

# The value of an explicit pronunciation syllabus in ESOL teaching

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on an action research project which investigated the value of systematically and explicitly incorporating a pronunciation sub-syllabus within the overall syllabus of a full-time post-intermediate level ESOL course. This pronunciation syllabus involved raising each individual learner's awareness of their difficulties with pronunciation and of the main features of spoken English in general. It then attempted to systematically and explicitly instruct learners in these features, at both the segmental and suprasegmental levels, and to encourage learners to practise and monitor their pronunciation.

The effectiveness of the syllabus was examined through pre- and post-course tests of pronunciation and through a survey of students' reactions to the syllabus and their beliefs regarding the teaching and learning of pronunciation. The results showed that clear gains were made, and that learners believed both that teachers should teach pronunciation, and that the particular approach taken here had been of value.

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## Rationale and literature review

This project was prompted by two factors. The first was that pronunciation was still a significant impediment to communication for many students studying on a full-time post-intermediate level course with a study focus at a university in Auckland. The second factor emerged from a recently completed tracer study of former students, which investigated their needs in hindsight (Couper 2002) and indicated that, even though the students had had a focus on further study, they expressed a great need in the area of informal spoken language and pronunciation. While pronunciation had not been ignored on their course, it had often been treated implicitly, and there had been no attempt to explicitly or systematically cover all of the main features of the phonology of English. It had generally been treated incidentally as an integrated part of the syllabus. The approach adopted in this project was therefore to explicitly instruct and raise learners' consciousness of the pronunciation of English, rather than assuming that it would be improved implicitly through exposure to the target language.

The focus on explicit instruction taken in this project follows from

Sharwood Smith's (1981) arguments that consciousness and awareness raising are important in second language acquisition, rather than with Krashen's (1982) position that pronunciation is acquired naturally. More recently, SLA research into the effects of a focus on form in the classroom has suggested that explicit teaching of form can have beneficial effects on L2 learning (Spada 1997). Although these studies generally involved grammar, questions regarding the effects of form-focused pronunciation instruction, such as those addressed in this study, are very relevant to second language teachers and learners.

As far as the acquisition of phonology is concerned, it is generally thought that as one ages it becomes more difficult to attain a native-speaker-like accent in another language, as the brain has already established ways of categorising sounds and it is very difficult to change these (Leather 1999). Thus, L2 pronunciation difficulties are more related to cognitive factors than physical ones (Fraser 2000). This suggests that it may be beneficial to take a cognitive approach to teaching pronunciation to adults, and this was the approach taken in this study.

Pennington (1998) argues that phonology both can and should be taught to adult learners and calls for more research in this area, as does Fraser (2000). However, empirical studies have been relatively few in the literature. Although type of instruction is clearly important in the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction, this was a key factor ignored by Suter (1976), who was not able to find a positive effect for instruction. While Acton (1984) reports in detail on a program of instruction focusing on the link between pronunciation, affect, personality and social context, which was designed to help learners whose pronunciation had fossilised, no empirical evidence of its success is offered. More recently, Derwing, Munro and Wiebe found a positive effect for instruction which 'focused on general speaking habits as opposed to a concentration on individual segments' (1997: 217). Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998) also found that both instruction in segmental accuracy, and instruction in general speaking habits and prosodic features, led to improved pronunciation.

Macdonald, Yule and Powers (1994) attempted to measure the short-term effects of different types of instruction, but found that learner differences introduced a very important variable which was hard to control, and they were not able to draw clear conclusions. However, two of the interventions investigated involved only one ten-minute period of instruction and the third involved 30 minutes of self-study. In contrast, the study reported on here has focused on longer term gains from longer periods of instruction involving learner analysis.

A number of studies have been able to show positive effects on the

production of individual phonemes, prosody or overall fluency resulting from explicit phonological instruction in English and other languages (for example, Neufeld 1977; Murakawa 1981; de Bot and Mailfert 1982; de Bot 1983; Leather 1990; Champagne-Muzar, Schneiderman and Bourdages 1993). There have also been studies which have focused on phonological perception on the basis that this may lead to changes in articulation, and which have found a positive effect (for example, Strange and Dittman 1984; Jamieson and Morosan 1986).

