

To pronounce or not to pronounce: A critical analysis of pronunciation instruction for newcomers in Canada

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Abstract: As a subtle yet pervasive part of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, pronunciation instruction for adult newcomers poses linguistic concerns based on historical power dynamics shaped by sociopolitical factors in Canada. Pronunciation courses inadvertently tend to prioritize segmental features and encourage accent reduction for better employability and integration goals and thus disregard the sociocultural identities of learners. Through this critical analysis, I bring a new perspective to “Standard Canadian English” by drawing on language pedagogy, learner and teacher perspectives, and language policies. I examine how *Anglonormativity* manifests itself in Canadian language classrooms by systemically marginalizing linguistic variety and perpetuating assimilation. The disparity between multiculturalism ideals and classroom realities urges the educational system to seek intelligibility-focused instruction, teacher professional development opportunities, and inclusive curricula that validate diverse linguistic repertoires. Therefore, this paper makes a strong case for systemic improvements to support immigrants in navigating Canadian life by challenging monoglossic norms embedded in language education.

Keywords: *ESL; pronunciation instruction; adult newcomers; linguistic inclusion; language standardization; critical language pedagogy*

1 Introduction

In Canada, learning English as a Second Language (ESL) is viewed as an important step for immigrants to participate in society fully. As part of this process, pronunciation instruction is a subtle but prominent part of the overall education experience among ESL adult learners for effective communication. In other words, its impact is deep because its prescriptive nature indirectly shapes learners’ perceptions of social acceptance, perceived competence, and access to opportunities. However, the focus on pronunciation in many programs is limited and varied. This paper examines how pronunciation instruction reflects systemic power dynamics and the ways in which it impacts newcomers’ inclusion or exclusion.

This research draws upon perspectives of teaching pronunciation developed for and from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms and my own pedagogical reflections, as well as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) contexts, as part of a broader study of adult newcomer education. Deducting marks for difficult or unfamiliar consonant or vowel sounds taught in class feels unfair because learners might have difficulty pronouncing certain sounds that

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are absent in their first language. This may also lead to an unproductive tension between the intended learning goals in the classroom and the expectations of the students. In my opinion, students' pronunciation does not need to be a single "standard," but it may need to be improved. Nonetheless, pronunciation assessments expect students to meet standards aligned with specific sounds. Eventually, many students perceive their accents as flawed and as a problem that must be fixed.

This notion is inherently problematic from micro-level and macro-level perspectives. At a micro level, newcomer adults perpetuate the dominance of "standard" English accents by aggrandizing them and valuing/prioritizing these accents for social and economic inclusion. At a macro-level, economic and political agendas continue to promote certain accents through policies, recruitment practices and teaching materials.

Therefore, the following questions guided my investigation of the issues around pronunciation instruction and my suggestions for policy and practice in Canada.

- How does Canada's historical and contextual background of immigration, language policy, and language programs maintain an Anglonormative ideology?
- How can pronunciation instruction in ESL programs for newcomers in Canada be adapted to challenge and mitigate Anglonormativity?

Through this critical analysis, I will explore the motives behind Canadian policy and ideology, the practices and implementation of these in classrooms, the perceptions and experiences of newcomers regarding English pronunciation, the confidence and preparedness of teachers in teaching pronunciation, and the power dynamics that elevate certain accents of English to dominance.

2 Historical and contextual background

2.1 Immigration in Canada

With its growing immigrant population, Canada has come a long way from its past. This immigration history is inextricably intertwined with its demographic, economic, and cultural development. Therefore, it is important to revisit the historical context to understand the evolution of adult ESL programs in Canada.

Historically, there were many discriminatory practices in Canadian immigration policies, which prioritized European immigrants and restricted non-European populations. Policies related to immigrants from East and Southeast Asia may be used as an example: the Chinese Head Tax of the early 20th century created financial barriers to reduce the number of Chinese immigrants; hundreds of Indian passengers in a ship were denied entry to Canada during the Komagata Maru Incident; and thousands of Japanese Canadians were confined brutally during World War II (Fleming, 2007). These incidents left lasting emotional and psychological effects on people's lives and on Canada's history.

These unfair practices began to shift post-1947 with the naturalization of Asian Canadians and the introduction of a points-based immigration system in 1967. The naturalization process provided legal protections for Asian Canadians, including the right to vote and policies promoting racial equality. Also, the points-based system replaced racial quotas with a merit-based system and prioritized skills, education, and language proficiency for immigration purposes (Guo, 2013). Following this shift, Canada continued to accept an influx of immigrants from Central America, Africa, and the Middle East, most of whom were refugees displaced by war and violence,

especially after formally affirming its commitment to resettling those fleeing oppression and persecution through the 1978 Immigration Act (Lambert & Ma, 2024). These new approaches to immigration reflected some progress toward better inclusion.

