

“I THINK WE DON’T HAVE A REALLY GOOD WAY TO TALK ABOUT INTELLIGIBILITY”: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEVIS

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In his influential paper, John Levis (2005) argued that pronunciation teaching is influenced by two conflicting ideologies: the nativeness principle, which suggests learners should strive to sound like native speakers, and the intelligibility principle, which emphasizes that learners should focus on being intelligible and developing speech patterns that are contextually appropriate. These two principles often clash, creating a conflict between teachers’ pedagogical practices and their theoretical knowledge (e.g., Burri, Baker & Chen, 2017; Gordon & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024; Nguyen & Burri, 2024; Lim, 2016). Almost two decades after its publication, Levis (2005) continues to be a significant contribution for researchers when reflecting on the role of pronunciation in Applied Linguistics.

Information from Levis (2005) and similarly influential scholars, however, continues to face obstacles in reaching instructors and teacher trainers. For a long time, pronunciation teaching has revolved around accuracy and prioritized nativeness (Kang & Kerman, 2018). With the rise of communicative language teaching and its shift away from language form, pronunciation instruction was mostly neglected in the classroom (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017). More recent pedagogies have started to prioritize intelligibility over native-like accuracy (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 2015), but a disjunction between pedagogies for language teaching and pronunciation still persists. In light of this, we decided to interview John Levis to celebrate his impressive career as a researcher and professor, and to reflect on this ongoing issue in teacher education.

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John Levis is a Full Professor in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at Iowa State University, with a special interest in second language pronunciation. He authored *Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation* (2018), and co-edited several key publications including *The Handbook of English Pronunciation* (2015), *Pronunciation: Critical Concepts in Linguistics* (2017), and *Second Language Pronunciation: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice* (2022). Levis's contributions to the field of second language pronunciation also include initiating the "Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference" in 2009 (now in its 15th edition) and serving as the founding editor of the *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation* (2015-present). In 2021, he received the Iowa State University Award for Outstanding Achievement in Research.

In this interview, Levis discusses his initial trajectory as a researcher and shares his ideas about current issues in pronunciation research. The interview was conducted online with synchronous communication.

Germán: How did you become interested in second language pronunciation research?

John Levis: I had to. When I first got into doing stuff with pronunciation, it was back in the mid 1980s. At that time, there was some stuff going on that we would now see as research. But it was stuff that never made it into Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and in TESOL, which is where I came out of, what passed for research was really kind of "how do you teach better?". My doctoral advisor, Wayne B. Dickerson, did research on orthography and pronunciation. But it was not like what we do with orthography now. It was "how can you use the somewhat chaotic English spelling system to help learners pronounce words that they've seen but never heard?", or perhaps never ever seen before. It was a very, very practical kind of thing. When I went on to do a PhD, it was in Linguistics. I did research on whether there were two different rising contours that should be taught in teaching materials. When I was first taught to teach intonation, I was told you would jump up in pitch and then go higher [at the end of a question]. "Are you going?" [with rising intonation], that kind of thing. And then I realized most people that I heard, including me, didn't really do that. We went "are you going?" and we would drop down in pitch before rising again, and that's what I did my research on. Did American English listeners actually notice the difference between whether pitch goes up and continues to rise or whether pitch first goes down and then rises? Did they distinguish the kinds of meanings that these two have? I did this with statements, yes-no questions and wh-questions. But all the time, it was very teaching oriented. I went to TESOL as my main conference. I went to IATEFL¹. When I got the job that I had in North Carolina, I knew I had to publish in order to get further. I did publish a number of things. But even then, if you go back and you look at my really early publications,

it is very much pedagogically formed, pedagogically oriented, pedagogically critiqued. And so that's where I come from.

Germán: It's been almost 20 years since you published your seminal paper where you introduced the Nativeness and Intelligibility principles (Levis, 2005), and argued in favor of the latter. What changes have you seen in pronunciation teaching since then?

