

2018

Research on teacher cognition and pronunciation instruction: Implications for teachers

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Recommended Citation

Baker, Amanda Ann, "Research on teacher cognition and pronunciation instruction: Implications for teachers" (2018). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 4732.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4732>

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Keywords

cognition, teacher, research, pronunciation, teachers, instruction:, implications

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

A. Baker 2018 Research on teacher cognition and pronunciation instruction: Implications for teachers
<http://www.pronunciationforteachers.com/key-concepts.html>

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

Research on Teacher Cognition and Pronunciation Instruction:

Implications for Teachers

Teacher cognition is a term used in second language research to refer broadly to the beliefs and knowledge of teachers (Borg, 2006). This concept covers a range of mental constructs, including teacher knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, rationales, understandings and opinions. Comparing teacher knowledge with teacher beliefs, teacher knowledge is generally considered to be more “objective”, involving investigations such as teachers’ understanding of language, the features of language, and what methodologies or techniques can be used to teach them. Conversely, teacher beliefs are considered more “subjective” in that they involve an evaluative stance or judgement by the teacher in regard to a particular proposition. However, the reality is that these two constructs are highly interconnected and it is difficult to separate the two (Pajares, 1992), particularly in carrying out empirical research (Baker, 2014).

Research on teacher cognition seeks to explore the beliefs and knowledge underlying the decisions teachers make in various aspects of their classroom practices. What are their beliefs and why do they do what they do? And the two may not always clearly align. Early research into second language teacher cognition either examined the general beliefs, knowledge and practices of teachers or focused more specifically on grammar teaching (e.g., Borg, 2003). Very little teacher cognition research focused on oral communication skills (e.g., Cathcart & Olsen, 1976; Glisan & Foltz, 2008), much less pronunciation teaching. However, in recent years, there has been emerging interest into the cognitions of inexperienced and/or experienced pronunciation teachers (e.g., Baker, 2011, 2014; Couper, 2016; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). This interest aligns with an increasing awareness of the importance of pronunciation in developing learners’ communicative competence and subsequent investigations into the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching practices in the past few decades (see Thomson & Derwing, 2015, for a review).

Research on the cognition of pronunciation teachers is important due to teachers’ integral role in supporting students to learn pronunciation, among numerous aspects of a language. What teachers know and believe about pronunciation teaching influences what they prioritize in the class and how they guide students to learn the content that they need to focus on. For example, if teachers place little value on a particular aspect of a language, such as pronunciation, or know little about it, it typically receives little or no attention in the classroom, and thus students may not receive an opportunity to learn it. Such research also serves to inform teacher education. Potential gaps or issues identified in the exploration of teachers’ cognition can be addressed in teacher education and professional learning programs.

Research designed to reach an in-depth understanding of teachers’ cognition will typically employ multiple methods to look at the phenomenon from different angles. Such research may involve questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, and teacher journals/diaries. Many studies will

involve two or more of these methods with the purpose of triangulating the data they collect and to gain a more solid understanding of what teachers believe, know, and do.

Emerging themes from much of the recent research on teacher cognition of pronunciation teaching have provided us with a developing understanding of what areas need to be further enhanced in teacher education and professional development programs and what teachers may need to focus on themselves to enhance their own teaching. Some of the following prominent themes that have arisen in empirical research are:

- Lack of confidence to teach pronunciation (e.g., Baker, 2011; Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2011);
- Neglect of pronunciation in the classroom (e.g., Macdonald, 2002; Foote et al., 2011);
- The lack of confidence and neglect of pronunciation instruction may be attributed to a lack of knowledge of how to teach pronunciation (e.g., Couper, 2017);
- Lack of knowledge in phonology and anxiety about the complexity of the phonological system (e.g., Burri, Chen, & Baker, 2017);
- Lack of knowledge of how to teach pronunciation. There's a desire for learning more techniques for teaching pronunciation. There's an expressed need for how to effectively provide feedback on student pronunciation, how to explain pronunciation, and how to scaffold teaching effectively. (See Couper, 2017; Baker, 2011, 2014; Baker & Burri, 2016);
- Lack of systematicity in teaching pronunciation (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2016) and how to integrate it effectively into the curriculum (Couper, 2016);
- Insecurity with teacher's own pronunciation (e.g., Couper, 2016);
- What model to use (Jenkins 2007; Couper, 2017);
- Valuing of diverse varieties of English (Burri, 2015)
- Need for quality teacher education/professional development (Foote et al., 2011; Murphy, 2014)

For the teacher, the take-away message is that doubts and anxiety about teaching pronunciation and gaps in phonological knowledge and/or pronunciation pedagogy (how to teach pronunciation) are normal. And, these challenges may be caused by several different contextual and personal factors. What is important is for teachers to identify where they position themselves in relation to each of these themes, and choose areas for professional growth and learning. Many of the research articles cited in this brief piece offer suggestions for how to address areas of concern, and thus provide a solid starting place for teacher development and learning.

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