Today, myriad immigrants from various backgrounds are granted entry to Canada and contribute to the country's labour force growth to a great extent. However, the systemic inequalities rooted in historical discrimination are still in place, and these inequalities pressure newcomers to navigate linguistic, economic, and social challenges with limited support. ESL programs continue to be important in determining whether newcomer populations are included or excluded from Canadian society.

2.2 Bilingualism and multiculturalism

When Canada's historically shaped identity is considered, bilingualism and multiculturalism have a strong influence. Although Canada's language policy is designed to promote diversity and inclusion under these concepts, it has been going through hurdles in achieving equitable practices for its diverse populations (Cooper, 2020). These two concepts have far-reaching implications for adult ESL programs.

From a legislative perspective, a couple of key policies play a crucial role in shaping Canada's bilingual and multicultural identity. With the introduction of the Constitution Act of 1867, Canada decided to run the country under a two-language, two-culture framework of British and French (Li, 2003). This step also set the stage for official bilingualism. When it comes to languages, the Official Languages Act of 1969 made this bilingual groundwork stronger by giving official language status to English and French in the parliament and federal institutions (Guo, 2013).

Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau later put multiculturalism into effect as the official government policy as a means for "assuring cultural freedom" in 1971 (Berry, 2020). This so-called more inclusive framework, along with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, wove the concept of multiculturalism into a narrative that served to preserve the privileged status of English and French as the languages and cultures of the "two founding peoples" (Flemming, 2007). Eventually, the British and French, as the founding nationalities, were given the power to review all claims related to indigeneity and marginalization of non-British and non-French ethnic groups (Haque, 2012). Therefore, all these legislative changes only laid the foundation for lip-serving purposes of bilingualism and multiculturalism in Canada.

Historically, these sociopolitical power dynamics have also greatly informed Canada's language policy and planning and, inevitably, educational practices today (Ricento, 2000). For instance, language education policies overtly reflect the tension between linguistic diversity and language standardization by disadvantaging many immigrants without "sufficient" proficiency in English or French to access economic and social opportunities (Wiley & García, 2016). Additionally, globalization has also framed bilingualism as an economic asset by ignoring the linguistic needs of marginalized communities like immigrants and prioritizing functional literacy in one of Canada's official languages (Heller, 2002).

These dynamics significantly affect ESL programs now because, as Wiley and García (2016) suggest, policies shape language learning and teaching practices in multilingual contexts by celebrating diversity on paper while enforcing standardization in practice. Even though Canada claims to be all about multiculturalism, newcomers are pushed to assimilate into white, Eurocentric norms. There is still language standardization in Canada, which prioritizes Standard Canadian

English (i.e., a blend of English with British and American language features reflecting middle-class, white, and urban speech, often associated with educated “native” speakers). Therefore, pronunciation instruction in many ESL programs tries to measure up to this variety of English.

2.3 ESL programs for newcomers

Informed by these immigration practices and political goals, Canada’s ESL Programs mirror a predetermined agenda tailored towards the linguistic assimilation of newcomers. Historically, in the aftermath of the post-war immigration waves, the government designed these programs to equip adult immigrants with the language skills necessary to participate in the economy and integrate socially (Fleming, 2007). ESL programs then became more diverse with language initiatives, such as the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs.

LINC programs came onto the scene in 1992 as a federally funded Canadian initiative to provide basic language training to adult immigrants (Galiev & Masoodi, 2011). This free basic language training aims to meet the official national standards set as Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and teaches functional English for daily activities, employment, and accessing services (Dempsey et al., 2009). Despite being an entry point for many newcomers, LINC has received criticism for its one-size-fits-all approach for all immigrants hailing from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America, and the Caribbean (Guo, 2013). The reasoning behind this approach lies in the program’s emphasis on assimilation, which reinforces broader societal expectations to conform to standardized English norms (Hanks, 2022).

On the other hand, EAP programs targeting immigrants and international students have been offered by colleges, universities, and some private institutions to teach academic language skills for post-secondary education or professional careers. Therefore, their focus is on more specialized aspects of academic language proficiency (Corcoran & Williams, 2021). However, the quality and sustainability of EAP programs are a current concern among their practitioners, which has the potential to affect the conditions for equitable and effective language education (Corcoran et al., 2022). Since immigration has long been central to Canada’s social and economic development, these programs play an important role in affecting newcomers’ experiences and their successful participation in Canadian society.

