still be perfectly intelligible (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Despite this shift, Huensch (2018) found a tension in the survey responses of instructors who simultaneously prioritized intelligible speech but also valued native-like accuracy. Similarly, Nagle et al. (2018) reported that, while Spanish instructors generally disagreed with a survey item that stated, "only

individuals with nativelike Spanish pronunciation should teach it", this item simultaneously had the highest variability on the survey, demonstrating some instructors' upheld nativeness principles (p. 15). Missing from these studies is direct evidence of what pronunciation features are targeted in foreign language classrooms and the extent to which pronunciation instruction and/or corrective feedback prioritize nativeness and/or intelligibility.

Stated Beliefs vs. Classroom Practices

Teacher cognition refers to, collectively, cognitive aspects of teaching which include, for example, instructors' attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, etc. (Borg, 2003). In referring to the relationship between teachers' cognitions and their classroom practices, Borg summarized that the former "emerge consistently as a powerful influence on [teachers'] practices…[but] do not ultimately always reflect teachers' stated beliefs, personal theories, and pedagogical principles" (p. 91). Contextual factors such as directives from those making curricular decisions or aspects of student performance (see e.g., Graden, 1996) can result in practices that do not necessarily align with an individual instructor's reported beliefs. This is perhaps particularly relevant when considering university-level introductory language courses because many of these courses are taught by graduate teaching assistants (Laurence, 2001) who are most likely not making curricular decisions but rather following directives from program directors/supervisors. Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) investigated the extent to which ESL instructors' beliefs concerning the incidental focus on form during communicative lessons aligned with their instructional practices. They found that all three instructors stated that focus on form should occur as a result in issues with meaning; however, in practice, a majority of observed episodes targeted linguistic inaccuracies that had not, in fact, affected meaning. Basturkmen et al.

suggested that the alignment between beliefs and practices might be stronger for pre-planned activities.

Baker (2014) and Baker and Burri (2016) are among the few studies that explored the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practices concerning the teaching of pronunciation. Based on data obtained from five experienced ESL instructors who were teaching courses for which explicit pronunciation goals were stated, Baker (2014) not surprisingly found that those teachers who had taken a graduate course on pronunciation pedagogy used a wider variety of techniques to teach pronunciation than those without training. Baker and Burri (2016), using data from the same instructors, found that all five instructors valued giving pronunciation feedback that targeted comprehensibility over native-like speech, and despite using recasts, did not believe that recasts offered an effective form of pronunciation feedback.

The Current Study

Framed by previous work that found variable alignment between teachers' beliefs and actual practices and recommended that future research incorporate data from multiple sources, the current study compared results from a national survey with data obtained from classroom observations of, and interviews with, seven graduate teaching assistants (TA). The study addressed the following questions:

1. What beliefs and practices do graduate teaching assistants report concerning the teaching of pronunciation and corrective feedback on pronunciation?

2. To what extent do observed classroom pronunciation teaching practices correspond with reported beliefs and practices?

3. How do graduate teaching assistants explain or rationalize their decisions regarding pronunciation instruction and/or the use of corrective feedback?

Methods

Participants

The data were obtained from two participant groups: a national survey administered to instructors at 28 large, public universities; and six hours of interviews and 22 hours of audio-recorded classroom observations with seven TAs.

The TA French (*n*=53) and Spanish (*n*=89) respondents to the online survey represent a subset of those described in Huensch (2018). They were recruited via email to participate because they were teaching French or Spanish at the introductory level (i.e., first four semesters) at a large (more than 15,000 students), public institution in the United States. Participants had been teaching on average 3.4 years (*SD*=3.5, range=0–20). Thirty-six percent of the French TAs were native speakers of French and 57% of Spanish TAs were native speakers of Spanish.

The seven participants who were interviewed and observed were TAs of French (*n*=3) or Spanish (*n*=4) teaching at two, large public universities located in the eastern part of the United States. TAs from two institutions were recruited to allow for greater generalizability of the findings, which would not be limited to the practices of instructors at a single institution. Background information (pseudonyms are used) is provided in Table 1. These TAs also had fewer than four years of teaching experience and included both native and non-native speakers. Participants were each given $40 in Amazon gift cards for participating in the two interviews and classroom observations.

