

# Phonological competence<sup>1</sup>

Phonology is an aspect of language teaching that still tends not to be taught explicitly, with many teachers lacking confidence as they fear they may not be perceived as providing the “correct” model, and because they may have received little or no specific training. Despite a considerable increase in research into phonology,

the marginalization of pronunciation teaching, which Derwing and Munro pointed out in their 2005 article as having potentially serious consequences, continues in spite of the increased interest in pronunciation among educators. In a very recent publication (2015) the same authors relate of a wide series of studies that revealed that “teachers are hesitant about systematically teaching pronunciation” (p.78), that they feel a “need for access to more professional development” (p.80) and that “[t]he curricula in the various programs in which the teachers worked did not focus on pronunciation” (ibid.) with vague and unhelpful indications if any. (Piccardo 2016: 11)

The CEFR 2001 went some way towards starting to address this problem in that the main CEFR text provided a detailed description of aspects of phonology. In her analysis prior to developing the new CEFR phonology descriptors, Piccardo summarised this as follows: “Phonological competence takes an important role in the descriptive scheme of the CEFR even though this does not translate into an extended and accurate series of scales and descriptors” (Piccardo 2016: 7) and “The construct of the CEFR in relation to phonology is thorough and sufficiently broad to allow a revision and extension of the scales/descriptors in order to capture the new developments and reflection in second/foreign language education” (ibid: 8).

However, the 2001 CEFR phonology scale did not successfully operationalise this construct and was in fact the least successful of the CEFR 2001 descriptor scales (North 2000: 248-50), which prompted teacher/researchers interested in phonology to criticise and attempt to supplement it (e.g., Cauvin 2012; Frost and O'Donnell 2018; Galaczi et al. 2011; Harding 2013; Horner 2010, 2013, 2014; Isaacs and Trofimovich 2012). Unfortunately, most of their proposed solutions continue to make distinctions between levels or assessment grades merely by alternating adverbials, despite the fact that such an approach has long been criticised as too vague (e.g., Alderson 1991; Champney 1941; North 2000, 2014).

The main problem with the CEFR 2001 phonology scale was that it was a single scale which conflated constructs and gave the impression that progression in proficiency meant becoming more and more like a native speaker. In particular, it suggested that this transformation occurred between B1 and B2 with the B2 descriptor saying: Has acquired a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation. At and above B2, accent was not mentioned at all, even though “most L2 speakers at even advanced levels can have detectable accents (Moyer 2013); thinking otherwise is unrealistic” (Isaacs et al. 2018: 197). Also, the expression “natural” pronunciation and intonation in this descriptor strongly suggests that of a native speaker, whereas the usefulness of an “idealised native speaker” as the goal of language learning has

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also long been criticised (e.g. Byram and Zarate 1996; Kramersch 1997) and was in fact not adopted in the CEFR.

In relation to phonology, as Muñoz and Singleton (2011) emphasise, a lot depends on whether the learner wants to sound like a “native-speaker”. And in addition, “almost pretending to be a different person in each language, in the pursuit of the chimeric native speaker model ... leads to high levels of frustration and feelings of inadequacy and consequent avoidance of the language – even in regions that are officially bilingual (see, for example, Puozzo Capron 2014)” (Piccardo 2019: 1010). Such a mindset of multiple monolingualism, which has been criticised in the Canadian context by Cummins (2008) as “the two solitudes”, is antithetical to a plurilingual perspective. Research has shown that intelligibility is far more important to communication than accent (Derwing and Munro 2015) and consequently, pronunciation research has moved towards examining what linguistic factors most affect it. Here we should mention that in the literature on phonology, a distinction is made between “intelligibility” (i.e. actual understanding of an utterance by a listener) and “comprehensibility” (i.e. a listener’s perceived difficulty in understanding an utterance). It was decided not to apply this meaningful but subtle academic distinction in the CEFR descriptors, in order not to overload for teachers the already challenging switch away from the “native-speaker” norm.

The new CEFR Phonology scale – the conceptualisation, development and validation of which is described in Piccardo (2016) – therefore refines and expands the construct of the 2001 scale, taking intelligibility as its lead factor and overcoming the issues of the “native-speaker” model. It is an analytic scale, consisting of three subscales. The first subscale is overall phonological control, intended for those who wish a simple update of the 2001 holistic scale. In addition, there are two more detailed subscales, for Sound articulation and Prosody (stress and intonation). Descriptors for Sound recognition were also validated, but not included in the final scale; they can be found in the “Supplementary descriptors” in Appendix 8 to the CEFR Companion volume. The reason for creating an analytic scale was that, although everything is interconnected, the main elements involved (sounds and prosody) need to be made visible so that both teachers and learners might become aware of their equal contribution to intelligibility.

The new scale thus broadens the scope of phonological competence in comparison to the 2001 scale and removes native-speakerism from it, with the overall aim of providing more explicit support to teachers. Phonological competence can be an obstacle, since communication is filtered through it. People who have a very high level of proficiency can still be penalised by their level of phonological competence, particularly a noticeable accent, even though the majority of users/learners retain an accent even at Level C2 and above. Thus, the new scale helps towards social justice by unveiling this issue, reducing unrealistic expectations and encouraging teachers to focus on teaching the elements of phonological competence so that their learners will be clearly intelligible – at all levels.

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