In summary, while there is now some empirical evidence that instruction can lead to an improvement in pronunciation, questions remain as to the short-term and long-term effects of different types and quantities of instruction on different types of learners. The study reported here investigates the effectiveness of a program of explicit instruction on a group of post-intermediate learners from a range of backgrounds who were living in New Zealand and wished to improve their professional qualifications and study skills.

### **Overview of the study**

In brief, the learners who participated in the study were given a pre-test in pronunciation which was incorporated in the course and used as an awareness-raising diagnostic tool. Learners were given the results and had these explained to them. The course of instruction developed for the learners involved an explicit and systematic approach to pronunciation. After the course, a post-test was administered to measure the effectiveness of the teaching methodology, and the results of this were also presented to learners so that they could see their improvement. A survey was also given to the students to elicit their reactions to the syllabus, and to elicit data about their beliefs regarding the teaching and learning of pronunciation.

### **The subjects**

From a class of 21 post-intermediate students, 15 agreed to participate in the project, and were present throughout the whole course, and available for both the pre- and post-tests. All were permanent residents. Most already had some form of professional qualification from their own countries, but needed additional study in order to be able to work at the same level in New Zealand. In some cases, they wanted to study something else to take up an alternative occupation. Their language backgrounds were: Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese) (10), Japanese (1), Korean (1), Farsi (1), Arabic (1) and Serbian (1). They ranged in age from 22 to 48 with an average age of 32. At the beginning of the course they had been in the country for periods ranging from three months to six years. The average length of stay was

two and a half years. They had all had some English tuition before coming to New Zealand, but the focus had generally been on reading and writing rather than on speaking.

## **The course and development of the pronunciation sub-syllabus**

The course into which the pronunciation sub-syllabus was introduced was a full-time post-intermediate level course with a focus on study skills conducted at a university in Auckland. It involved 18 hours of in-class study, with an additional two hours designated as self-study each week over a 16-week period. Approximately two hours per week were devoted specifically to pronunciation teaching. This was not done in one block, but rather in three or four shorter sessions, including time in the language laboratory. This is a relatively short time for each aspect of pronunciation, but students were directed to the Learning Centre for more practice exercises in their individual areas of difficulty.

The syllabus was developed over the two semesters prior to the study, and was based on principles developed using feedback from previous students. This suggested that students needed to:

- 1 recognise the importance of pronunciation (that is, accept that accuracy was important, and that they needed to attend to it);
- 2 develop an awareness of their areas of deficiency (an extension of 1, this was done through diagnostics and other feedback, and getting students to plan what they were going to focus on, especially in their self-study time);
- 3 develop the ability to monitor their own pronunciation (in particular, this was done by getting students to record themselves after a model and then listen again and compare);
- 4 learn to focus on the pronunciation of native speakers and try to use this as a model (through listening to and analysing native-speaker speech, by pointing out different features and getting students to listen for more features). Learners also need to accept that there is a difference between spoken and written language and that they will not hear and understand every word that is said. Thus we can teach them how words change or are left out in spoken language;
- 5 develop their auditory memories and thus the ability to retain and imitate sounds (by getting them to listen and repeat things, to focus on the sounds rather than the visual form of the written word);

- 6 develop physical control over motor skills, through a combination of explanations of what is physically happening when certain sounds are produced, and practice;
- 7 lower their affective filters; for this reason learners need support and positive reinforcement as they produce sounds, and need to realise that not managing a sound correctly the first time around does not mean they cannot learn how to do it and achieve this through practice. In particular, it is felt here that those learners who have been less successful in acquiring pronunciation naturally may achieve more by appealing more to analytical aspects of their nature as learners.

At the beginning of the semester, the students were given a diagnostic test, which was recorded on a tape in the language laboratory. In Part 1 of the test, the students read the following five sentences designed to cover the main potential problem areas:

- 1 I wait for five minutes then I press send.
- 2 He lit lots of cigarettes because he had to wait for a long time.
- 3 We've got hot and cold baked potatoes for breakfast.
- 4 Heat the beans and put them on a plate.
- 5 Many kind men and women live in Meadowbank.

In Part 2, they were asked to introduce and talk about themselves for two minutes.