Instruments and Procedures

Survey. As part of a larger project on instructors' beliefs and practices concerning the teaching

of pronunciation, a national survey was administered online via Qualtrics in fall 2016 to

university-level instructors of introductory-level French, German, and Spanish language classes

in the United States. A detailed description of the survey (a modified version of the instrument

used in Foote et al., 2011) and recruiting methods can be found in Huensch (2018) and the

complete survey is available on IRIS (Marsden, Mackey, & Plonsky, 2016; www.iris-

database.org). All participants who completed the survey were given a $10 Amazon gift card.

The online survey questions that related to corrective feedback practices and the inclusion

of pronunciation teaching were analyzed. Some of the survey questions asked respondents to

indicate on a sliding scale (converted by Qualtrics into a value between 1-100) how strongly they

agreed or disagreed with a statement (e.g., "I include pronunciation in my lessons."). Responses

between 1–39 were coded as 'agree', 40–59 as 'neutral' and 60–100 as 'disagree'. For these

questions, because the French and Spanish groups contained different numbers of respondents,

counts were converted into percentages. For open-ended questions, two coders (the author and a

research assistant) coded all open-ended responses for recurring themes using a coding scheme

created by the author. The coding categories for each open-ended question were developed in

three stages: in the first stage, emergent themes were indicated for each response by the first

author. In the second stage, a research assistant used this list of themes to independently code the

responses while simultaneously verifying the effectiveness of the codes in accurately

representing the data. In a final stage, the author's and the research assistant's coded responses

were compared, and any instances of disagreement were discussed and resolved. The themes

with the most frequent mentions for each open-ended response are reported in the results as representing major trends.

Interviews. TAs who agreed to participate in the interview and classroom observation component of the project were interviewed twice (in English): once prior to the observation(s) and once following the observation(s). Interviews were audio-recorded. After participants had completed the informed consent process, the first interview focused on TAs' teaching background, teacher training experiences, the current context in which they were teaching, and the extent to which pronunciation was part of the required course goals and/or materials. Questions in the second interview primarily addressed the representativeness of the observed classes (e.g., was the class observed 'typical'?) as well as any specific moments during the observation(s) when pronunciation was addressed in class. The questions that guided the semi-structured interviews are available on IRIS (www.iris-database.org). The interviews averaged 25 minutes in length (*SD*=10 minutes), although as a group the initial interviews were typically somewhat longer than the post-observation ones.

Once the audio-recordings of the interviews were broadly transcribed, the author and a research assistant independently took notes on and summarized interviewees' responses to each question. The two sets of notes were compared and combined into a single document and exact quotation extracts were added. After analysis of the classroom observations was completed (see next section), the interview notes for each TA were used to match themes with quotations from the interviewees.

Classroom Observations. All but one TA was observed teaching two class sessions. Classes were audio-recorded using two Zoom H2n Portable Recorders that were placed in the front corners of the classroom. During the class, the researcher took notes about what was written on the board and/or projected on the screen. Classes were observed during both academic year and summer sessions. Academic year courses met for either 100 minutes two times per week or 50 minutes four times a week, over 15 weeks. The summer courses were accelerated and thus met daily for 4 hours (with two TAs teaching each class day, one half session each) for 13 days. Regardless of the instructional model, each course offered approximately 50 hours of direct instruction and had fewer than 25 students enrolled. Table 1 provides information about the length of recording and lesson content of the classes observed.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Audio-recordings of the classroom observations were transcribed in CLAN following CHAT conventions (MacWhinney, 2000). After initial transcription was completed, each transcript was independently checked by the author and a research assistant for accuracy before coding took place. Initial coding of TA speech was based on the categories adopted in Collins, White, Trofimovich, Cardoso, and Horst (2012) and used by Foote et al. (2016).[4] Following Collins et al. and Foote et al., only teacher speech during whole class activities was coded; thus, small group work among students, discussions during breaks, or instances in which the TA helped a student during individual worktime were not coded. The resulting corpus of TA speech totaled 84,417 words (see Table 1). These word counts include all TA speech, regardless of whether it was in English or the target language (i.e., French or Spanish). The original coding in