2.4 Pronunciation instruction in ESL

Although it is just one aspect of ESL education, pronunciation instruction has a subtle yet pervasive role in adult immigrant education. Because of the lack of specific guidelines either under the CLB framework or other frameworks, there is a wide variety of methods used in pronunciation instruction in classrooms across Canada. These teaching and learning practices in pronunciation reflect the sociopolitical nuances around what to teach and learn based on the historical and political agenda of the country.

In the recent past, pronunciation instruction focused mostly on segmental features, such as individual sounds, rather than suprasegmental aspects, such as intonation, rhythm, and stress (Breitkreutz et al., 2001). Even though suprasegmentals are a critical part of intelligibility, these linguistic elements of pronunciation have not received much recognition in pronunciation due to limited resources and teacher training.

Studies in the early 2000s showed how suprasegmental features gained more popularity in academia, which included recommendations to replace traditional methods for improved communication outcomes. Derwing & Munro (2009) argued that the mere focus on sounds failed

to improve learners' intelligibility or reduce the social barriers caused by strong accents. Even though research encourages suprasegmental teaching, surveys with Canadian ESL programs showed that many instructors continued to prioritize segmental teaching in the years that followed these studies (Foote et al., 2011).

As perceptions and applications around pronunciation instruction continue to evolve, there is an increasing need to recognize and balance the intelligibility aspect with respect for linguistic diversity. Therefore, EAP programs as well as broader ESL and LINC contexts lie at the heart of this discussion, given that they serve adult newcomers in Canada. These current ESL programs in Canada aim to help learners achieve clear communication while inadvertently conveying the message that eliminating accents is necessary or desirable. This marked tendency speaks to a broader understanding of pronunciation as a key factor in their integration into Canadian society.

3 Political and practical issues

3.1 Integration dilemma

As seen in Canada's historical context, language serves not just as a tool for communication but also as a form of symbolic power and social capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Language instruction in Canada perpetuates existing power structures and linguistic assimilation through the dominance of "Standard Canadian English." The expectation for newcomers to conform to English norms exemplifies *Anglonormativity*, or "the expectation that people will be and should be proficient in English, and are deficient, even deviant, if they are not" (McKinney, 2016, p. 80). This ideology gives greater social capital to those who comply with this "standard" while marginalizing those whose accents reflect diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

How does language instruction make *Anglonormativity* come true? Canada's language policies and practices prioritize English as the standard despite the country's multicultural branding and bilingual framework by underrating French, Indigenous languages, and other minority languages in socioeconomic contexts. For example, Francophones outside Quebec and New Brunswick are subjected to *Anglicization*, a concept that refers to the process through which the English language and culture systemically dominate or replace other linguistic and cultural identities at political, institutional, and societal levels, despite the country's bilingual context (Castonguay, 2002). In addition, one-third of 270 Indigenous languages in both Canada and the USA are facing extinction while many others are at risk of language attrition (Mithun, 1998). Finally, ESL programs impose "Standard Canadian English" as a benchmark as a way of conforming to economic and social expectations (Dollinger, 2011), which forces newcomers to prioritize linguistic assimilation over maintaining their cultural and linguistic heritage (Nakhaie, 2020)—without which they will have restricted access to professional opportunities and full societal participation. Even if ESL programs are designed to facilitate integration rather than assimilation, they risk reproducing inequalities through their almost religious dedication to narrow definitions of linguistic competence.

It is highly concerning to see these sociolinguistic challenges around the integration of multiple languages and cultures into Canada's diverse landscape, especially since multicultural changes in education are essential for genuine linguistic justice rather than symbolic inclusion. To address this integration dilemma, language instruction in Canada needs to be reconsidered in a way that genuinely includes multilingualism. First, language policy and planning could go beyond the dominance of English by integrating Indigenous and minority language education into curricula when possible and feasible and by celebrating and rewarding bilingual and multilingual

proficiency. Another approach could be to diversify learning materials by adopting the World Englishes framework, which identifies and incorporates English varieties globally from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts (Kachru, 1992).

3.2 Focus on employability

Within instructional settings, pronunciation instruction in Canada is closely tied to employability. LINC and EAP programs prioritize immediate economic participation and assimilation to Canadian workplace culture by emphasizing functional English skills and minimally sufficient proficiency. In work settings, the demand for clear communication is high in many companies and institutions, and almost perfect enunciation is expected. Unfortunately, biases against accents are prevalent in professional settings across Canada. To illustrate, foreign-accented doctors are seen as less competent than their colleagues with standard Canadian accents (Baquiran & Nicoladis, 2020). Therefore, linguistic standards disregard deeper cultural inclusion, acceptance of linguistic diversity, and equitable integration (Galiev & Masoodi, 2011).