John Levis: I went to my colleague Carol Chapelle, who was the editor of *TESOL Quarterly* at that time. This is 2003. I talked to her and I said I would like to propose a special issue, thinking once I got tenure, which was still two years away. I very much moved into thinking about pronunciation in terms of intelligibility because of work that Jennifer Jenkins had done. From the mid 1990s, I was always involved with the ideas that were happening in the U.K., mostly through *Speak Out*, the long-running newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group. And there were other things that went into that. One is that the chair of our department when I was in my Master's program was Braj Kachru, who was the World Englishes person. He really influenced the way I thought about pronunciation as well during my Master's. When I proposed this special issue to Carol, I already knew Tracey [Derwing] and Murray [Munro] by that point, so I wanted to do it on intelligibility, World Englishes and identity, which was another issue that was often important, especially in the IATEFL group. There were convincing arguments that people didn't have to be native-like because of their identity. So I offered this to Carol and she said "Great! Can you get me a proposal by next week?", and I'm going "No, I wanted it three years from now". That's where that special issue came from. The nativeness and intelligibility principles kind of came from... this is mildly embarrassing, but it's honest: I got to the end of the special issue and I had these great papers in it and [...]. When I got to the end, Carol said that I needed to write a front piece, too. I wrote the front piece based on all of the things that were coming in, and it allowed me to pull many of those ideas together. And that's where that article came out. It was a new way of talking about it.

Germán: Did you ever think it would have such an impact?

John Levis: No. I still sometimes joke that it gets cited so much because it's only about eight pages long [laughter]. But no, I didn't because other people had talked about intelligibility. One of the things that happened in that paper as well is that I was able to—as well as a chapter in a book on spoken English by Rebecca Hughes that came out in 2006 (Levis, 2006) where I wrote a chapter on assessment of speaking—I was able to pull together both the World Englishes idea and the intelligibility [idea]. The question of intelligible *to whom* and intelligible *for whom*. I think in the 2005 article is just the matrix of the "native X non-native". But in the other one, the matrix is three by three, where you have Inner circle, Outer circle,

and Expanding circle, so that's where that all came from. I sometimes still go back and read the 2005 article and I think "oh, it's actually pretty good!"

Alison: Professor Levis, our next question has to do with my experience as a teacher educator in Brazil, but we also see it in empirical research that deals with teacher education and pronunciation teaching. We see teachers saying that they would prioritize intelligibility when teaching pronunciation to their students, but if we observe their practice or if we argue with them about their practice, they will say that pronunciation needs to be correct, and they would mention that the American model is still a suitable model for teaching pronunciation. We see this sort of clash between what they're saying—what they're reporting—and what they're actually doing. We would like to hear from you if you have any suggestions on what teacher education programs can do to help teachers really follow the intelligibility principle in their practice.

John Levis: This is a really hard question because a lot of times teachers who are nativeness-oriented and people who are intelligibility-oriented may do the same things. They may teach the same things. Everybody has to prioritize, and I think that the intelligibility principle gives us a justification for prioritizing. People who are nativeness-oriented prioritize only because they don't have enough time to do everything, but they have to still prioritize. We have a way of talking about nativeness. If I want to speak Brazilian Portuguese, I should use you as a model because you do it naturally. It's simple in that sense. But intelligibility asks us to make a decision about whether deviations from what you would normally hear from a native speaker actually make any difference.

Germán: What's the boundary there? How many deviations do you accept? It's easier to follow a native speaker model.

John Levis: It raises all kinds of questions. It may be simply these sounds you really need to get "right enough" because otherwise they're going to get in the way. But it may also be questions of how many times you are making these errors. This is my guess, that even low-functional load problems can be pretty difficult [for the listener] if they're very frequent. This question of intelligibility, we have ways to do this with English—not as much with other languages—with concepts like functional load. Even then, it's not always a guarantee that a high-functional load error is going to cause problems. It's just that if you have 100 times when you have this high functional load error, maybe 80% of the time it's going to cause a problem. If you have 100 times of low functional load things, maybe 10% of the time it causes a problem. Any kind of deviation can cause problems, but if we are trying to prioritize, we do need to say these sounds are getting in the way. Going back to the question, I think we don't have a really good way to talk about intelligibility that distinguishes it from nativeness. The problem with nativeness is that it's very narrow. We know that native speakers are like "accent detectives."

