



## An Advantage for Age? Self-Concept and Self-Regulation as Teachable Foundations in Second Language Accent

Age of onset has long been assumed to predict outcomes in second/foreign language accent. Yet beyond early childhood, acquiring a new accent has much to do with social-affective factors such as learner identity and motivation, as well as cognitive factors such as learning strategies (Pfenninger, 2017). Newer perspectives acknowledge this complexity, emphasizing learner experience and orientation instead. This article contextualizes the age factor and prioritizes self-concept, given that those with a strong affinity to the target language and culture end up sounding more authentic, that is, closer-to-native, than those with a more conflicted sense of second language (L2) self (see Moyer, 2004). Given the connections between self-concept and self-regulated learning, age actually confers two benefits: self-awareness and metalinguistic knowledge, which can be channeled into strategies such as goal setting and self-evaluation. Pedagogical strategies can facilitate the development of a strong L2 self-concept as well as an appreciation for the importance of accent in the target language.

If, as Levis and Grant (2003) point out, *how* you say something is as important as *what* you say, then as language teachers our priority is not just vocabulary and pragmatic skill, but also pronunciation, which plays a central role in comprehensibility. *Comprehensibility* is generally defined as the perceived ease/difficulty of understanding an utterance by a given speaker, while *intelligibility* can be understood as the degree to which “the speaker’s intended utterance is actually understood by a listener” (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 385). By contrast, *accentedness* is more about the listener’s perception of a speaker’s

(non)adherence to an expected “standard” target, and it may not actually affect comprehensibility (see Derwing & Munro, 1997, 2005; Levis, 2005). According to Levis (2005), intelligibility is a far more realistic goal for both teachers and students, as opposed to a native-ness ideal. As he puts it, aiming to be understood “recognizes that communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong” (p. 370).

Regardless of one’s specific goal, accent is a challenge, not least because fully embracing a new sound relies on being open to a new sense of self in the target language (TL). This article begins by addressing why it is an uphill battle for those beyond early childhood to acquire fluency in accent, the aspect of language that represents sounds and sound patterns, including the pronunciation of individual sounds or segments, and broader features of intonation, pitch, rhythm, and stress (the suprasegmental level).

Accent is a “complex aspect of language that affects speakers and listeners in both perception and production, and consequently, in social interaction” (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 385). In other words, it conveys “linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation” (Moyer, 2004, p. 11). Because accent is socially significant, and because it reflects our sense of identity, the article explores the connections between accent and self-concept in late language learning. Using evidence for advanced and exceptional learners’ approaches to accent mastery, the article then outlines classroom strategies aimed at accent improvement via self-concept development. The conclusion holds that age can actually confer advantages for accent improvement through strategic work on self-concept, goal setting, and self-evaluation, all of which are relevant for both classroom and immersion language learning.

### **Age and Accent**

Acquiring a new sound system activates analytical and motor skills, cognitive control related to self-awareness and monitoring, vocal tract control, and subvocal rehearsal of phonemic sequences (Ghazi-Saidi, Dash, & Ansaldo, 2015). Sounding authentic requires articulatory precision at the segmental level, mastery over stress and intonation, accuracy in phrasal timing, juncture, and so on. Without some measure of mastery in each of these areas, communicative effectiveness often lags, affecting pragmatic and social appropriateness as well. In short, acquiring an accent in any language requires both higher-order (analytical) and lower-order (motor) skills, no matter the age at which we begin the process.

Linguists and nonlinguists alike tell us that younger learners ac-

quire language effortlessly, that all effectively end up as native speakers because early language acquisition has little or nothing to do with attitudes, motivation, identity, ego, and the like. Nevertheless, some very young second language (L2) learners retain a foreign-sounding accent in their L2 despite nativelike fluency in other areas (e.g., Flege, MacKay, & Piske, 2002; Uzal, Peltonen, Huotilainen, & Aaltonen, 2015), and some late learners actually do manage to sound like native speakers eventually (Bongaerts, Mennen, & Van der Slik, 2000; Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Moyer, 1999, 2004; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007). It is thus important to challenge the simplistic notion that our capacity to become fluent strictly depends on *age of onset* with a new language, that is, the age of first exposure, either through immersion or instruction.