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Collins et al. (2012) included the following categories of pedagogical activities: Classroom procedures (i.e., language organizing activities and managing behavior), language-related episodes (i.e., "any focus on features of the language such as morphosyntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary", p. 77), text-based input (i.e., scripted language), discussion of text-based input (i.e., any language elaborating upon text-based input), and personal anecdotes (i.e., when instructors shared personal stories). The author and a research assistant first coded two transcripts from the Spanish classes for training purposes and to verify the usefulness of the coding categories for the current data. This preliminary analysis resulted in the inclusion of one additional coding category: text-based translation. It was often the case that TAs would translate the entirety of an example sentence into English. This language was seen as distinct from scripted text-based input as it was not in the target language. With these categories established, the author and a research assistant each coded all of the Spanish transcripts by changing the TA participant ID in the transcript to a three-letter code (e.g., CPR for classroom procedure, LRP for language-related episode focusing on pronunciation). This allowed for automatic word counts (using FREQ) and analyses using the CLAN program. Inter-rater reliability as represented by Cohen's Kappa was .91 for the Spanish coding. The first author coded all of the French data two times; intra-rater reliability as represented by Cohen's Kappa was .80.

The pronunciation-focused language-related episodes (LRP) were further analyzed based on the coding adopted in Foote et al. (2016) and themes that emerged from survey responses and interviews with TAs. Each LRP was coded for its length (in words), its target (segmental vs. suprasegmental), and whether it was pre-planned or incidental. Instances of corrective feedback were further coded as recasts (i.e., teacher repetition of a student-uttered word/phrase with the mistake corrected), explicit corrections, or prompts (i.e., instances in which students were guided

to make a correction on their own). Finally, two aspects of each LRP was coded: 1) whether the target resulted in a change in meaning (Example: *visite* [visit] pronounced as *visiter*/*visitez*/*visitait*, etc. [to visit]/[they visit]/[he was visiting] was coded as a change in meaning whereas *urgente* [urgent] with the 'g' pronounced as /ʤ/ was not), and 2) whether it was the result of a student indicating signs of difficulty while attempting to pronounce a word (e.g., multiple repetitions of a word/syllable, long pauses/hesitation markers, explicit requests for help). Because the recording lengths/amount of TA speech varied among the TAs, results are reported as percentages and proportions for normalization purposes to allow for comparison across the TAs.

Results

Amount of Pronunciation Instruction

The study first examined beliefs and practices related to the inclusion of pronunciation instruction in introductory-level classes. Forty-five percent of survey respondents (62% French, 34% Spanish) agreed that they included pronunciation instruction in their lessons and only 21% (4% French, 32% Spanish) disagreed; however, 83% of the respondents (77% French, 87% Spanish) reported that they devoted 15 minutes or fewer each week teaching to pronunciation in their classes. Regarding the amount of TAs' observed classroom pronunciation teaching practices, Table 2 summarizes the percentage of words in each of the eight categories of teacher speech in the corpus, separated by TA. As a group, the highest proportion of input (37%) was categorized as classroom procedures, and the next highest proportion of the input (28%) was categorized as language-related episodes focusing on grammar. Following at 14% and 11% were text-based input and language-related episodes focusing on vocabulary, respectively. Text-based

translations and discussion of text-based input were the next most common, each representing

3% of the corpus. Finally, language-related episodes focusing on pronunciation and anecdotes

were the least common, each comprising 2% of the corpus in terms of words spoken.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

In total there were 130 language-related episodes focusing on pronunciation (LRP) in the

corpus. Table 3 summarizes LRP information separated by TA including the number of words

present in the LRPs, the total number of LRPs, the average length (in words) of the LRPs, etc. To

compare LRP frequency across the TAs who had differing amounts of input, the total number of

words of TA input was divided by the number of LRPs. Thus, Anna showed the highest

frequency of LRPs in her input, one LRP for every 378 words spoken. In contrast, Federico had

the lowest frequency of LRPs, with only one LRP for every 3,988 words spoken. Table 3 also

provides information about the average length of the LRPs for each TA. Ashley's LRPs were the

shortest being on average three words in length. On the other end of the spectrum was Federico,

whose average LRP length was 143 words. Thus, in terms of amount, while Federico's LRPs

were the most infrequent, they were the longest compared to the other TAs.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

An analysis of the 130 LRPs according to word length indicated high variability in terms

of the word count for each LRP. Figure 1 shows the word count for each LRP ordered from most

to fewest words with the x-axis representing each of the individual LRPs. As can be seen in

Figure 1, a majority of LRPs were fewer than 100 words, in fact 75% were 10 words or fewer.