They hear something and they place the person immediately as being from my tribe or not. Or they place them, if they're other native speakers, as being from somewhere else, or being of a different social class. We do it to each other, but when you're listening to non-native speakers from any language, we're just incredibly good at noticing that certain things don't sound right. We're very good at nativeness. But intelligibility has to do with really this question of priorities. Tracey Derwing has said this, that if you have students who really want to learn a "th" sound, even though it doesn't make that big of a difference in terms of understanding, teach it to them. It takes five minutes. I can get anybody to make a "th" in five minutes. But that doesn't mean that you then spend a week on it. But I think we just don't have a good way of talking about intelligibility in a way that people who don't know and are sympathetic to the difference can distinguish it [from nativeness].

Germán: A popular issue in Brazil now is the internationalization of higher education, especially concerning a push to teach and conduct research in English. How do you think pronunciation or pronunciation teaching can help professors and researchers become better equipped to meet these demands, to use English in their academic work?

John Levis: I think a lot of the work that has been done through the last 50 years with international teaching assistants (ITAs) in English speaking countries can speak to this issue. People who work with ITAs teach pronunciation, but they really teach pronunciation according to what the person actually needs. They don't teach a system as much as they teach key-vocabulary that they need to pronounce more effectively within the tasks that the teacher is doing. This is an important thing for this kind of context, too. Rebecca Hincks, in Sweden, did a lot of research in the first 10 years of this century looking at this question. And she did it from the point of view of "if there's teaching in English, can they teach the same amount of content?". She would argue that they can't. This is a big issue that also fits within World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca because what you're really doing is you have teachers for whom the English is probably not first language teaching students for whom English is not first language. It's not just that Swedish teachers are teaching Swedish students. It's that they're teaching Italian students, and I think it's a huge thing, but I don't think it's a situation in which what we traditionally think of as pronunciation teaching is the way to go. I think it has to do with content. I think it has to do with specialty language. I think it has to do with the model that you expect of how these key words and ideas are communicated.

Germán: How do you see technology and artificial intelligence changing the way languages are learned in the near future?

John Levis: I think it's going to change things a lot. Pronunciation has always been kind of technology-oriented, right? We're the early ones who did recordings, going back to audiolingualism. We were part of language labs. We have the apps now. And I think that AI [artificial intelligence] is going to make some of this easier, especially with things like voice cloning. I've done research on this idea of golden speakers [e.g., Ding *et al.* 2019; Silpachai *et al.*, 2024] that if you listen to a voice that is really your own voice, but with accurate pronunciation, that you will have fewer confusions important details of sounds and the suprasegmentals. We worked on this a lot and our voices, our golden speaker voices were okay. They got better and better, but they're not as good as these AI voices. Voice cloning right now, I think, allows you to provide models that are kind of a British model but with your voice, or American model, but with your voice. They're really good and I think they're especially good for suprasegmentals.

Germán: Based on your golden speaker research, I know that you think now with artificial intelligence that the modeling is better, but the principle would be the same. Do you think it helps learners appreciate it?

John Levis: Yes. We were trying to do it for segmentals, and that was hard. For suprasegmentals, the learners do really well. In our study, they did very well with fluency and they improved in comprehensibility. I think this has to do with the easiest modeling to do, which is with the suprasegmentals. But I don't think we've gone very far with it because it's kind of global noticing of "what does the voice sound like?", but we're not really teaching the learners to pay attention to certain things.

Germán: Yes, but it depends on how much the learner is able to imitate. Some people are very good at imitating.

John Levis: And I think that that's where we're stuck right now. We're in the imitative/intuitive part of the Celce-Murcia [model] (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010), but not in the analytic part. And I think that is where this could be made even better.

Alison: This is our last question. In the long term, what practical and theoretical outcomes would you like to see from pronunciation research?

John Levis: I'm a teacher, and there are a lot of people who are doing research into L2 pronunciation who don't really care about teaching. They care about other elements of it, and even as the editor of the *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, we get a lot of articles that really would be better in something like the *Journal of Phonetics*. What we do in pronunciation research that is distinctive is this connection of teaching and learning and so I would like to see that not get lost. I would like to see that [connection] develop more fully. How do we know

that these things are effective? Are there other activities that are just not very useful?

Germán: What do you do with those submissions that you think belong somewhere else, in the *Journal Phonetics*, for example?

John Levis: Right, I suggest that they send them there. [...] And there's a lot of interesting research being done in those other journals.

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1. International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL).

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