

# The native speaker ideal in FL pronunciation teaching practice

## Evolving norms for English and French

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Language teaching practice is known to come with more or less implicit views on what ‘good pronunciation’ sounds like. However, over the past decades, frameworks such as the communicative approach to language learning and the wish for social inclusion have led to a gradual shift in normative thinking, with intelligibility becoming increasingly valued over the acquisition of a native-like accent, especially at lower levels of proficiency. This contribution traces the evolution of pronunciation norms, ideologies and teaching practices for French and English. We zoom in on the past 150 years, a period in which the relative importance of English and French in international communication was gradually reversed and foreign language learning became a school subject, readily accessible to all pupils. We will supplement our historical overview by an exploratory investigation of current foreign MA foreign language teacher trainees’ experiences and attitudes. While a near-native accent is still seen as a sign of academic success for language students, this new generation of language professionals is very much aware of the fact that pupils who start learning languages in secondary school should first and foremost be sensitized to the target language pronunciation in a safe environment, with feasible and communicatively-relevant norms.

**Keywords:** pronunciation, English, French, native speaker norm, language learning

### 1. Introduction

Language learning, teaching and testing are unavoidably associated with norms to be achieved. The standard against which learners have traditionally been evaluated is that of the educated native speaker (NS) of the target language (TL) (cf. Valdman 1989). This principle of measuring learners’ achievements against those

of an idealised native speaker has come under sustained attack since the 1960s, when the arrival of Chomskyan linguistics cast doubt on the possibility for second (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners, who have no or limited exposure to the TL during the critical period, to achieve native-speaker competence. More than just an *unrealistic* target for L2 and FL learning, native-speaker competence has come to be seen by many scholars as an *undesirable* aim to pursue. Cook (1999), for example, explicitly argues that the goal for language learners should not be to imitate native speakers but rather to develop into successful L2 or FL users. Still, an abstract NS standard often continues to be adopted, implicitly or explicitly, as the goal in language learning (Cook 2016; Dewaele, Bak, and Ortega 2022). This holds not least for the domain of pronunciation, “the area of greatest prejudice and preconception” (Jenkins 2000, 4), where deviation from the norm is immediately audible. It is not surprising, therefore, that pronunciation is strongly associated with linguistic anxiety. FL literature reports that learners may feel vulnerable when it comes to their FL pronunciation, both inside and outside the classroom (e.g. Horwitz 2010; Baran-Łucarz 2011, 2014; Munro and Derwing 2020; Tsang 2022).

Attitudes to normativity have fluctuated considerably over time. Over the last 150 years, we have not only seen changes in modern foreign language (MFL) teaching practice, but we have also witnessed the rise of English as the most important lingua franca, gradually overtaking French in status and prominence in Western-European educational curricula. And while about 100 years ago setting ‘Standard French’<sup>1</sup> as the default learner norm was relatively uncontroversial for learners of that language, regardless of its use as a European lingua franca, today the wide variety of Englishes around the world makes the adoption of Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA) as the standard a less obvious or neutral choice.

This paper traces the evolution of pronunciation teaching practice for both French and English, focusing on the way it has affected how language teachers, policy makers and linguists have viewed the pronunciation goals to be achieved by second and foreign language learners. This historical overview will be complemented by an exploratory survey of the views and experiences of the current generation of university students specialising in foreign languages. BA language students study the linguistics, literature, culture and politics of their TL, but they also continue their own language learning trajectory and have to be able to use the

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1. ‘Standard French’ has traditionally been equated with the variety spoken by the upper class of Paris, i.e. “la bonne bourgeoisie Parisienne” (Grammont 1922, 1) or “la société cultivée de Paris” (Nyrop 1902, vi). As noted by Martinet and Walter (1973, 17–18), this was the direct result of the centralisation of the political, economic and cultural life in Paris.

TL academically. As academic content and language use become more and more intertwined, intellectual success is (again implicitly or explicitly) closely associated with sophisticated language use, which in practice is often equated with language use that is as native-like as possible. Beyond their own language learning goals, those students who go on to enrol in an MA teacher training programme also have to reflect on the importance and practical implementation of pronunciation instruction in secondary schools. In this sense, future MFL teachers bridge the gap between academic discussions about normativity and language models on the one hand and daily teaching practice on the other. We therefore asked the current cohort of students enrolled in the educational MA for modern foreign languages at Radboud University in The Netherlands about their attitudes to and experiences with pronunciation teaching and normativity.

Before delving into the evolution of pronunciation standards, models and goals, Section 2 first contextualises the learning and teaching of pronunciation. Afterwards, Sections 3 to 7 provide a more or less chronological overview of how views on normativity and pronunciation teaching have evolved over time, with a main focus on French and English as a foreign language. Section 8 will then zoom in on the attitudes of the next generation of teachers of English and French: what do teacher trainees think of normative (native-speaker) goals and what kind of pronunciation teaching practices do they subscribe to? Section 9 concludes this contribution by highlighting the main points of convergence and change in pronunciation instruction over time.

## 2. Learning the phonetics and phonology of the TL

When learning a new language, learners have to familiarise themselves with the sounds and sound structures (phonotactics, stress and intonation patterns, mapping between sounds and orthography) of the new language. Novice language learners initially rely heavily on the patterns and knowledge of their mother tongue (L1). The more the L1 is phonetically and/or phonologically similar to the TL, the more often this leads to positive transfer, i.e. realisations that are already in line with the TL. If the distance between the two languages is greater, more negative transfers will arise, with a stronger foreign accent transpiring in the learner's speech (cf. Brière 1966; Tahta, Wood, and Loewenthal 1981; Leather 1983; Colantoni and Steele 2008).