The six longest LRPs, however, accounted for 908 words or 48% of the words categorized as

LRPs.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Each of the seven TAs was asked whether he or she included pronunciation activities as

part of the course and why or why not. Reponses from all of the TAs indicated that pronunciation

did not play a central role. Anna and Megan indicated that pronunciation was not featured in the

curriculum and that they would incorporate pronunciation if/when they had time. For example,

Megan stated,

> "Pronunciation isn't necessarily carved out as a distinct part of our curriculum. So, there
> are pages in the textbook that'll be like 'here's this vowel combination and here's some
> examples of how it is pronounced across…differing words or…types of words'. The
> problem is…you'd have to take extra time to do that. So, if we get to that page and we
> have an extra ten minutes I'll read that page with them. But I know if I left them to it they
> would just skip over that page."[5]

Anna was the only TA who had any experience teaching pronunciation, which she did in a

tutoring context with ESL students while she was an undergraduate student. She wished she had

more time to focus on pronunciation in her Spanish course and provided examples of how she

had incorporated pronunciation on a few occasions: she drew a mouth on the board to discuss

place of articulation or used a piece of paper to demonstrate aspiration. Adam, Federico, and

Sven mentioned the higher importance placed on students' understanding of grammar. Adam's

responses highlighted the prioritization of grammar in his context and his perceived lack of

compatibility between pronunciation instruction and communicative language teaching:

"It's Spanish one, we're not really focused on pronunciation, we want them to start to understand grammar…The current thing that we do is we do communicative language teaching, right? Over and over and over again. And there it's pretty explicit that…you're not as worried about the pronunciation."

Ashley and Federico both mentioned incorporating pronunciation in their teaching when they introduced new vocabulary. Federico commented, "Every chapter I go through all of the new vocab from their list, their vocab list, and we do pronunciation together and we talk about meaning. So like 'hey, this, how could you use this?' to help the new words stick but also to have at least an initial one or two passes of pronunciation." Ashley mentioned the importance of using repetition with new vocabulary but also pointed out a barrier to teaching pronunciation: "the main problem is that we have to teach them so many things in so small amount of time. They have too many stuffs to learn."

Corrective Feedback Practices

Next, the study examined beliefs and practices related to correcting pronunciation. Survey respondents were asked three open-ended questions about their beliefs and practices related to correcting pronunciation: (a) whether (and if so, why) they thought it was important to correct students' pronunciation during class, (b) whether (and if so, why) there were particular pronunciation mistakes that were more important to correct than others, and (c) to describe a situation when they might correct a student in class. Eighty-five percent of respondents (91% French, 82% Spanish) reported thinking that it was important to correct pronunciation during class and 66% (77% French, 59% Spanish) agreed that they did, in fact, correct students' pronunciation errors. Only 6% (2% French, 9% Spanish) disagreed with the statement. Regarding observed practices, Table 4 summarizes the different categories of LRPs in the corpus. A majority of LRPs (100 of 130) involved corrective feedback, with 89 of those realized

as recasts. Only one LRP in the corpus was pre-planned, an instance in which, at the request of a student in a previous class, Megan ended the day by presenting information about the pronunciation of *plus* [multiple meanings, e.g., 'more', 'plus', 'only'] with and without an /s/ at the end. In terms of target feature, 88% of the LRPs targeted segmental features; however, suprasegmental LRPs were documented for each of the seven TAs and most often targeted word stress in Spanish (e.g., stress placement in the word *lámparas* 'lamps') and elision in French (*ç'arrive* vs. *ça arrive* 'it happens').

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents (94% French, 78% Spanish) thought that some pronunciation mistakes were more important to correct than others. In response to all three of the open-ended questions about corrective feedback, the most frequent theme was to highlight the importance of correcting pronunciation when comprehension was impeded. For example, the most common explanations given (31% French, 18% Spanish) for why it was important to correct students' pronunciation during class included statements such as *It is important to correct the pronunciation errors that might interfere with communication* and *if the students' pronunciation is interfering with comprehension, I do believe it is important to correct them*. An even higher percentage of responses (38% French, 40% Spanish) to whether some mistakes were more important to correct than others included reference to pronunciation impeding comprehension (e.g., *The errors that impede comprehension are above all the most important* and *Some mistakes interfere with comprehension while others don't, really. The former are much more important*). For this question, it was also the case that many responses (49% French, 26%

Spanish) referred to instances when pronunciation specifically changed the intended meaning

(e.g., *it is very important to correct errors in words such as pero* [but] *and perro* [dog] *that have*

only one letter difference, but change the word entirely and *Certainly ones that change the*

meaning of the word (pronouncing the t on petit, or saying "aimay" when reading aime, etc.).