Their pronunciation was then evaluated for errors by the researcher at the level of the phoneme, word stress, strong and weak forms, epenthesis and absence<sup>1</sup>, joining sounds, and sentence stress. Phonemes were marked as errors if they were not recognisable as the target phoneme. Allophonic variation was not recorded unless it interfered with comprehensibility. Word stress variations were marked as errors when they were clearly non-standard. Epenthesis and absence were recorded as errors when they were significant enough to interfere with meaning or fluency. Instances of a failure to use joining sounds were recorded as errors when this made the language sound disjointed. Failure to use strong and weak forms, and inappropriate sentence stress were recorded globally through comments such as, 'You often forget to use weak forms', rather than through a quantifiable number of errors. These errors were recorded on the test sheet where they occurred under each of the five sentences, or were written down beneath the section for Part 2 when they had occurred in the freer part of the test. To make it easier for students to interpret the analysis, the types of errors were then summarised

on a separate sheet according to the categories described above. A list of phonemic symbols was also included on this sheet for reference.

With this feedback, students then had to make notes of their areas of difficulty on the contents page of a booklet which contained the worksheets to be used for the pronunciation sub-syllabus covered by the course. There was also room for them to record their progress.

The contents page of the booklet indicated the areas to be covered on the course. These were the following:<sup>2</sup>

Unit 1 A: The sounds underlined in: pie, buy, to, do, cap, gap.

Unit 1 B: Strong and weak forms.

Unit 2 A: The sounds underlined in: sum, sun, sung.

Unit 2 B: Word stress and syllables.

Unit 3 A: The sounds underlined in: fan, yan, thanks, than, sue, zoo, pressure, pleasure.

Unit 3 B: Final consonant sounds.

Unit 4 A: Double consonants.

Unit 4 B: Sentence stress.

Unit 5 A: The sounds underlined in: rain, lane, year, wear, hear.

Unit 5 B: Linking sounds between words.

Unit 6 A: The schwa.

Unit 6 B: Changing sounds in connected speech.

Unit 7 A: The sounds underlined in: see, sit, ten, hat, page, five, join.

Unit 7 B: Sounds in connected speech: consonant–consonant.

Unit 8 A: The sounds underlined in: got, saw, cup, fur, arm, home, how.

Unit 8 B: Sounds in connected speech: consonant–vowel.

Unit 9 A: The sounds underlined in: put, too, pure, here, hair.

Unit 9 B: Rhythm and Intonation.

Each part of each unit had a specific focus. These alternated between attention to segmental or suprasegmental features, and often recycled the language presented in the course. For example, a model of a short talk about a newspaper article was used as the vehicle for demonstrating sentence stress, and words from the vocabulary list used on the course were used as examples of individual phonemes or for word stress and syllable work.

Typically, each lesson or group of lessons involved the following teaching methodology. First, the language presented would be listened to, analysed and then repeated. During the next stage, the students recorded themselves in the language laboratory and replayed their recordings in order to compare their pronunciation with the model. During the analysis, explicit instruction on how to produce the particular feature was also given. In the case of the phonemes, graphical representations and explanations of the place and manner of articulation were also provided. Covering all the main phonological features of English, even though some features were easy for some of the students, had the advantage of providing useful points of reference. For example, fricatives could be compared to the equivalent stop in a bid to get Korean students to hear, and produce, the difference between 'fat' and 'Pat'.

Thus the instruction given to the learners involved:

- a) analysis and explanation of pronunciation;
- b) controlled classroom practice;
- c) slightly less controlled classroom practice as learners added their own examples;
- d) listening to and recognising different aspects of pronunciation, especially in the language lab;
- e) language lab work involving listening and repeating;
- f) critically listening to their own speech after recording it in the language lab, both after a model and independently.

This approach stressed the importance of pronunciation. Through recording, listening to, and correcting themselves in the language laboratory, learners were encouraged to think about and analyse their own pronunciation. This process encouraged an increased awareness of specific problem areas, of what people actually say, and of the value of improving the ability to self-monitor.

## **Data collection and analysis**

### **DIAGNOSTIC TESTS**

As noted above, a diagnostic test was given at the beginning of the course. A similar test was also given at the end of the course. Part 1 of the post-test involved reading the same five sentences given on page 57, followed by a further five designed to make it possible to compare the error rate on five different sentences while still maintaining direct points of comparison. These five additional sentences were:

- I might be mad but I don't mind Glen Innes.
- There were five ships sailing through storms over the sea.
- The fish and chips seem cheap at five dollars a throw.
- The lawns right in Greenlane are great.
- Remuera is right next to Glenfield.