The pronunciation of the TL is known for being one of the most difficult aspects to master when learning a new language after childhood. Not only the linguistic distance between the L1 and the TL affects learners' final attainment, also factors such as learners' age and motivation, the quality and quantity of input

and feedback, and language learning aptitude may play an important role (cf. Pennington and Richards 1986; Moyer 1999; Kennedy and Trofimovich 2017). Even those learners who have a very good command of vocabulary, as well as word and sentence structure, may continue to speak with a noticeable foreign accent.

Insufficient command of the pronunciation of the TL to some extent limits learners' communicative ability. Step by step, learners thus need to discover where discrepancies exist between their L1 and the TL and bring their production in line with target-like usage. This gradual process of unlearning is reflected by the learner's interlanguage phonological system. Once they are familiar with the target language sound system, learners will also have to work on their ability to produce the target realisations in an automated way, so that it does not negatively affect the flow of their speech (cf. Pennington and Richards 1986, 217–218).

Input and activities that enable the learner to make progress are crucial here. FL research and practice are surrounded by a considerable amount of debate on the question of what this input and these activities should look like and which models exemplifying TL pronunciation should be used: recordings especially designed for language learners, the classroom speech produced by a native or non-native foreign language teacher, an idealised NS variety or authentic language use by (native) speakers of various varieties of the TL? Similarly, there are different views on what kind of pronunciation activities would best suit learners' interests, i.e. listen-and-repeat drills, authentic communicative tasks, contrastive analysis raising phonetic/phonological awareness or maybe even no explicit attention at all. This debate, as it has unfolded over time, will be described in detail in the following sections.

### 3. Grammar Translation and beyond

For most language teaching up to the end of the 19th century, pronunciation was not a priority, or even “largely irrelevant” (Celce-Murcia et al. 2010, 3). Foreign language learning was a form of intellectual stimulation rather than economic necessity, and the dominant Grammar Translation Method did not aim to make learners fluent speakers of the TL to facilitate international communication, but rather to allow upper-class elites to understand and translate target language literary texts. This does not mean to say that pronunciation did not receive any attention at all, but where it did, it was mostly still reading-based and focused on educated, prestige varieties, as exemplified by Lenoir's (1799) French pronunciation guide for English children, revealingly titled *French pronunciation and reading made easy; or the Logographic-Emblematical French spelling-book. Being*

*a method by which any child, four or five years old, and of ever so slow an apprehension, although perfectly acquainted with his letters, will, in a few months, be enabled to read French fluently, and pronounce it as if he were Parisian born.*

The need for productive knowledge of French is likely to have been greater than for English at that time, French being the language of the European elite, often taught to young upper-class men staying in Paris as part of their Grand Tour. In his overview of the history of French language teaching in the Netherlands between the 16th and 19th centuries, the Dutch Romance philologist Salverda de Grave (1919) describes the importance of French in Dutch educational curricula, especially in boarding schools, where French was often the language of instruction. Beyond the prestige value of French, Salverda de Grave attributes the proliferation of so-called ‘French schools’<sup>2</sup> to the practical importance of French as the language of trade, commenting that “[e]verything points to the conclusion that practical use of the language was the main aim; this is why it was only very rarely that Dutch instructors were tasked with French teaching” (Salverda de Grave 1919, 300 – our translation, JB & SvV),<sup>3</sup> although he also comments that instruction in oral language use remained limited.

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, language teaching methodologists like Prendergast, Gouin and Berlitz introduced changes in instructional priorities, emphasising oral fluency over grammar and translation. Prendergast (1864) in particular saw FL pronunciation training as a prerequisite, which should precede a focus on written language:

When we learn our first lessons, we are apt to think that if we remember the spelling of the words, and can write them correctly, we have, at all events, retained the substantial part; and that the correct sounds and tone may be attended to afterwards. Sounds may be deemed immaterial and unsubstantial when compared with letters, which are rendered palpable objects by means of paper and ink; but the words of a living language are nothing but sounds. Sounds are the substance; and the letters, or symbols, are their shadows. (Prendergast 1864, 148)

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2. Where Latin schools focused on the classics and prepared pupils for university, French schools, as their name implies, offered instruction in French and a range of other subjects. Their more practical orientation made them very popular, so much so that the 17th century French philosopher Pierre Bayle, who taught for a certain time at the *Ecole Illustre* in Rotterdam, is said to have commented, “*Il y a en Hollande douze Ecoles de françois pour une de Latin*” (Salverda de Grave 1919, 301).

3. “Uit alles blijkt dat het praktische gebruik van de taal bij het onderwijs hoofddoel was; vandaar het feit dat men slechts zelden Hollanders met dit onderricht belast vindt.” (Salverda de Grave 1919, 300)

Gouin (1892,137) similarly comments that “the written word [is] the shadow of the spoken word” and that “the first cause [...] of a false accent and pronunciation is the study of languages by means of reading.” Berlitz (1888,7) is also convinced that “the student must at first learn through the ear, in order to acquire a good pronunciation.” This is done through the use of the TL in the classroom, with the NS teacher serving as a model. As pronunciation is said to rely on “the unintellectual process of parrotry” (Prendergast 1864,150), the learner needs a model with an authentic accent more than a teacher with any kind of linguistic training:

A clear, soft, refined, and deliberate utterance should be considered indispensable in teachers; because all their tones, accents, emphases, and cadences are to be imitated and adopted. It is quite unnecessary to employ a professor. A foreign friend with a pleasant voice will do the work as effectually, and much more agreeably. (Prendergast 1864, 146)

In the absence of NS teachers, Gouin (1892,180) suggests, the class should be opened to NS informants, so that the non-native-speaker teacher does not need to fear being ridiculed for their accent, “having in his class and ready to his hand the foreign accent, and that a selected one.”

