

## **Assessing English L2 Pronunciation: Perceptions of Select English Teachers from Arts and Engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu**

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**Abstract:**

This small-scale study conducted with a group of 20 English teachers from arts and engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu primarily aims at understanding how these teachers rate English pronunciation. In the process, it also throws light on these teachers' awareness of prosodic features and the factors that they consider to be important for intelligibility. The study uses the stimulated recall method to collect data. Results reveal that English teachers from Engineering colleges tend to score slightly lower. The justifications given by them for awarding these bands also reveal that they tend to base their assessment on various other factors rather than focusing exclusively on actual features of pronunciation.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Pronunciation, prosodic features, stimulated recall

**Introduction:**

Assessing pronunciation, which is considered to be one the vital areas has remained in the focus of assessment for a long time. This area has received considerable degree of attention and attained greater visibility, with one of the reasons being the inclusion of pronunciation as a scale of assessment in standardized tests (Isaccs, Talia and Luke Harding 2017). The challenges in assessing pronunciation have also been acknowledged by practicing teachers and researchers (Talia, 2014; Levis, 2006). Further, how rater's understanding of pronunciation constructs affect L2 pronunciation have also been studied (Kennedy, Sara et al 2019). In Tamil Nadu, some autonomous Engineering and Arts college have 'speaking presentations as one of their methods of assessment. After teaching speaking skills the entire semester, these teachers assess students on a scale of 1/10 using their own assessment criteria. Commonly prevalent practices inform that us there exists no clear-cut criteria for assessing pronunciation. Even if they used one for scoring, students are not revealed what components of speaking fetched / did not fetch them those scores that had been awarded. Therefore, we felt it was important to understand how they graded their learners and this was the motivation was the study. The study has the following objectives:

- a) To understand how college teachers in Tamil Nadu rate pronunciation
- b) To determine those factors teachers consider important for intelligibility and their awareness of prosodic features

## Review of Literature

The associated sub areas of phonetics such as a) issues of intelligibility and comprehensibility (Munro & Derwing, 1995; 1997, 2005; Gass & Varonis, 1984; Jenkins, 2000) b) nativness (Levis, 2006) c) functional load (Brown, 1991; Munro & Derwing, 2006, 2008), d) fluency (Derwing et al., 2017) e) the importance of intelligibility and the intricacies involved in assessing accuracy and fluency (Kormos & Dénes, 2004; Levis, 2006), and g) the construct of “accentedness” (Talia 2014) have been examined in various studies. The challenges involved in assessing pronunciation have been attributed to many factors, two of them being the tussle between the nativity Vs intelligibility principle (Levis 2005) and the difficulties faced by experienced listeners in understanding pronunciation (Yates, Zielinski, & Pryor, 2011, p.4). Despite contributions related to this area, assessing pronunciation continues to be an under-researched area (Yates, Zielinski & Prior, 2008). This study attempts to add to this body of knowledge of this research by analyzing how a group of English teachers rate pronunciation and in the process, understand these teachers’ awareness of prosodic features. One of the most reputed and widely accepted tests for assessing proficiency, the IELTS presents the following phrases as key indicators of pronunciation of a Band 9 speaker (IELTS descriptor - *public version*)

- full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety
- Sustains flexible use of features throughout
- Is effortless to understand

The pronunciation scale of the Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) focuses on the following features:

- Fluid expression
- Pronunciation, intonation, pacing
- Intelligibility

However, whether teachers follow and adopt some of the features described in these tests or if they mark based on their understanding is not clear. Hence, this study was conducted to assess the same.

## Methodology:

For the purpose of this study, we chose 3 sophomore students from 3 engineering colleges and 20 teachers teaching English at 2 Engineering and 2 arts colleges. The samples were

chosen at random and the participant-subjects, who were at various levels of language proficiency, were asked to give an expository speech on an extempore topic for one to two minutes and their samples were recorded. The teachers were requested to listen to these samples of speech and rate them for the criteria of pronunciation alone, using IELTS public band descriptors. As IELTS is considered to be one of the most reliable and valid tests and contains pronunciation as one of the criterion for assessment, the public version of the band descriptors was used. Prior to this, these teacher-participants were also briefed about the Cambridge European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scales that map language learners' abilities across different levels starting from A1 up to C2.