Part 2 was the same as in the pre-test (see p 57). Therefore, although there were some points of direct comparison, there were also some differences between the pre- and post-tests. The errors were defined in the same way for the post-test and were tallied using the same categories (see p 57). The analysis of strong and weak forms and sentence stress proved difficult to quantify and is not reported here.

An alternative approach would have been to adopt a more global assessment using criteria such as fluency, comprehensibility and accentedness (see Derwing, Munro and Wiebe 1998). This approach was not chosen for this study in order to provide more meaningful feedback to the students: informing learners that they have a certain rating is less helpful than giving them quite specific feedback about the types of errors they are making. While it was not possible in this project to incorporate rater reliability checks on my assessment of error, I endeavoured to be as objective as possible and crosschecked my own ratings at a later date. I assessed the post-test some four months after the pre-test and without reference to it.

## **Survey**

In addition, the students were surveyed to gauge their reaction to the syllabus and their beliefs regarding the teaching and learning of pronunciation. A full version of the survey is given in the Appendix (p 68). The first part of the survey asked learners to rate the extent to which various activities helped them to improve their pronunciation. Some of these activities involved explicit teaching or the use of resources aimed specifically at learning pronunciation, while others did not. The second part of the survey asked learners for their perceptions of pronunciation and the teaching methodology used in the course, while the third part asked the students for their views on whether and how pronunciation should be taught.

## **The results**

### **THE PRE- AND POST-TESTS**

One very noticeable difference between the pre- and post-tests was found on the worksheets the students used for each test. In the post-tests, a number of learners had marked where and how they were going to join the various



sounds. This was not evident in the pre-tests and, as such, is an interesting indicator of a changed awareness of pronunciation.

The total number of errors with consonants, vowels, word stress, absence, epenthesis, and joining made by each student in each test is presented in Table 1. From this it can be seen that there was a clear increase in accuracy between the pre- and post-tests.

**Table 1: Summary of the number of errors made in the two tests**

Learner	Pre-test 1st 5	Post-test 1st 5	Post-test 2nd 5	Pre-test Free	Post-test Free	Pre-test Total	Post-test Total
1	1	0	2	2	0	3	2
2	2	0	0	4	0	6	0
3	7	3	2	15	6	22	11
4	2	1	1	8	3	10	5
5	5	2	3	5	3	10	8
6	18	2	2	14	7	32	11
7	16	4	6	8	2	24	12
8	15	6	3	8	0	23	9
9	19	6	4	9	0	28	10
10	9	5	4	4	6	13	15
11	19	2	6	13	8	32	16
12	28	7	8	14	23	42	38
13	22	12	10	18	12	40	34
14	20	10	8	28	14	48	32
15	29	18	12	18	10	47	40
<b>Average</b>	<b>14.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>16.2</b>

A comparison of the first two columns of data; 'Pre-test 1st five' and 'Post-test 1st five', gives the most reliable evidence of an increase in accuracy because it indicates the errors made in reading the same five sentences at the beginning and end of the course. Here the average number of errors made more than halved from 14.1 to 5.2. It can also be seen that on an individual basis, all of the subjects showed an improvement.

The results of the reading task in the post-test (Post-test 1st 5 and Post-test 2nd 5), show a similar error rate for both halves (5.2 for the first five sentences versus 4.7 for the second five sentences). The fact that the error rate is similar suggests that the two groups of sentences provide a reasonably reliable guide and that there was no specific effect from the subjects already having worked with the first five sentences in the pre-test.

The results of Part 2, the more spontaneous parts of the pre- and post-tests ('Pre-test Free' and 'Post-test Free'), also provide evidence that the learners'

pronunciation improved during the course, as the number of errors almost halved, dropping from an average of 11.2 to 6.3. Although the task was the same for each test, it was not controlled for length or complexity, however, so the results are not directly comparable. They nevertheless support the trend towards improvement indicated by the results of the controlled reading task undertaken in Part 1. As far as individual performances in Part 2 are concerned, there was only one subject (Learner 12) who made more errors in the post-test than in the pre-test. Incidentally the errors made by that particular subject involved a large number of cases of substituting /d/ for the /ð/ phoneme in 'the', which did not greatly affect comprehensibility. This particular learner had reduced the number of errors from 28 to 7 on the controlled reading task for the first five sentences, suggesting that some definite gains in accuracy were achieved nonetheless.