#### 4. The Reform Movement

The foundation of the *International Phonetic Association* in 1886 and the introduction of the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) in 1887 marked a more radical change in the teaching of pronunciation. Like Prendergast, Gouin and Berlitz, proponents of the so-called Reform Movement also believed in the primacy of oral language but their approach to pronunciation teaching went beyond mimicry. They stressed the importance of using phonetic information such as phonetic charts and articulatory features of different sounds to help learners to master the sound system of the TL. In *A Handbook of Phonetics* (1877) Sweet called for reform of “our present wretched system of studying modern languages” by integrating in language courses “a preliminary training in general phonetics” (Sweet 1877, v–vi). The Danish Romance linguist Kristoffer Nyrop (1902) also emphasises the importance of paying attention to phonetics in pronunciation teaching:

Que la connaissance exacte de la nature des phonèmes, de leur formation et de leur combinaison, soit un moyen pédagogique tout à fait excellent, c'est maintenant une vérité presque banale, et on reconnaît volontiers les grands services que la phonétique peut rendre à l'enseignement des langues.<sup>4</sup> (Nyrop 1902, vi)

This new orientation meant that a native command of the TL was no longer a sufficient qualification for a language teacher; any self-respecting language teacher should be able to draw on basic knowledge of phonetics in the teaching of pronunciation. In fact, the innovations proposed by the Reform Movement appear to have gained in popularity so quickly that Sweet laments in 1908 that “[m]any teachers who used to profess not to know what phonetics was, forthwith announced classes in it” (Sweet 1908, 4).

The systematic phonetic description that linguists engaged in around this time led to a degree of standardisation in language teaching and a need on the part of phoneticians to make a choice as to which variety of the TL they set out to describe. In his *Primer of Spoken English* (1890) Sweet describes the standard he has adopted as “the educated speech of London and the district round it”, which he distinguishes from “vulgar and provincial English on the one hand, and literary English on the other hand” (Sweet 1890, v),<sup>5</sup> similar to Daniel Jones whose preface to his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917) announces that it will provide the pronunciation “most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose menfolk have been educated at the great public boarding schools” (Jones 1917, viii). In France it is the pronunciation of “la société cultivée de Paris” (Nyrop 1902, vi) or, more generally, “la population cultivée du Nord de la France” (Michaelis and Passy 1914, viii) that is favoured. Each of these authors acknowledges that these definitions of standard French or English may encompass a great deal of variation, that there is not “un seul bon usage” (Nyrop 1902, vii), and that any standard “is not absolutely uniform even among speakers

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4. ‘It is now almost a truism that an exact knowledge of the nature of phonemes, their formation and combination, is an excellent pedagogical tool, and the great services that phonetics can offer to language teaching are readily acknowledged.’ [our translation, JB & SvV]

5. Almost two decades later, Sweet describes both Standard English and Standard French as class dialects rather than local dialects:

Standard English, like Standard French, is now a class-dialect more than a local dialect: it is the language of the educated all over Great Britain. But although it has, to a great extent, supplanted the local dialects, it is still liable to be influenced by them; each speaker imports into it something of his own local form of speech, whether it be a rustic dialect or the vulgar cockney of London, Liverpool, or any other large town. The best speakers of Standard English are those whose pronunciation, and language generally, least betray their locality. (Sweet 1908, 7)

of the same generation, living in the same place, and having the same social standing” (Sweet 1890, vii). Nevertheless, for each of these authors, the adoption of the educated NS as a convenient standardised model for pronunciation instruction remains entirely uncontroversial.

## 5. Audiolingualism and the oral approach

Societal and political changes during the interbellum, the Second World War and the post war period, prompted further changes in the way FL learning and teaching were organised. French gradually lost its position as the main *lingua franca* in the Western world (Rooryck 2013; Wright 2016; McLelland 2018), which also reduced its status and prominence as a school subject. In 1919 Salverda de Grave complained about plans to limit French instruction in Dutch primary schools, which was “said to have less practical use than other foreign languages” (Salverda de Grave 1919, 300 – our translation, JB & SvV).<sup>6</sup> Especially after World War II, English became more and more important in trade, international relations, science and culture (Lo Bianco 2014; Wright 2016).

Increasing globalisation and international tensions went hand in hand with a reorientation of teaching methods, and a discussion about the pronunciation goals to work towards. FL learning in general was no longer exclusively seen as a prestigious skill for the well-educated classes. Rather, language learners wanted to focus on understanding and making themselves understood in the TL. The most prominent language training methods in the direct aftermath of WWII – the Audiolingual Method (originating in the USA) and the Oral Approach (developed in the United Kingdom) – both aim at providing learners with an acceptable level of productive and receptive oral FL skills, with pronunciation training playing a key role. Learners are familiarised with the sounds of the language through models of well-educated NS pronunciation, as provided by their teacher’s speech or by NS recordings. Schueler (1944) reports on his experiences as a FL teacher in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) at Queens College. He paraphrases the objective for FL speaking as “a command of the colloquial *spoken* form of the language” (Schueler 1944, 183), and when referring to the ASTP directive, he quotes the following envisioned outcome:

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6. “Zo is dus hetzelfde Frans dat men tans op de lagere school wil besnoeien, omdat het niet van zoveel prakties nut voor de leerling heet te zijn als andere vreemde talen, drie eeuwen geleden door de praktijk zelf in ons onderwijsprogram gekomen.” (Salverda de Grave 1919, 300)