Finally, when asked to describe a situation when they might correct students'

pronunciation errors in class, again the most common theme (47% French, 44% Spanish)

indicated instances when comprehension was impeded with statements such as *I do not correct*

unless I do not understand a sentence because of the incorrect pronunciation of a word or when

students seem unsure of the correct pronunciation and *If a student is severely mispronouncing*

something to the point that I am having trouble understanding them, I correct them. Regarding

classroom practices, Table 4 indicates that a majority (80%) of LRPs in the corpus did not target

changes in meaning. However, a little over half of the LRPs occurred when students

demonstrated difficulty in pronunciation as indicated by students' repetitions, hesitations, etc.

Given that respondents in the online survey reported prioritizing correcting mistakes that

impeded comprehension, TAs were asked whether they experienced misunderstandings with

their students because of pronunciation. Generally speaking, TAs did not report having difficulty

understanding their students. For example, Megan stated, "There are times where I'm just like

'can you repeat that?' but because I always have context…I know what I asked them and I,

as…someone who went through the same process as them, know the kind of mistakes that are

made. Most of the time I'm like 'oh yeah, I know what you said'." Similarly, Sven alluded to an

increased ability of instructors to understand students by commenting, "as language teachers we

have…superpowers for…comprehending students and… what they want to say...it's rare that I

can't actually understand them."

A final theme that emerged from the investigation of participants' beliefs and practices concerning pronunciation corrective feedback was a concern about discouraging students. For example, the second most frequent response concerning correcting students' pronunciation during class focused on not discouraging them (21% French, 15% Spanish), and included comments such as: *it should be done in a way that does not intimidate the student or make them feel bad for making an error, as this can often cause anxiety/shame in students and discourage them from participating* and *the correction should be done with subtlety and tact as to not discourage the students*. This theme was also present in the interviews: Megan stated, "I make a pretty good point of not correcting everything because then they're not going to want to talk ever. When I lived in France for the first time, I knew how damaging it was to the language ego to have every sentence corrected. So, I try to go for the big ones. Or if I know a student has better pronunciation I'll get a little bit more nitpicky." Similarly, Federico explained that, while some students have difficulties, he tried "to call it out but in a non-embarrassing way". Ilsa commented that when she corrected students she tried "not to be overly picky because I don't want to put them on the spot." And Adam noted, "You want them to be speaking. You want to provide it in an environment where if they say something you're not going to immediately correct it right off the bat. You want to make them comfortable speaking the language. And then…down the road they can start to…hone in on their skills better."

Discussion

The goal of this study was to better understand the beliefs and practices related to pronunciation of university-level TAs of French and Spanish in the United States. A clear finding across both data sources was that very little instructional time was allocated to

pronunciation teaching. These results are in line with findings from previous surveys in EFL/ESL and FL contexts (e.g., Buss, 2016; Foote et al., 2011; Huensch, 2018) and classroom observations in ESL contexts (Foote et al., 2016).

Similar to Foote et al. (2016), there was also some variability among the TAs regarding the amount/frequency of LRPs, perhaps due to prior experience and training related to pronunciation teaching. In the current study, the TA who demonstrated the highest frequency of LRPs per words spoken also had the most prior experience teaching pronunciation. The potential relationship between training and LRP frequency is perhaps concerning when considered in conjunction with the fact that prior evidence shows that many instructors lack training in teaching pronunciation (Huensch, 2018; Murphy, 2014). Thus, while TAs can verbalize priorities, for instance believing in the importance of focusing on pronunciation deviations that affect meaning and intelligibility, their actual practices focus less on targets that change meaning.

When discussing variability and how individual differences in instructor beliefs might impact class practices, it is also important to consider how frequency is operationalized. In Foote et al. (2016) the fact that one instructor had twice as many LRPs as another was used as evidence of variability among instructors. In the current study, frequency was considered both in terms of the number of LRPs per words spoken and in the proportion of words spoken: While Federico had the least frequent LRPs and Anna had the most, 4% of Federico's speech was comprised of LRPs while only 2% of Anna's was. Future research investigating pronunciation teaching practices should not only consider frequency, but also explore the impact of different types of pronunciation instruction practices to allow for a more nuanced understanding of what advantages each may or may not provide.