Overall, looking at the total number of errors in the pre- and post-tests, the average dropped from 25.3 to 16.2. This is quite a remarkable decrease given that the reading task in the post-test was twice as long as the one in the pre-test. On an individual level, all but one of the subjects managed to decrease the total number of errors.

## **PRONUNCIATION SURVEY**

### **Learners' assessment of strategies that help improve pronunciation**

Table 2 presents a summary of student responses to items designed to elicit how far the activities listed were considered helpful, where a high score out of 5 indicates that the learners find the activity helped 'a lot'. The scores are tallied for each category, with the average in the final column.

The first five questions all relate to activities which do not involve explicit teaching, or the use of resources aimed specifically at learning pronunciation. As can be seen, these were all rated highly with the possible exception of number 4, 'talking with classmates'. Numbers 6 to 10 all involved some sort of explicit teaching. These were also rated highly. The fact that both sets of items were rated highly indicates that learners feel that both general listening and speaking activities, and explicit instruction in pronunciation, are important. It is interesting to note that 'listening and repeating' received the highest score, followed by 'the teacher explaining'.

### **Attitudes to pronunciation and its teaching**

Table 3 summarises the responses to questions one to seven concerning the students' attitudes to their pronunciation and the work done during the instruction program. The answers written in response to items 8 to 11 were open ended and have been summarised as follows under the wording of each item. For a full version of the questionnaire, please see the Appendix (p 68).

**Table 2: Learners' assessment of strategies that help improve pronunciation**

<b>Tick the box, on a scale of 1 to 5.</b>						
<b>1 = No, not at all. 5 = Yes, a lot.</b>						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Av</b>
1 Listening to people speaking	1	0	4	3	6	3.93
2 Listening to the radio	0	0	2	5	8	4.40
3 Watching TV	0	0	2	5	8	4.40
4 Speaking to other New Zealanders	0	0	3	3	9	4.40
5 Speaking to classmates in English	0	5	4	3	3	3.27
6 Listening to cassettes and doing exercises in pronunciation practice books	0	0	0	6	9	4.60
7 Listening and repeating sounds, words and sentences	0	0	2	3	10	4.53
8 Recording yourself then listening to your pronunciation	0	1	3	4	7	4.13
9 The teacher explaining how to make different sounds	0	0	2	1	12	4.67
10 The teacher explaining how to get stress, rhythm and intonation right	0	0	4	2	9	4.33

**Table 3: Attitudes to pronunciation and the teaching of it**

<b>Tick the box, on a scale of 1 to 5.</b>						
<b>1 = No, not at all. 5 = Yes, a lot.</b>						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Av</b>
1 How important is pronunciation?			1	4	10	4.60
2 How good is your pronunciation?		4	6	3	2	3.20
3 Has your pronunciation improved this semester?			9	5	1	3.47
4 Was it good to try and explain all the main things about pronunciation? NR* = 1	1		1	1	11	4.50
5 Did the pronunciation workbook help you?		2	4	3	6	3.87
6 Did you do all the exercises?		2	1	8	4	3.93
7 Did the diagnostic test at the beginning help? NR* = 3			4	6	2	3.83

\* NR = No Response

As can be seen from the responses to question 1, learners rated pronunciation as very important. However they were not confident about their own pronunciation. This may be partially explained by an increased awareness of their own deficiencies as a consequence of the teaching program, which may have caused them to be cautious in their self-evaluation. The majority (11/15) strongly favoured the systematic approach to teaching pronunciation taken on the program. There was, however, one learner (Learner 1<sup>3</sup>) who did not feel it helped at all. This may have been because this particular student's pronunciation was already very good at the beginning of the course and made a total of only three errors in the pre-test. The workbook and exercises were generally viewed positively as was the diagnostic test.