[T]his command includes the ability to speak the language fluently, accurately, and with an acceptable approximation to a native pronunciation. It also implies that the student will have a practically perfect auditory comprehension of the language as spoken by natives. (Schueler 1944, 183)

These language training approaches, which directly reflect the insights of behaviourist psychology, were facilitated by the arrival of the language laboratory, which became more and more common from the 1960s onwards. By listening to and repeating minimal pairs, individual sounds, words and short sentences, learners internalise and automate the essentials of the sound patterns of the TL and try to erase traces from their L1 as much as possible. Imitative drilling is typically accompanied by explicit instruction on TL articulatory phonetics (cf. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996; Ketabi and Saeb 2015), continuing the innovations introduced by the late 19th century Reform Movement. In the introduction of his *French Phonetics Training for Anglo-American Students*, French linguist Pierre Delattre also justifies this combination of drill exercises with phonetic explanation, explaining why an abstract, formal standard is typically preferred over a more realistic TL model:

On négligera généralement la description réelle au profit de la description corrective, car pour arriver à acquérir des habitudes qui correspondent à la réalité physiologique de l'articulation, il faut souvent dépasser cette réalité pendant une période corrective prolongée. La théorie est un moyen et non pas un but. Le but est d'acquérir des habitudes articuloires durables. (Delattre 1951, 2)<sup>7</sup>

The comments made by American linguist Albert Valdman in *A Drillbook of French Pronunciation* are also illustrative of how drilling and phonetic instruction may contribute to accurate TL pronunciation. He defines the first goal in terms of recognition and perception of sound contrasts, a step which enables the learner to engage in basic communication with native speakers. The second step involves the realisation of the TL sounds “the same way as native speakers of the language produce them” (Valdman 1964, 1). This phase takes much more time and training, but is seen as essential as “one cannot hope to use a foreign language in its cultural context efficiently unless one succeeds in that task” (Valdman 1964, 1).

Although Audiolingualism and the Oral Approach were popular didactic principles in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, criticism gradually emerged (cf. Pimsleur

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7. ‘The real-life description will generally be neglected in favour of the normative description, because in order to acquire habits which correspond to the physiological reality of the articulation, it is often necessary to go beyond this reality for a prolonged corrective period. Theory is a means, not an objective in itself. The aim is to acquire lasting articulatory habits.’ [our translation, JB & SvV]

1963; Scovel 1969; Valdman 1970; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996; Ketabi and Saeb 2015). With their focus on habit formation (pronunciation accuracy, automation of chunks), the drill-approaches were felt to have a rather limited effect on the development of spontaneous language fluency. The introduction of Generative Grammar by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s and his ideas about the human language learning faculty also fuelled emerging doubts regarding the listen-and-repeat strategy, as acquiring a native-like accent after childhood seemed to be an unachievable goal. It was instead deemed more realistic to work on the grammar of the language as a controllable basis for FL competence. This led to a new phase of rethinking language skills training – and the role of pronunciation and the native-speaker model therein – in the 1960s and 1970s.

## 6. Accuracy vs. fluency: Communicative language teaching

### 6.1 Pronunciation no longer in the foreground

Language teachers and didactic materials drifting away from the listen-and-repeat strategy broadly reoriented towards two alternatives. Reverting to an approach based on learning grammatical rules and memorisation of vocabulary (e.g. the Cognitive Approach) was one of them. As it was considered virtually impossible to achieve native-like competence in pronunciation, these approaches allocated only a very marginal role to pronunciation training (Jarosz 2019, 7, referring to Scovel 1969). The second main didactic alternative focused on learners' communicative abilities and saw pronunciation as one of the components of oral language skills, requiring a basic mastery for intelligibility. Pronunciation training clearly lost the centrality it enjoyed in previous decades, a development which was reflected in teaching materials published in this period, as observed by Pimsleur (1963, 199): "While publications of textbooks in a wide variety of other ESL/EFL areas mushroomed, very few new pronunciation books appeared on the market, and those most widely circulated can be counted on the fingers of one hand."<sup>8</sup>

As grammar-based approaches, concentrating on a formal, standardised language variety, awarded no defined role to pronunciation teaching, we will not discuss them in more detail in this section. The Communicative Approach, however, played a significant role in reshaping our thinking about the goals for language learning in general and pronunciation instruction in particular.

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8. ESL: English as a Second Language; EFL: English as a Foreign Language.

## 6.2 The Communicative Approach

The arrival of sociolinguistics in the 1960s and the perceived limitations of existing language teaching approaches made numerous linguists and language pedagogists realise that language teaching could not ignore the social dimension of language use. Instead of focusing solely on their systemic, grammatical competence, learners should also develop their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. This was fleshed out in the Communicative Approach to language learning (cf. Nunan 1987; Savignon 1987, 1991; Thompson 1996) and Hymes' (1972) definition of Communicative Competence.

Contrary to previous strategies, the Communicative Approach formulated the ability of the learner to engage in authentic oral or written communication in the TL (with other learners or native speakers) as the ultimate goal of language learning and teaching. Learners should therefore be exposed to meaningful language in context, engage in communicative tasks, and be sensitised to discourse features. Learning of relevant grammar and vocabulary should be embedded in these communicative contexts. Being communicatively competent should not be equated automatically with native-like competence (Savignon 1991, 270); rather, communicative competence reflects the ability of a language user to engage in an appropriate way in communicative situations relevant to their life and needs.