In educational settings, these ESL programs focus on accent reduction and adapting to Canadian workplace norms. Although these efforts may improve employability in the short term, they place an ongoing burden on immigrants to conform in the long run. Rather than addressing the biases of colleagues or clients to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity, these instructional practices move the responsibility of overcoming discrimination onto newcomers. The very first context that newcomers encounter should go beyond their economic contributions to the country and instead appreciate their contributions to Canada's multicultural mosaic through their personal, professional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

3.3 Teaching “Standard” Canadian English

The evolution of Canadian English, as the product of the complex interplay of historical, social, and cultural influences, has lasting implications for ESL education in Canada, especially in how pronunciation is taught and perceived.

Canadian English emerged as a unique blend of British and American linguistic features. Settlement patterns, regional variations, and sociopolitical dynamics influenced this blend notably (Chambers, 1993; Dollinger, 2008). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the sociolect “Canadian dainty” was marked by British English pronunciation (Sathiyathan, 2017). Canadian dainty was associated with upper-class prestige, but it faded away after World War II because of the perceptions of pretentiousness (Sathiyathan, 2017). Over time, some criticized features disappeared while others became established North Americanisms or standard Canadian English usage (Chambers, 1993). Melchers and Shaw (2011) also note that Canadian English is influenced by both British and American traditions but shows significant spelling variability. As another difference in phonology, Canadian raising is a unique characteristic because certain diphthongs are pronounced differently compared to General American English in words like ‘about.’ (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Though “Standard Canadian English” is rather fluid and dynamic, pronunciation instruction attempts to conform to its linguistic expectations. ESL programs encourage newcomers to measure up to this standardized norm to access professional opportunities (Foote et al., 2011). Pronunciation instruction in many programs prioritizes segmental features (i.e., individual sounds) over suprasegmentals (i.e., intonation, rhythm, and stress), although research shows that the latter has a greater impact on intelligibility and communicative competence (Breitkreutz et al., 2001).

This misalignment between research findings and classroom practices highlights broader issues in how language education reinforces hegemonic norms.

When it comes to the curricula across ESL programs, there is no standardization or guideline on what pronunciation features to teach adult immigrants. Currently, the CLB document does not have pronunciation features, stating this:

Grammar and pronunciation are components of language ability and, as such, may require explicit instruction. However, the purpose of a standards document such as the CLB is not to prescribe discrete pronunciation items and grammatical forms to be mastered at each benchmark (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012, p. 6).

In my own EAP teaching experience, I have observed certain patterns in pronunciation instruction in an EAP setting where both segmentals and suprasegmentals are part of the curriculum. However, it is unfair to deduct marks from students who cannot pronounce certain sounds because of their first language influence. This approach is strongly connected to settler colonialism and treats language variations as deficits rather than assets (Sterzuk, 2015). The result is a system that values hegemonic norms and creates systemic barriers for immigrants in both educational and workplace settings.

3.4 Learner perceptions

Pronunciation instruction in ESL programs also has a great impact on adult learners' perceptions of Canadian English and its ramifications. Newcomers usually view pronunciation as a marker of linguistic competence and inclusion in Canadian society. In a study with 42 ESL participants, 74% of the learners shared a desire to sound like native speakers, and 67% believed sounding like a native speaker would make them feel more Canadian (Dawson, 2013). This perception comes from the idea that "good pronunciation" brings better jobs and social acceptance (Derwing & Munro, 2009). This linguistic pressure is also linked to broader social identities. Amin (1999) found that ESL students associate Canadian and native-speaker identities with whiteness. Therefore, immigrants often have concerns about accent discrimination that can extend to employment, stereotyping, and harassment. Pronunciation instruction is one site where learners navigate these complex power dynamics and societal perceptions. It can either perpetuate the same perceptions or dismantle them by creating a more welcoming linguistic landscape.

I have noticed similar learner perceptions and beliefs in my own experience as an EAP teacher. At the beginning of the semester, the students often share their aspirations regarding the pronunciation course. I have witnessed that many students share their learning goals as wanting to have "perfect" English as they progress through pronunciation instruction. This goal typically includes a desire to sound like a "native" speaker, especially in terms of accent, to gain legitimacy, confidence, and a stronger sense of belonging in Canada. This aspiration goes beyond the intelligibility of their speech and reflects a deeper internalization of the social pressures to have a native-like pronunciation that serves as a marker of identity, competence, and social integration (Derwing & Munro, 2009). In this sense, the pronunciation course becomes a space where students negotiate their place within Canadian society and conform to dominant linguistic norms.