Stimulated recall, one of the introspective methods of research, was used to collect data and to tap into their working memory while recalling their thought processes, when they were awarding their scores. The following standardized instruction was given to all teachers:

*While you were assessing the samples, what were you thinking? How did you rate them? We would like to understand the same.*

To ensure recency of data, these teachers were made to reflect on these questions immediately after rating pronunciation and their responses were audio recorded.

## Discussion and Findings:

The following tables present the ratings of English teachers from Arts and Engineering for participants 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

**Table 1: Bands awarded by Arts college teachers for participants 1, 2 and 3**

Arts college teachers	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Bands 6	20%	9%	25%
Band 7	55%	-	25%
Band 8	20%	-	45%
Band 9	5%	-	5%
Band 5	-	18%	-
Band 4	-	64%	-
Band 3	-	9%	-

**Table 2: Bands awarded by Engineering college teachers for participants 1, 2 and 3**

	<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>
Bands 6	70%	10%	10%
Band 7	20%	-	10%
Band 8	10%	-	70%
Band 9	-	-	10%
Band 5	-	10%	-
Band 4	-	25%	-
Band 3	-	55%	-

It is clear from the tables that with participant, most arts college teachers (55%) have given the higher band 7, while the same candidate has been marked one band less by 70% engineering college teachers. No teacher from engineering college has given the highest Band 9 for P1. In the case of participant 2, more than half of engineering college teachers have awarded the lowest band 3, while only 9% arts college teachers have given Band 3. 64% and 18% teachers have given B4& 5 in arts colleges, while they have awarded the same score for B6.

For participant 3, 10 % arts college teachers have awarded B9, while only 5% of engineering teachers awarded B9.80% of arts college teachers have awarded Band 8, while it is just 45% of teachers in case of engineering colleges. It can be seen that engineering college teachers tend to award slightly lower bands. Overall, the data reveals that arts college English teachers tend to mark slightly higher when compared to their engineering counterparts. We further deconstructed the data to understand the reasons why teachers from both the countries awarded these scores to the candidates. The following table summarizes reasons given by these teachers:

**Table 3: Justifications given by teachers for awarding Bands 3 - 9**

Engineering College Teachers	Arts college Teachers
<b>Band 3</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has to work on intelligence *</li> <li>• Influence of accent</li> <li>• Not clear *</li> <li>• Much pausing *..to much “eh”..”uh”..</li> <li>• Some words “walkED” “ passED”</li> <li>• Difficult to understand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Words not clear,lot of mumbling</li> <li>• Spoke very minimum (just 12 sentences in 2 minutes)*</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>Band 4</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hurrying up *</li> <li>• Less confident with language *</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some mispronunciations</li> <li>• Not fluent, spoke little *</li> <li>• Each word not like sentence *</li> <li>• Accent from his hometown *</li> <li>• Chunking was terrible</li> </ul>
<b>Band 5</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Half of the words cannot be</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Intonation – like straight line in an</li> </ul>