The age factor is a convenient explanation for seemingly intractable foreign-sounding pronunciation, yet there is no agreement about what underlies the influence of age. We do not know whether there are truly “qualitative differences in the [language learning] mechanisms used by younger and older L2 acquirers” (Kinsella & Singleton, 2014, p. 443). It therefore makes sense to examine the age factor and its co-occurring factors in order to understand how directly—or indirectly—it affects the process (see Moyer, 2014a). Decades of research point to many variables related to age that exert significant influence on L2 pronunciation, for example:

- *Motivation*, namely, both integrative and instrumental orientation toward L2 (Bongaerts et al., 2000; Moyer, 1999; Smit, 2002);
- *Attitudes* toward the language and culture, including the desire to sound native (Moyer, 2007; Purcell & Suter, 1980), and intention to reside long term or permanently in-country (Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Moyer, 2004);
- *Experience*, for example, L2 practice and use, length of residence in-country, years of instruction, contact with native speakers, and L2 use relative to first language (L1) use (Flege & Liu, 2001; Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995; Moyer, 2004, 2011);
- *Social, psychological, and cognitive orientations to L2*, for example, L2 identity, desire to assimilate culturally and linguistically, empathy, extraversion, and learning strategies varying from metacognitive to affective (see Moyer, 2013).

Understanding of these factors is evolving to better reflect the inherent complexity in each. For example, many studies on motivation are

based on simple measures of strength or type, for example, *instrumental*, in which career or academic context is key, versus *integrative*, which refers to the desire to integrate into the TL culture. Nowadays, motivation is understood in more complex terms, namely as a function of *self-concept*, or “beliefs one has about oneself . . . [in] a particular area or field” (Mercer, 2011, p. 14; see also Ushioda, 2011), including beliefs about one’s competence as a language learner.

*Self-concept* is also a multidimensional construct, encompassing beliefs, attitudes, motivation, sense of autonomy, and identity (Polat, 2014). This means that like most age-related factors, it is highly individual; prior experience and one’s current situation both shape it. By nature, it is also fluid rather than static. Perhaps most significant for the purposes of this discussion is the connection between the L2 self-concept and efforts toward increasing fluency. Compared to young children, adolescents and adults are more highly analytical, faster learners (see Muñoz, 2008, 2011; Pfenninger, 2017), and they exert control, or *agency*, via goal setting, strategic approaches to learning, and self-evaluation of progress. Maximizing the effectiveness of such metacognitive efforts is something teachers can facilitate by asking students what motivates them, how they set goals and plans for action, and how effectively their strategies help them to reach their goals. This means we can train students to accurately assess their progress and encourage them to keep going when progress seems slow. This is all part of self-regulated learning (see Woolfolk, 2013).

There is little disagreement that age appears to negatively affect fluency in accent, but exactly how and why is a matter of great debate. More than any other linguistic skill set, pronunciation learning beyond early childhood relies on not just cognitive, but also motivational and attitudinal variables, including the need to build a new identity of sorts and a willingness to project that identity through new sound patterns. It is thus a deeply personal, internal process that can challenge late learners for this reason. Our growing appreciation of interlanguage as a *dynamic system* (Larsen-Freeman, 2009) puts us in a position to acknowledge the potential benefits of age; older learners can use their agency in conscious ways and guide themselves to a positive L2 self-concept that benefits long-term attainment.

The adolescent or adult learner does not typically enjoy similar circumstances to those of the child learner, as both input and opportunities for practice may be scarce. Moreover, older learners have already formed a self-concept in their native tongue(s) and have family, peer, and community connections that reinforce that identity. Not all will want to sound natively like in their new language, and some may consciously hold on to a foreign sound for the above-mentioned rea-

sons (Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Moyer, 2004). At the same time, there is an undeniable connection between how we sound and how others perceive us (Kang & Rubin, 2014; Lindemann, 2002; Lindemann, Litzenberg, & Subtirelu, 2014). Discrimination based on accent is a widespread phenomenon (see Lippi-Green, 1997). Being heard as foreign can hinder one's assimilation into the majority culture and society, affecting social and economic status over the long term. These are all things to be aware of for students whose mother tongue(s) differs from the mainstream language (English, in the US). Students need to set realistic goals for linguistic fluency as they navigate the tension between holding on to a mother tongue culture and/or language while learning the new language. Such goals may incorporate developing social connections beyond the classroom to increase authentic practice. For accent especially, evidence shows that developing a strong social network with speakers of the target (majority) language beyond the classroom holds particular significance for long-term outcomes (Cutler, 2014; Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Lybeck, 2002; Major, 1993; Marx, 2002; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Piller, 2002). Establishing such connections is a challenge, but it is surely easier if a strong L2 self-concept exists. As teachers, we can help students work toward these goals with a conscious, regulated approach.