3.5 Teacher perspectives

While Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programs frequently include courses that prepare in-service teachers on how to teach pronunciation features across programs, there is little to no instruction on what pronunciation features should be taught to students.

There have been historical shifts surrounding teacher perceptions of pronunciation instruction in ESL programs in Canada. In the early 2000s, English language instructors primarily covered segmental features in their lessons due to the belief that clear articulation was the key to improving learners' pronunciation (Breitkreutz et al., 2001). In the early 2010s, the dominance of segmental instruction persisted, but there was growing awareness of the importance of suprasegmental features (Foote et al., 2011). Despite this recognition, many instructors reported a lack of confidence in teaching intonation, rhythm, and stress and identified insufficient training and limited resources as key challenges in teaching pronunciation (Foote et al., 2011). Although 70% of instructors believed pronunciation could be integrated into general ESL classes, stand-alone pronunciation classes were only offered in 43% of programs, and only 46% of the instructors reported regular inclusion in lessons and the use of pronunciation textbooks (Foote et al., 2011). As a result, the lack of clear guidelines and formal training for pronunciation instruction leaves many teachers reluctant to cover pronunciation in adult ESL classrooms (Derwing et al., 2013).

This historical evolution of teacher perceptions shows a slow but continuous change toward more comprehensive pronunciation instruction. However, there is still a continuing need for investment in teacher training, resource development, and institutional support for improved pedagogy to close the gap between research and practice.

4 Political and practical implications

4.1 Systemic changes in institutional pathways and employment systems

Systemically, employers, policymakers, and public institutions must be educated on the value of diverse accents to counter accent discrimination and promote equity. Intelligibility, rather than “sounding Canadian,” should be the focus in ESL programs. Pronunciation instruction should serve two primary purposes: to improve clear and confident communication and to challenge identity-related stereotypes that associate accents with lesser competence or social belonging (Derwing & Munro, 2009).

Ideologically, a two-way model of integration could be very helpful because it suggests that both newcomers and Canadian society should share responsibility for mutual adaptation. Integration should consider how open Canadian institutions, communities, and individuals are to welcoming and treating newcomers as equals (Li, 2003). Through this model, pronunciation instruction could welcome mutual adaptation rather than assimilation. In other words, newcomers can work on developing intelligibility for effective communication through pronunciation lessons while educators, employers, and host communities can attempt to acknowledge diverse accents as valid expressions of identity. This reciprocal approach would create a more inclusive environment in ESL classrooms by allowing immigrants to keep their identities and promote mutual understanding between newcomers and their host communities (Hanks, 2022). In this way, pronunciation instruction can go beyond ESL classrooms to broader society. When the mainstream culture is exposed to diverse accents in schools, media, workplaces, and public institutions, wider societal acceptance of linguistic diversity in Canada can be achieved.

4.2 Program improvements

When integrated into language programs, pronunciation instruction should focus on intelligibility rather than accent elimination in the curricular goals. Additionally, instruction should emphasize intonation, rhythm, and stress over specific sounds because suprasegmentals are more critical for improving intelligibility (Archibald, 2002). Existing research already provides

empirical evidence that regular practice with exposure to target phonological forms increases learners' pronunciation accuracy and fluency (Trofimovich et al., 2012).

Classroom materials should draw on World Englishes and incorporate diverse accents and localized varieties. This approach will boost learners' confidence in their accents and challenge the dominance of “native” English norms (Kachru, 1992). For instance, it is possible to use audiovisual content spoken in a variety of Englishes to study a certain pronunciation feature. In this way, the instructional materials could challenge the monoglossic orientation to only one standardized English language in learning practices among adult learners.

More broadly, Wiley and García (2016) recommend inclusive language education policies to support multilingualism and equity in educational systems. Hanks (2022) suggests that translingual interactions also improve students' English language acquisition. Rooted in heteroglossic ideologies, these practices improve communicative competence and cultural awareness through plurilingual instruction (Galante, 2022; Landry, 2023). Bilingual and multilingual connections can even ease English pronunciation by making learning more relatable and effective. For example, showing the similarities between the voiceless “TH” sound in English and the “ث” sound in Arabic can raise metalinguistic awareness among some students.

5 Conclusion

Although pronunciation instruction is often a neglected aspect of ESL education for adult immigrants in Canada, there is no doubt that pronunciation instruction is necessary and helpful for better oral communication. However, the instructional focus should move from accent reduction to intelligibility, as well as sound investment in teacher professional development and resources. To defeat English's strong assimilative power, the Canadian education system can improve its language programs that could genuinely support immigrants. When the necessary changes are in place, adult immigrants will be more likely to communicate effectively, integrate into society, and participate in the workforce more confidently.

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