While pronunciation is not central to communicative language teaching, it is considered relevant to the extent that it facilitates (or hinders) communication. Celce-Murcia (1983, 11) cites Hinofotis and Bailey (1980), saying that "there is a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given non-native speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, he will not be able to communicate orally no matter how good his control of English grammar and vocabulary might be." This 'threshold' implies that the learner has travelled part of the way towards a final goal, but what this goal is is left implicit. Celce-Murcia's (1983) communicative approach to pronunciation involves genuinely communication-oriented tasks that elicit the use of target sounds or contrasts, rather than controlled practice with isolated words or minimal pairs. In general, practitioners of the communication-based approaches assume that pronunciation skills will improve gradually "from interaction with native speakers in naturalistic settings" (Pennington and Richards 1986, 217).

The arrival of the Communicative Approach not only affected the position of pronunciation teaching in the language curriculum, but also the selection of phonetic features. Where previous materials prioritised individual sounds, the Communicative Approach emphasised the importance of suprasegmental features such as stress and intonation patterns as well, as these characteristics play

a major role at the level of discourse (Pennington and Richards 1986; Savignon 1987, 1991; Kang 2010).

### 6.3 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Parallel to the developments in language teaching methodology in the second half of the 20th century described above, the wish to develop a set of non-language-specific and internationally comparable level descriptors led to the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which has its roots in the communicative approach to language teaching. The publication of the first version of the CEFR by the Council of Europe in 2001 was the result of several decades of thinking about standardised levels of FL and L2 proficiency. The definition of the *Threshold* level for English in 1975, from which the CEFR B1 level would later be derived, can be seen as a significant pioneering step. The CEFR formalised the wish to approach language learning from a communicative and plurilingual perspective, a change in approach which inevitably led to divergence from the NS model:

From this perspective, the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. (Council of Europe 2001, 5)

Even though this first edition of the CEFR was quite comprehensive in making its mission and perspective explicit and in providing various scales for the evaluation of the different language competences at each of the six language levels, it came with the disclaimer that “[t]he full implications of such a paradigm shift have yet to be worked out and translated into action” (Council of Europe 2001, 5), for pronunciation as well as other skills. Phonological competence and pronunciation are referred to in several places in the document. A striking reference can be found in the first chapter, where pronunciation, together with inflexional morphology, is given as an example of the fact that certain skills just need to be mastered to gain confidence when using a foreign language. A comparison is made with learning to drive a car: controlling certain basic skills gives the driver self-confidence and makes them feel at ease (Council of Europe 2001, 11).

Phonological competence explicitly returns in Chapter 5 ‘The user/learner’s competences’, where it is defined as “knowledge of, and skill in the perception and production” of various segmental and suprasegmental characteristics” (Council of Europe 2001, 116–117). In production this starts at the A1 and A2 levels with the requirement for the learner to be able to pronounce basic phrases clearly

enough to be understood. Interlocutors have to listen through a “noticeable foreign accent” (2001,117) and repetition may be required for clarification. At B1, phonological control is required to be “clearly intelligible, even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur” (2001,117). At B2, the learner is supposed to have acquired a “clear, natural pronunciation and intonation” (2001,117). For C1 and C2 the requirements are identical, which means that the learner is supposed to have achieved their pronunciation goals by the time they have reached C1 level, where they are expected to “vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning” (2001,117). It is up to the MFL teacher to determine which segmental and suprasegmental features are most important for language learners at various stages, and they are also supposed to determine the importance of phonological skills relative to other language competences in various phases of the learning process, i.e. they need to consider “whether phonetic accuracy and fluency are an early learning objective or developed as a longer term objective” (2001,117). Learners’ age and developmental stage play a role, and it is acknowledged that if the aim is to approximate native norms, it may be less time-consuming and much more efficient to start earlier (2001,132).

## 7. Recent developments

### 7.1 Pronunciation variation and models

The most recent period of pronunciation teaching history has seen a continuation and consolidation of the trend to define the goal for pronunciation teaching as intelligibility rather than nativeness – at least in research if not always in practice (cf. Levis 2005; Munro and Derwing 2020). Particularly influential in this regard has been Munro and Derwing’s (1995) research on accentedness, comprehensibility – i.e. ease of interpretation – and intelligibility, defined as “the extent to which a speaker’s message is actually understood by a listener” (Munro and Derwing 1995,76). Their findings demonstrate that there are only moderate correlations between ratings by NS listeners of the accentedness of L2 speech and either intelligibility or comprehensibility, so that “a strong foreign accent does not necessarily cause L2 speech to be low in comprehensibility or intelligibility” (Munro and Derwing 1995,92). Their conclusion that accentedness, comprehensibility and intelligibility are related but distinct constructs has been an important drive in subsequent empirical research investigating exactly which features, segmentals as well as suprasegmentals, contribute to intelligibility (e.g. Hahn 2004; Munro and Derwing 2006; Kang and Moran 2014; Thir 2020).

An additional question is who should be the judge of a speaker's intelligibility – a question that is clearly relevant for any language, but has been asked more often and more persistently in connection with English than with French, as a direct result of the spread of different varieties of English (i.e. native speaker varieties, lingua franca users, FL and L2 speakers) across the world. If communication does not necessarily involve (inner-circle)<sup>9</sup> native speakers, prestigious NS varieties clearly lose much of their relevance as models for pronunciation instruction. As Smith (1992, 75) asserts, “[o]ur speech [...] in English needs to be intelligible only to those with whom we wish to communicate in English.” Responding to English language training (ELT) materials' focus on “intelligibility for the native rather than the non-native receiver”, Jenkins (1998, 121–123) proposes “a universal, realistically teachable and learnable core” of features that affect intelligibility in lingua franca contexts. This ‘Lingua Franca Core’ (LFC; Jenkins 2000) comprises core phonological features (e.g. most of the consonant inventory, vowel duration, nuclear stress), but steers clear of features like liaison and weak forms with reduced vowel sounds, which are considered to be unhelpful – or even detrimental – in the context of interactions where English functions as a lingua franca.