The relatively infrequent focus on pronunciation in the observed classes is not surprising in conjunction with the finding that all but one of the LRPs in the current study were incidental, and the one pre-planned LRP was initiated by a student in a previous class session. The lack of proactive (vs. reactive) pronunciation instruction is even more striking than that found in Foote et al. (2016) in which pre-planned LRPs represented between 7%–33% of an instructor's LRPs. TA interviews also highlighted the lack of prioritization of pronunciation: Pronunciation was not seen as a core component of the curriculum and focusing on it required that TAs have or make extra time to do so. Several TAs commented on the emphasis on grammar learning, which is corroborated by the fact that 28% of the corpus was comprised of language-related episodes focusing on grammar.

The lack of pre-planned pronunciation teaching has direct implications for curriculum design, course pacing, and materials development. To overcome the obstacle of a perceived lack of time for incorporating pronunciation, Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster (2012) and Darcy (2018) advocated for the inclusion of pronunciation from the outset and called for its consistent integration. Martin and Jackson (2016) demonstrated that mini-pronunciation lessons can be purposely integrated within a curriculum using short homework modules on word stress in a second semester German course at the point when the grammatical focus was on separable prefix verbs. Using apps that incorporate automatic speech recognition (ASR) (e.g., Foote & McDonough, 2017; Mroz, 2018) also offers a potentially fruitful approach: Although Mroz investigated the use of ASR with more advanced leaners, her data provided a compelling case for the use of ASR to simultaneously provide individualized feedback and a focus on intelligibility while increasing learner autonomy.

Classroom observations demonstrated that a majority of LRPs targeted segmental aspects of speech, but 12% targeted suprasegmental features. This finding is in line with survey reports in which TAs prioritized segmental features over suprasegmental features (Huensch, 2018). This finding is not completely in line with Foote et al. (2016) who indicated that 100% of LRPs in their grade six ESL context were focused on segments. They explained that finding by hypothesizing that suprasegmental errors are less noticeable because they span multiple words. In the current study, the most commonly targeted suprasegmental feature was word stress in Spanish and a few instances of elision in French. Given that these features target one or two words, perhaps they were more salient in the input than suprasegmentals in the English classes.

In addition to investigating TAs' beliefs and practices concerning the teaching of pronunciation, the study also explored TAs' beliefs and practices related to corrective feedback. Results indicated that a majority of survey respondents reported correcting pronunciation during class particularly when comprehension was compromised and/or the mistake changed the meaning of a word. However, only 20% of LRPs addressed a change of meaning, although it is also possible TAs believed that the other 80% of the LRPs (those that did not result in a change of meaning) might still have interfered with comprehension. These findings suggest a potential discrepancy between TAs' beliefs and practices that could be addressed through training.

The frequency with which the results from the online survey and interviews with TAs mentioned concerns about discouraging or embarrassing students by correcting their pronunciation is also of interest. This finding speaks to current work examining the role of individual differences among instructors and how those impact teaching practices (e.g., Long, 2017). The finding that corrective feedback was the most frequent type of LRP and that when and how TAs provide corrective feedback represents one of the aspects of instruction over which

they have control (as opposed to choosing course content/materials), offering teacher training

that allows TAs to actively reflect upon their beliefs and better understand the alignment between

their beliefs and practices suggest a promising direction for future work.

It is important to point out that, for a student to be corrected, he or she must be producing

language. In fact, in the current study, over 50% of the LRPs were those in which a student

demonstrated signs of struggle or difficulty with pronunciation. This means that classes that have

higher student output will likely have increased opportunities for such episodes.

Impressionistically, it was the case that some classes included more opportunities for student

output than others. Given its focus on teacher speech, the current study did not investigate

student output; however, classroom observation notes indicated pronunciation was discussed and

corrective feedback was offered during individual and small group activities as well as during

breaks. Future investigations would thus be strengthened by gathering data on these types of

interactions (see e.g., Luo, 2016).

Finally, there is limited empirical evidence in languages other than English about which

features contribute most to intelligible speech as opposed to foreign accented speech (although

see Lapin-Fortin, 2018). A critical next step for future research is to determine what those

features are so as to guide instructors in making choices about targets for pronunciation

instruction and approaches to corrective feedback. McAndrews and Thomson's (2017) useful

framework for using empirical evidence to set priorities for pronunciation teaching in EFL/ESL

contexts acknowledges the need to identify students' individual needs. They also recommend

using functional load (Brown, 1988; Catford, 1987) information to prioritize segmental targets.

The concept of functional load is to rank the amount of 'work' that segmentals do in a language

(e.g., certain sound pairs differentiate between a greater number of minimal pairs and thus would

be said to have a higher functional load). Applying functional load investigations to teaching

pronunciation in languages other than English offers a promising direction and could have a

direct impact on improving pronunciation teaching practices.