<p>understood *</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speech not continuous* ..many breaks</li> </ul>	<p>ECG graph</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No stress of the sentence</li> <li>• Mispronunciation of some words</li> </ul>
<b>Band 6</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intelligible, difficult to understand vocab *</li> <li>• Not rhythmic</li> <li>• Many grammar mistakes*</li> <li>• Not able to deliver properly</li> <li>• Attempts are good, speech fillers *</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PRON largely clear</li> <li>• Slightly Above average/average *</li> <li>• Some parts can be understood, not all</li> <li>• Not perfect *</li> </ul>
<b>Band 7</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much rising tone</li> <li>• Clear, but not as good as speaker 3*</li> <li>•</li> <li>• Some words not intelligible</li> <li>• Different accent*</li> <li>• Some words cannot be understood because of accent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effortless to understand</li> <li>• Able to use different aspects of pronunciation</li> <li>• No problem with chunking</li> <li>• High energy levels*</li> </ul>
<b>Band 8</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better than speaker 1*</li> <li>• Rhythmic, very easy to understand</li> <li>• Perfect accent</li> <li>• PRON like Indian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faster than speaker 1</li> <li>• Limited mistakes *</li> <li>• Good PRON</li> <li>• Very smooth, fluent and reasonable *</li> </ul>
<b>Band 9</b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like a native speaker*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very good in all aspects*</li> <li>• Like a native speaker</li> <li>• Lot of energy in voice</li> <li>• Better than speaker 1*</li> </ul>
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It appears that teachers from both colleges have based their assessment on some pronunciation features such as clarity, accent, intonation, chunking, rhythm, smoothness of speech and intelligibility. However, they have also let criteria influence their marking. Responses such as “smooth and fluent, much pausing, difficult in understanding vocab (sic), speech fillers” etc. indicate that vocabulary and fluency criteria have been considered while marking. Native speaker pronunciation is often considered essential for scoring high and these teachers tend to compare with familiar accents (PRON like Indian; Accent from Home town; like a native speaker etc.). Further, assessment is also based on other subjective factors such as number of errors, confidence levels, quantity of speech (as evident from the phrases in asterisks - “Passion and energy”, “limited mistakes”, “very good in all aspects”, “less confident with language”, “spoke too little” etc. These phrases are very generic, unrelated to pronunciation & not indicative of clear linguistic features. Further, response such as “above average” “Clear compared to speaker 2” indicates that they have compared participants’ samples and made overall, subjective assessment. The confusion between “intelligence” and “intelligibility” is also evident. Further, they also appear to take into account features of fluency and discourse management such as use of fillers, smooth and fluent speech also into account.

It can be inferred that in addition to features of pronunciation, these teachers are also been influenced by factors other than those related to pronunciation. All of these indicate teachers’ incomplete understanding of prosodic features and training in exclusive features of pronunciation

For accurate, valid assessment. Sentence stress, word stress, intonation, accent, chunking have been considered, but the phrases “Not clear” “above average” “below average” are very broad and do not seem to indicate precise linguistic references. We tried to understand what they meant by these terms, but the teachers could not articulate the same. The confusion between “intelligence” and “intelligibility” is also evident.

## Conclusion:

The findings reveal that teachers from both Arts and Engineering colleges tend to stray outside the actual features of pronunciation such as vocal and base their assessment on other psychological factors as well. Further, since these teachers could be from varying linguistic abilities, how they interpret “smoothness” “energy” and “accent” are points of concern.



Letting others features of speech interfere with marking pronunciation might have a negative impact on accuracy and might also severely impact the validity and reliability of their assessment. Further, some of the teachers seem to consider “native speaker - like pronunciation” to be essential for scoring high. However, standardised tests which have emerged with criteria do not include this factor as one of the yardsticks. In fact, standardised tests focus on intelligibility while accommodating the various nuances of World Englishes. Therefore, it is important to provide guidelines to help these teachers understand the features of pronunciation and assess these criteria independent of other factors of language. To ensure objectivity and accuracy while assessing pronunciation, these teachers need to be trained on features of solely on features of pronunciation. This training should ideally focus on raising their awareness related to their understanding of prosodic features of language and dispelling some of their notions of what constitutes accurate pronunciation.

Some of the limitations of this study include the small sample size and the generalizability of results arising from the research tool used. Future studies could focus on triangulating data using different research tools to arrive at more valid conclusions. The sample size can also be increased. While increasing the sample size, a sizeable section of both arts and engineering college teachers in that sample could be trained in assessing using standardized tests to study if there are any differences in the way trained and untrained teachers assess pronunciation. This could be an area of potential research as well.

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