In spite of a growing consensus on the superiority of the ‘intelligibility principle’ over the ‘nativeness principle’ among scholars of FL/L2 pronunciation, uptake of research findings in language teaching practice remains relatively limited (Levis 2005, 370), even for English. This is evidenced by training manuals like *Get Rid of your Accent* (James and Smith 2006), explaining to learners why they should “make an effort to reduce a strong Russian or Spanish accent” and why they should learn Received Pronunciation – billed as “a neutral pronunciation of educated Southern English” rather than any regional variety of English (James and Smith 2006, 2). A recent content analysis of global ELT coursebooks (Kiczkowiak 2021) also suggests that selection of pronunciation features is not necessarily informed by research, with LFC features accounting for only 5 to 33 percent of the pronunciation syllabi of the coursebooks under investigation. Reasons given by the coursebook writers themselves point to doubts about the usefulness of the LFC as a model as well as about the role of editors and publishers as gatekeepers, determining the pronunciation features (in some cases “more for marketing than for pedagogy”) as well as accents learners will be exposed to (which two writers reported as being “restricted [...] [to] mostly young educated southern UK types”) (Kiczkowiak 2021, 63). A notable, recent, exception to this divide between research and practice is Smakman's *Clear English Pronunciation* (2020), which explicitly sets out to “help learners think critically about pronunci-

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9. Inner circle countries: countries in which English is the first language of the majority of the inhabitants, such as the UK and the USA (Kachru 1985).

ation variation and models” and encourages them to select the model they want to adopt from a variety of different NSs as well as non-native speakers (NNSs) “whose English is of a high understandability level” (Smakman 2020, xii).

Discussions about the suitability of different models for pronunciation instruction and learners’ right to retain their accent as a marker of identity (Smith 1992; Jenkins 2000; Sung 2014; Pennington 2021), have initially mostly focused on English, fuelled by its current role as an international lingua franca. However, it is clear by now that the scope has widened to include other languages as well (Levis 2020, 311). Huensch (2019) also sets out to redress the balance between English and other languages by investigating the beliefs and practices of teachers of Spanish, French and German. She concludes that while most instructors agreed that the main goal for pronunciation instruction should be comfortable intelligibility, for many this did not preclude accent reduction as a valid goal in its own right (Huensch 2019, 745). For some instructors their perception of pronunciation instruction as synonymous with accent reduction was even cited as a reason *not* to devote class time to pronunciation at all, because this was felt to be at odds with a focus on communicative competence.

Insights from sociolinguistics have also greatly contributed to the debate on which varieties should be adopted as contemporary model(s) for FL learners, especially in the case of French, where rethinking normative ideas has had a different dynamics than for (lingua franca) English. Whereas standard (i.e. ‘cultivated Parisian’) French has traditionally been defined as the FL learning goal, insights from variationist linguistics have cast doubt on the usefulness and *raison d’être* of such an abstract standard, which in fact does not exist as a uniform accent in society. Already in 1973, in their pioneering, sociolinguistically-informed pronunciation dictionary *La prononciation du français dans son usage réel* [The pronunciation of French as in real language use], André Martinet and Henriette Walter point to the fact that learners’ main wish is to be understood, without breaking down communication. It is therefore most important to inform them about bandwidths of TL variation of specific features in authentic communication (Martinet and Walter 1973, 17). It would take several decades for this line of reasoning to be reflected in French (FL) pronunciation textbooks. Canepari (2017, 12) defines the preferred contemporary model for French pronunciation as a neutral one, i.e. a model stripped off its regional features, without affecting its naturalness. In their cross-accent depiction of French pronunciation, Detey et al. (2016) underline that a specific model may be required for the development of productive skills, but it is also important to sensitise the learner to different NS and learner accents in the TL, so that they will be able to decipher the varieties they may hear around them when engaging in authentic TL communication:

Les modèles en production (que les apprenants doivent imiter) et en perception (que les apprenants doivent être en mesure de comprendre) doivent-ils être identiques? Cette dernière question se pose de façon beaucoup plus aiguë à l'oral qu'à l'écrit de par la mobilité accrue des jeunes apprenants confrontés aux français, non homogènes, qui se parlent en Europe, en Amérique et en Afrique notamment. (Detey et al. 2016, 23)<sup>10</sup>

Next to rethinking production standards and perception models, Huensch (2019) identifies the investigation of which features contribute most to intelligibility in languages other than English as another main desideratum for future research. Outcomes of such studies should allow for a principled selection of target features by materials writers and curriculum developers.

## 7.2 The CEFR Companion Volume

The recent theoretical insights described above have been integrated in the 2020 version of the CEFR, which updates the previous edition in several regards, also when it comes to pronunciation. It is recognised that in the 2001 version

[...] the progression appeared unrealistic, particularly in moving from B1 (“Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur”) to B2 (“Has a clear, natural, pronunciation and intonation”). In fact, the phonology scale was the least successful of those calibrated in the original research behind the descriptors published in 2001.