When interpreting and generalizing the findings of this study, several limitations should

be kept in mind. First, the participants in the current study were aware that the research focused

on pronunciation teaching practices. Thus, it is possible that those who volunteered were

particularly interested in pronunciation, or this knowledge may have influenced TA behavior

during observations. While the decision to include observations from two institutions was made

to increase generalizability, it is important to acknowledge that each teaching context is unique,

and this study most readily speaks to the context in which it was conducted—large, public

universities in the US in which instructional priorities and pacing decisions are determined by

course coordinators rather than by instructors themselves.

Conclusion

This study documented the actual classroom practices related to TAs teaching and

correction of pronunciation in French and Spanish introductory language courses. In combination

with results from a national survey and interviews with TAs from two different institutions, it

provides a first step in better understanding the relationship between beliefs and classroom

practices as they pertain to pronunciation teaching. The finding that pronunciation-focused

language-related episodes comprised only 2% of teacher input suggests a very limited attention

to pronunciation in introductory language courses. While respondents to the national survey

prioritized correction of issues that impeded comprehension and resulted in changes in meaning,

classroom observation data demonstrated that a minority of corrective feedback targeted such

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instances. Perhaps one of the clearest findings was that pronunciation teaching practices were

reactive as opposed to pre-planned, which echoes findings from ESL classroom observations.

The findings document the need for teacher training in pronunciation instruction that proactively

guides and supports TAs in incorporating pronunciation instruction and assists in honing

feedback practices to purposefully target features that contribute to more intelligible speech.

Notes

1 Throughout this article the terms intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness are used following the definitions of Derwing and Munro (2015, p. 5): intelligibility refers to the extent to which a message is understood, comprehensibility refers to the effort necessary to understand a message, and accentedness refers to the extent to which the pronunciation of a message differs from an expected pattern.

2 Foote et al. (2016) defined language-related episodes as "instances of teacher talk that included a focus on some aspect of language, regardless of its nature (e.g. incidental vs pre-planned, student- vs teacher-initiated), focus (e.g. form, meaning, or use) and length (e.g. brief or extended)" (p. 186).

3 Length represents the duration of the recording file including breaks, individual and group work among students, etc., whereas words represents only the input spoken by the TA that was included in the current analysis (see Classroom Observations section).

4 I am very grateful to Pavel Trofimovich and the authors for providing detailed information and examples used in their coding.

5 A majority of ellipses in the TA interview quotations represent the removal of oral speech features such as 'you know'.

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Figure 1. Distribution of words per pronunciation-focused language-related episode
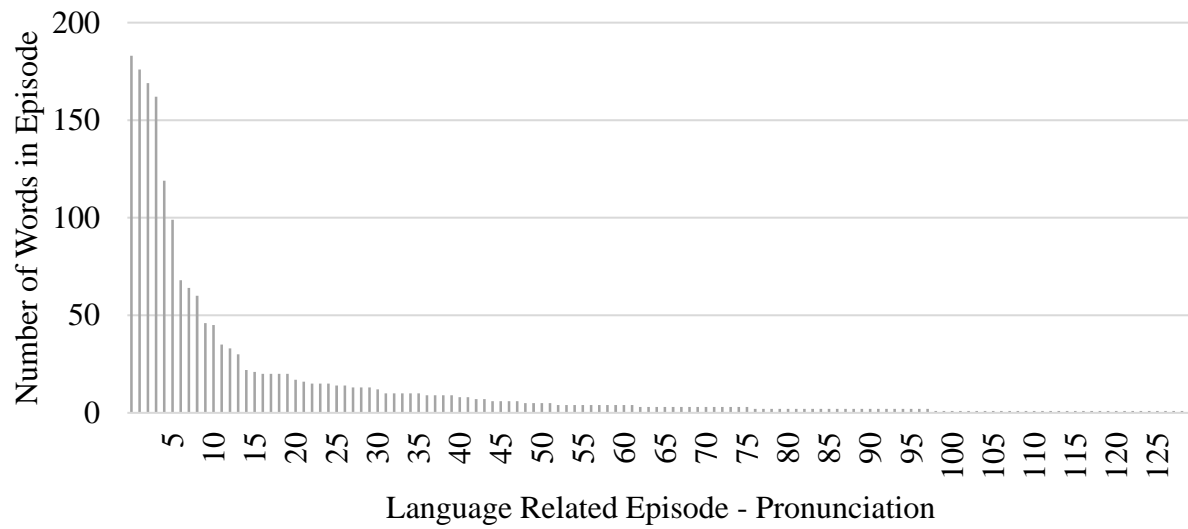
Table 1