**Comments in response to question 8:**

**How did the workbook help?**

**Any problems in doing the exercises.**

Seven respondents said the course had helped them to improve their pronunciation. A further three specifically mentioned that the workbook had helped them. Learner 12 felt that the workbook had helped to improve pronunciation but that more time was needed to do the exercises, while Learner 3 felt that the workbook should have more exercises and examples. Learner 1, whose pronunciation was already very good, said that, 'Studying all parts is unnecessary. Sometimes it is very difficult and meaningless for me to analyse the complicated form of the sounds.' Two made no comment.

**Comments in response to question 9:**

**Look at the results of the test you did at the beginning of the semester.**

**What areas have you improved in, and by how much (a little, some, a lot)?**

Five respondents (Learners 1, 7, 8, 9, 10) felt they were better at using stress in words and sentences. Two (Learners 2, 12) said they had become more aware of pronouncing final consonants, and Learner 6 mentioned an improvement in terms of not adding extra sounds quite so often. Two learners (6, 15) felt their vowel sounds had improved, and one (Learner 5) noted improvements in sounds in connected speech, consonant–vowel. One mentioned rhythm and intonation, and another referred to strong and weak forms (Learners 8 and 6 respectively). In general terms, six learners (1, 5, 7, 9, 13, 15) said they had made some progress. Two (Learners 6, 10) reported that they had made a lot of progress; Learner 10 commented 'And I feel easier to speak to New Zealanders'. Another (Learner 12) wrote, 'It didn't improve a lot, it did help'. Further comments were: 'I am sorry to say I paid little time in pronunciation, so progress is little' (Learner 14) and 'I reckon the teacher knows better my improvements' (Learner 3).

**Comments in response to question 10:****Write down any areas where you think you have not improved.**

Six learners (2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12) mentioned joining sounds as the area where they had not improved. Three mentioned phonemes, particularly consonants (Learners 8, 13, 15). Learner 5 mentioned syllable and word stress. Two learners (4, 14) said they had improved in all areas while three (Learners 1, 6, 11) made no comment.

**Comments in response to question 11:****Which area do you think is most important for you to work on now?**

Four learners (3, 10, 12, 13) referred to specific phonemes while two (Learners 7, 9) simply wrote 'pronunciation' and one wrote 'all of' (Learner 15). Learners (2, 4, 6) noted 'joining sounds in a sentence' as important areas to work on, while another said 'listening and repeating your pronunciation' (Learner 1). The value of increasing learners' awareness was underscored through the following comment by Learner 5: 'Sounds in connected speech. It was very helpful. No one has ever taught it. I didn't even notice it. So I'm happy to know it.' Learner 8 noted the need to work on 'some particular words sound', while Learner 14, whose pronunciation was incidentally often unintelligible and one of the poorest in the class, wrote 'I can say all things I want to say in English'. Finally, Learner 11 offered no comment.

**Comments in response to the question in Part Three:****Should a teacher teach pronunciation? If so, then how?**

Thirteen respondents said 'yes' (including 'indeed' and 'sure') to this question. Learner 1 wrote: 'I think the best way for me to pronounce correctly is to listen and repeat a lot', and the remaining respondent, Learner 11, made no comment. Of the 13 who said 'yes', six made no further comment. The other comments were: 'when we meet new words' (Learners 3, 7, 8, 9); 'the final result depends on the student' (Learner 3); 'like the way we have done and more practice' (Learner 6); 'with workbook, laboratory, tape, but repeating after the teacher is very important' (Learner 4); 'The teacher can teach us the pronunciation rule. That is enough.' (Learner 14).

**Other comments made in Part Three**

Three respondents referred to the difficulties of fossilisation. Learners 7 and 9 noted that pronunciation needed to be taught at the beginner or elementary level. Learner 14 commented that, 'The pronunciation mistake I make is very difficult to change. Just one semester is not enough. Maybe 2 or 3 years.' Learner 5 noted that the study helped a lot, and Learner 2 recommended

that pronunciation be compulsory. A further comment was that teachers should pay more attention to and correct students' pronunciation (Learner 8). One final comment by Learner 4 related specifically to the teaching method employed during the study: 'In my opinion if we do more practice with our teacher before going to the laboratory is more useful, for example, we read our new sentences in front of the class and our teacher check them one by one.'