(Council of Europe 2020, 133)

The more detailed attention given to phonetic and phonological competence also led the authors of the 2020 Companion Volume to be much more explicit about native speaker norms and accentedness. It was felt that the 2001 scales were too much in line with traditional normative views on accent reduction, at the cost of “consideration for context, sociolinguistic aspects and learners’ needs” (Council of Europe 2020, 133). The Companion Volume therefore provides a fully revised scale for pronunciation skills, focusing on overall phonological control, segmental articulation and prosodic features, with impact on intelligibility as the criterion for progress across the proficiency levels. The transition from B1 to B2 has become more nuanced: pronunciation at B1 has to be “generally intelligible” (2020, 134),

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10. ‘Do production models (which learners must imitate) and perception models (which learners must be able to understand) have to be identical? The latter question is much more acute for oral language use than for written communication, given the increased mobility of young learners who are confronted with non-homogeneous French spoken in Europe, America and Africa in particular.’ [our translation, JB & SvV]



although clear traces of an L1 accent remain; at B2 the suprasegmentals also come into play. Another clear difference with the 2001 version is that there is room for progress between the C1 and the C2 level: at C1 all phonological features used have to be mastered in such a way that there is no breakdown in intelligibility, while a foreign accent may still transpire. At C2 then, the learner can use a variety of phonological (segmental and suprasegmental) features of the TL in an automated way, and these can be used “to convey finer shades of meaning” (Council of Europe 2020, 134). No reference is made to accentedness at this level, so it is not clear to what extent learners are expected to have eliminated any traces of an L1 accent by the time they reach the upper end of the scale.

The preceding sections have outlined a gradual development in attitudes regarding accentedness and the validity of different pronunciation goals and models. We will now evaluate how these developments are reflected in the attitudes to pronunciation instruction of the next generation of teachers of French and English.

## **8. Future MFL teachers’ attitudes to pronunciation instruction**

MFL practitioners’ attitudes towards pronunciation instruction are shaped by their own experiences as language learners and teachers, but also by pedagogical insights they have been exposed to in their teacher training. In that sense, they are the connection between academic or ideological discussions about normativity and their practical implementation in the classroom. To gain insight into how FL students and future language teachers feel about the relevance of NS models to their own language learning goals and those of their (future) pupils, we have conducted an exploratory survey, the results of which are presented below.

### **8.1 Informants**

We collected questionnaire data, complemented by focus group interviews from 6 students enrolled in the two-year MFL educational MA programme (3 specializing in English, 3 in French). We additionally asked 27 BA students of English and Culture and 14 BA students of French Language & Culture about their wish to approximate a NS level. All participants study at Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

## 8.2 Experiences, ideas and attitudes

### 8.2.1 *Sensitisation and models*

According to the teacher trainee respondents, pronunciation instruction is especially important in the final years of secondary school, by which time pupils have a solid basis in grammar, vocabulary and communicative skills. There are, however, differences between future teachers of French and English in the perceived necessity to start pronunciation instruction right from the start in year one. As Dutch pupils' exposure to French outside the classroom is very limited, their starting level for French is much lower and there are not nearly as many opportunities for implicit learning from input outside school as there are for English. Especially the future teachers of French therefore consider it useful to integrate implicit and explicit attention for pronunciation from the first years of secondary school onwards. This would make learners aware of the major transfers from Dutch and the phonetic opacity of French orthography. Learners often create an L1- and/or orthography-based pronunciation, not reflecting actual pronunciation. This is a strategy that may work for written memorisation, but deviant productions seem to be very difficult to erase at a later stage. The future teachers of French also note that a lack of attention for pronunciation in the lower years leaves pupils feeling insecure and uncomfortable when they are required to use the TL orally in class. The future teachers of English, on the other hand, feel that their pupils have a sufficient basis to express themselves orally and there is no particular need to work on pronunciation in the lower years, especially as there are no oral examinations until much later.

The informants for both languages agree that NS teachers are a suitable model for secondary school learners. The teacher trainees for French are divided about the suitability of NNS teachers, however. One feels that they are less suitable than NS teachers, while the other two consider them to be suitable or highly suitable, commenting that especially in lower years, NNS teachers represent a more achievable (and less intimidating) model. The future teachers of English were on the whole more positive than future teachers of French about using recordings of speakers of regional or global non-standard varieties or fluent NNSs of English as a model for language production. In listening comprehension tasks, however, exposure to a range of native and non-native accents was considered valuable by future teachers of both languages to make learners aware of the actual language use they may come across in daily life TL contexts. One future teacher of English comments that NS accents as well as near-native accents modelled on RP (like her own) were difficult for pupils in lower years to understand, so she would modify her accent, avoiding reduced forms and inserting post-vocalic *r* to facilitate comprehension for her younger pupils. Another respondent, commenting on the link between accent and identity, also varies her accent depending on the occasion: in

class, in her role as a teacher, she feels RP to be appropriate, but she takes care to avoid RP in social interactions with her friends.

Even though the literature questioning nativeness as a goal for pronunciation instruction has been concentrated strongly on English, future teachers of both English and French see the relevance of this discussion for both languages. They agree that attention for pronunciation competence should contribute first and foremost to learners' intelligibility, both for communication with NSs and NNSs of the TL. None of the respondents indicate that the goal should be to sound like a native speaker. At the same time, some comment on the desirability of an 'authentic' or 'natural' accent, or they see accent reduction as a goal that can be pursued in parallel with intelligibility (similar to respondents in Huensch 2019). One future teacher added that there is still a perception among pupils that "if you sound British, you are very good at English", so that nativeness was not a goal for all pupils but rather a mark of distinction for high achievers. Likewise, for the future language teachers themselves, as well as BA students of French and English Language and Culture, the attainment of a native-like pronunciation is seen as a sign of study success and professional ambition. In a recent poll we conducted among second- and third-year BA students of French and English, 76.92% of the students of English and 84.62% of the students of French agreed strongly that they "would like to match the level of a native speaker". The teacher trainees explained their own preference for a NS standard by saying that it might not be essential, but that it helped them to feel more confident.