Participant and Course Information of the Observed Teaching Assistants (TA)

Language	French			Spanish			
TA	Ashley	Ilsa	Megan	Adam	Anna	Federico	Sven
Institution*	A	B	B	B	B	A	A
Native Language	French	English	English	English	Spanish	English	English
Prior Teaching Experience (in years)	3	1.5	2	3	0.5 1.5 years teaching ESL	2	3
Course Level	1st semester	3rd semester	3rd semester	3rd semester	3rd semester	2nd semester	2nd semester
Content	Comparative Vocabulary/ Listening (apartments) Review/Game ('telephone')	Listening (giving directions) Culture (reading) Vocabulary (office) Demonstrative pronouns Subjunctive (present)	Culture (reading) Future (simple) Vocabulary (nature) Culture (reading)	Subjunctive (present) Vocabulary (health/body) Affirmative/ negative expressions Possessive pronouns	Subjunctive (present) Vocabulary (health/body) Past perfect Subjunctive (imperfect) Vocabulary (environment)	Subjunctive (present) Commands (*usted/ustedes*) Listening (song)	Commands (*usted/ustedes*) Subjunctive (present) Review
Students Present	17	8	8	12	6	13	18
Length[3]	1h 45m	4h 4m	4h 11m	4h 29m	4h 41m	1h 40m	1h 44m
Words	4,263	13,222	18,392	17,989	13,599	11,965	4,987
Total	10h			12h 34m			

* Institution refers to the university where the TA was teaching and is represented by either A or B for anonymity purposes.

Table 2

Percentage of Words in Each Category Separated by Teaching Assistant (TA)

TA	School	Language	Level	Classroom Procedures	LRE* Grammar	Text-based Input	LRE Vocabulary	Text-based Translation	Discussion	LRE Pronunciation	Anecdote
Ashley	B	French	I	61%	5%	24%	9%	0%	1%	1%	0%
Ilsa	A	French	III	33%	29%	21%	9%	2%	4%	1%	0%
Megan	A	French	III	48%	13%	10%	15%	1%	5%	4%	5%
Adam	A	Spanish	III	27%	39%	13%	11%	3%	4%	1%	3%
Federico	B	Spanish	II	27%	46%	3%	9%	6%	2%	4%	4%
Sven	B	Spanish	II	52%	31%	2%	3%	8%	0%	5%	0%
Anna	A	Spanish	III	37%	23%	22%	12%	2%	1%	2%	0%
TOTAL				**37%**	**28%**	**14%**	**11%**	**3%**	**3%**	**2%**	**2%**

*LRE refers to language-related episode.

Table 3

Frequency and Number of Words in the Pronunciation-Focused Language-Related Episodes (LRP)

TA	Language	LRP Words	Total Input	Number of LRPs	Average LRP length (in words)	LRP Frequency (total input/number of LRPs)
Ashley	French	33	4,263	10	3	426
Ilsa	French	196	13,222	33	6	401
Megan	French	672	18,392	23	29	800
Adam	Spanish	122	17,989	13	9	1,384
Federico	Spanish	430	11,965	3	143	3,988
Sven	Spanish	227	4,987	12	19	416
Anna	Spanish	206	13,599	36	6	378
TOTAL		**1,886**	**84,417**	**130**		

Table 4

Categorization of the Pronunciation-Focused Language-Related Episodes (LRP)

TA	Changes Meaning		Planning		Target		Corrective Feedback		Student Struggling	
	No	Yes	Pre-planned	Incidental	Segmental	Suprasegmental	No	Yes	No	Yes
Ashley	8	2	10	-	9	1	-	10	7	3
Ilsa	27	6	33	-	32	1	7	26	13	20
Megan	20	3	22	1	21	2	11	12	13	10
Adam	11	2	13	-	11	2	4	9	5	8
Federico	3	-	3	-	2	1	3	-	3	-
Sven	12	-	12	-	10	2	3	9	6	6
Anna	23	13	36	-	29	7	2	34	16	20
TOTAL	**104**	**26**	**129**	**1**	**114**	**16**	**30**	**100**	**63**	**67**