## **Discussion**

Overall, the results of the pre- and post-tests demonstrated a clear improvement in accuracy of pronunciation on both the reading task and the freer speaking task. The survey results showed that an explicit approach to pronunciation teaching was valued. While there was certainly some variation amongst individual learners, there was overall support for 'listening and repeating' and 'teacher explanation' as activities, as well as for activities such as 'speaking to other New Zealanders'. It would have been useful to have asked learners before the course about their attitudes towards this to see whether their views changed over the program.

In considering responses to the section about learners' attitudes to the pronunciation syllabus, the majority clearly found it useful, but there were some who were less convinced. In particular, one of the students (Learner 1) with the best pronunciation appeared to have been perfectly capable of acquiring pronunciation naturally, and tended to be confused by explanations. Another learner (Learner 14), whose pronunciation was not very good, appeared to have reached a stage of fossilisation, did not find pronunciation important and was consequently not convinced of the value of this teaching approach. However, as can be seen in Table 1, this particular learner nevertheless halved the number of errors. It may be that this sort of explicit approach is likely to be beneficial and appreciated by certain types of learners, but not necessarily all.

Generally, learners' responses showed a great deal of awareness of pronunciation and what could be done to improve it. This awareness was also apparent in the post-tests as a number of learners had marked where and how they were going to join the various sounds.

## **Conclusion and future work**

The small-scale nature of this study, and the fact that inter-rater checks on coding were not possible, means that caution must be exercised in the conclusions which can be drawn. Nonetheless, the findings reported here provide support for the view that the explicit systematic teaching of pronunciation can be effective at a post-intermediate level. The learners in this

study were, moreover, enthusiastic about this approach and regretted that they had not been taught in this way earlier. As with the findings of Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1997, 1998), the results reported here support the value of explicit attention to pronunciation in the classroom, and should help to dispel the doubts of those teachers who are sceptical about the value of pronunciation teaching.

Of course, much work remains to be done in this area. While the teacher-as-researcher approach used in this study has benefits in terms of commitment to diagnosing student difficulties and to refining teaching input, the usefulness of different teaching approaches also needs to be examined under more stringently controlled conditions. The type of approach adopted here seems to match the needs of this particular group of students, but other approaches may be appropriate for other groups of learners with different needs and backgrounds. We need to know more about the effects of different types and amounts of instruction on different types of learners in different learning situations. This is likely to involve both ethnographic and experimental work, as well as the consideration of both the short-term and the long-term effects of instruction. In addition, it would be useful to refine the methods used to measure proficiency gains and to complement the quantitative approach of counting errors used here with more global assessments of fluency, comprehensibility and accentedness such as those used by Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998).

#### NOTES

- 1 That is, the adding of extra sounds, typically a schwa following a consonant, and the dropping of consonant sounds where a native speaker would normally not drop them.
- 2 Phonemic symbols were also used, but have been dropped here for ease of reproduction.
- 3 Refer to Table 1. Further references to learners also relate to this table.

## Appendix

### PRONUNCIATION SURVEY

#### Part One: Do these things help you to improve your pronunciation?

Tick the box, on a scale of 1 to 5. 1 = No, not at all. 5 = Yes, a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
1 Listening to people speaking.					
2 Listening to the radio.					
3 Watching TV.					
4 Speaking to other New Zealanders.					
5 Speaking to classmates in English.					
6 Listening to cassettes and doing exercises in pronunciation practice books.					
7 Listening and repeating sounds, words and sentences.					
8 Recording yourself then listening to your pronunciation.					
9 The teacher explaining how to make different sounds.					
10 The teacher explaining how to get stress, rhythm and intonation right.					

#### Part Two: Your pronunciation and work done this semester

Tick the box, on a scale of 1 to 5. 1 = No, not at all. 5 = Yes, a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
1 How important is pronunciation?					
2 How good is your pronunciation?					
3 Has your pronunciation improved this semester?					
4 Was it good to try and explain all the main things about pronunciation?					
5 Did the pronunciation workbook help you?					
6 Did you do all the exercises?					
7 Did the diagnostic test at the beginning help?					

8 Comments: (eg How did the workbook help? Any problems in doing the exercises.)

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9 Look at the results of the test you did at the beginning of the semester. What areas have you improved in, and by how much (a little, some, a lot)?

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10 Write down any areas where you think you have not improved.

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11 Which area do you think is most important for you to work on now?

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**Part 3:**

Do you think a teacher should teach pronunciation? If so, then how?

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Any other comments?

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