### 8.2.2 *Classroom practice*

Teaching activities that are seen as useful by all six teacher trainees to increase intelligibility are pronouncing and repeating words and short sentences, in order to automatize TL articulation, combined with instruction on major differences between the learners' L1 and the TL, so that learners develop some awareness of the features they should pay attention to. Authentic audio materials such as songs, documentaries and films are seen as valuable complementary input. The future MFL teachers are more divided about the usefulness of reading aloud longer stretches of text, the use of the phonetic alphabet and the learning effect of speaking without corrective feedback. Responding to the lack of available class time, they suggest that consciously integrating some attention to salient features of pronunciation in exercises and tasks that primarily target other skills could be one way to ensure that pronunciation receives sufficient attention.

Finally, the teacher trainees of French and English were asked to think about which phonetic and phonological characteristics they would find useful to include in pronunciation teaching. At the segmental level, both groups generally agree that consonantal and vocalic characteristics of the TL are important. However, paying attention to phenomena of consonantal and vocalic reduction is con-

sidered to be of inferior interest to secondary school learners of both languages. With respect to suprasegmental features, the future teachers recognise the importance of paying attention to word stress for both languages. The future teachers of English do not think attention for intonation patterns is particularly important, while the teacher trainees of French value this particular suprasegmental feature very highly. This is likely due to the considerable differences between French, with its phrasal accent, on the one hand, and the word-based patterns of both Dutch and English on the other. For both languages, the teacher trainees have diverging opinions about the amount of attention that should be allocated to liaison and connected speech. Noteworthy is one comment of a French teacher trainee, who clearly sees liaison as a (differentiating) sign of proficiency, which she expects the better students to have more or less mastered – without any formal instruction – by the end of their secondary school career, as it is such an integral feature of French pronunciation. Other respondents indicate, in line with the Lingua Franca Core formulated for English (cf. Section 7.1), that these features do not contribute greatly to a learner's intelligibility.

### 8.2.3 *Perceived limitations*

The future MFL teachers strongly agree that pronunciation instruction is a very important but often neglected skill. They all stress that the amount of attention paid to pronunciation in their internship schools appears to be highly dependent on available class time (next to other time-consuming language tasks and within the very limited number of hours available for their subject). In the final years the situation is complicated by the time taken up by preparation for the nationwide final reading comprehension exams. This leaves relatively little opportunity for practising other skills, and especially pronunciation is notorious for being neglected. Another reason they give for the perceived lack of attention for pronunciation is that it does not feature prominently in coursebooks, and those activities that are dedicated to pronunciation are not perceived as being particularly motivating. The teacher trainees also note that not all teachers feel qualified to rely on phonetic explanation for pronunciation instruction, or feel sufficiently confident in their own pronunciation to deal with pronunciation at all.<sup>11</sup> The teacher trainee informants indicated that they themselves and, more generally, their generation of academically trained MLF teachers, felt motivated to try to provide more room for pronunciation training and to raise more awareness of the phonetics and phonology of the TL in their future classrooms.

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11. This observation apparently corresponds to a more widespread feeling among FL teachers. Derwing (2010: 24, citing Burgess and Spencer 2000), for example, notes that “L2 teachers are somewhat intimidated by the idea of teaching pronunciation” (see also Huensch 2019).

## 9. Discussion and conclusion

Although each of the methodologies that we have described in our historical overview overlapped and co-existed with other approaches, in hindsight it is possible to identify a gradual development of new insights about the position of pronunciation instruction in the curriculum relative to other language skills, as well as the goals learners have been expected to work towards. Pronunciation instruction went from being considered largely irrelevant in the Grammar Translation approach to being a strong instructional focus in the Reform Movement as well as the Audiolingual and Oral Approaches of the fifties and sixties, only to then be consigned to the periphery once again because native-like pronunciation was considered either an unachievable goal or of minor concern in the development of communicative competence. At present pronunciation does not have a clearly defined position in the curriculum of modern foreign languages in secondary schools; much depends on the value individual teachers attach to pronunciation and their confidence teaching it, which in turn depends on their own educational background and their perception of themselves as valid models for their pupils.

We have also seen a change in attitudes regarding accentedness, moving from a self-evident focus on achieving a native-like accent at the end of the 19th century to an increasing focus on intelligibility as the main goal for pronunciation instruction. This is an insight that is widely recognised in research for FL learning in general, certainly for English nowadays, due to its status as a worldwide lingua franca. Given that much of the communication in English does not involve native speakers at all, it is perhaps easier to accept than for other languages that a native-speaker standard is unnecessary and serves to maintain accent-based discrimination. The acceptance of the intelligibility principle has led to a lot of research investigating which features, both segmental and suprasegmental, contribute to intelligibility, although the development of this line of research for languages other than English is relatively recent.








Results from studies like these are often slow to permeate classroom practices, partly because, as Jarosz (2019,1) observes, “teachers are not the target readers of academic publications and therefore, they are not acquainted with the latest findings of empirical studies.” In our overview of pronunciation teaching practices since the late 19th century we have seen that innovations tend to co-exist with earlier language teaching methodologies, rather than replacing each other in a neat succession. In the coming years the impact of the past two decades of research on normativity and accentedness can be expected to increasingly feed into actual language teaching practice, for French as well as English. The attitudes of the student teachers we interviewed suggest that the gap between theory and practice is not as big as it once was. The teacher trainees all agreed that their job was to






help secondary-school learners to make their pronunciation more intelligible – rather than more native-like. Nativeness does continue to lurk in the background, however, and a native-like accent continues to be seen as a mark of distinction. As people’s perceptions of others are known to be coloured by their interlocutors’ accents, it remains to be seen how changing goals for pronunciation instruction in FL classrooms will affect our perception of accentedness, not just in education but in society as a whole.

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