### **Self-Concept and Self-Regulation in L2**

Self-determination theory holds that we “have a generalized sense of what ought to be important ... because of the values of those around us” (McEown, Noels, & Chaffee, 2014, p. 22). Our perception of this value affects our efforts to acquire the TL, as Polat (2014) notes. In a foreign language classroom setting, there may be less overt value for the TL, or less urgency to acquire it overall. And if the emphasis is not on communication (and potential network building) with native speakers, priority may fall to vocabulary and grammar over pronunciation. In an immersion or ESL setting, however, the value and prestige of the TL are vividly apparent. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, as cited in McEown, Noels, & Chaffee, 2014) further asserts that as humans we (a) inherently enjoy challenges and novelty, leading us to seek exploration and learning; (b) regulate our behavior in line with our interests; and (c) are motivated to engage when an activity aligns with our sense of self. In other words, we exert intentional effort when the TL holds great significance for us personally, a significance that can be reinforced by the perceived external value of the language.

Csizér and Kormos (2014) maintain that we regulate our learning through the frame of an *ideal L2 self* based on a “strong vision

of future success” (p. 73). This ideal L2 self encompasses a tension between where we currently are, and where we would like to go (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005; Frazier & Hooker, 2006). Even so-called *exceptional* learners provide a glimpse into this basic tension: While the TL is essential to their self-concept, they are not yet satisfied with what they have achieved (Moyer, 2014a). This discrepancy between the current and the future self motivates these learners to seek more language input and practice, resulting in more nativelike fluency. They keep inching the goalpost forward, constructing a vision for how they will get there. It may also be the case that they are particularly good at visualizing success, for example, *I can picture myself in two years being able to perform well in various situations using this language*, which Dörnyei and Chan (2013) assert is both necessary and teachable.

Self-concept includes domain-specific beliefs, such as *I am a good language learner*, as well as more situation-based beliefs, for example, *I am often mistaken for a native speaker, but sometimes I prefer to sound American to preserve my identity*. Kinsella and Singleton (2014) describe learners who spend some years passing as native French speakers in Paris, yet decide to let it go in order to project an identifiably foreign accent in situations where they thought it would be advantageous. This underscores the essential fluidity mentioned above—that through time, we adjust our L2 self-concept in response to accomplishments and failures. We make gradual progress thanks to various self-regulation mechanisms, including these, outlined by Dörnyei (2005):

1. *Commitment control* to preserve a focus on goals;
2. *Metacognitive control* to monitor and modulate concentration;
3. *Emotional control* to generate emotions that support goals.

Evidence is mounting for the significance of self-regulation for outcomes in L2 accent. Advanced language learners engage in positive self-talk when the going gets rough, and they adopt a variety of learning strategies to vary their sources of input and interaction—all significant factors leading to more nativelike attainment in accent (Baker-Smemoe & Haslam, 2012; Csizér & Kormos, 2014; Moyer, 2004). Szyszka’s (2015) data add to this list of factors one’s concern for pronunciation accuracy, L2 experience beyond the classroom, and a strategic approach to pronunciation learning (see also Moyer, 1999, 2004, 2007; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007). Likewise, there is evidence from exceptional learners that they tend to undertake similar strategies to make the best use of resources. For example, they self-monitor

to check for accuracy, mimic native speakers, pay special attention to difficult features (Moyer, 2014b; Purcell & Suter, 1980), identify strongly with the TL and culture (Major, 1993; Moyer, 2004, 2007; Polat, 2014), and seek L2 input and practice in informal contexts (Moyer, 2004, 2014a). In short, the predictable aspects of the successful learner's approach to accent include conscious attention to form, affiliation with the TL and culture, and the proactive creation of opportunities for L2 practice and potential feedback, for example, creating social networks where possible (Moyer, 2004, 2007, 2011; Polat, 2014).

The self-regulated, strategic approach of successful learners underscores the importance of an *integration of cognition and affect* for developing an authentic L2 accent, which is key for modifying the negative effects of age. Those learners who push past the identifiably accented stage appear to engage in planning, strategic learning, and self-evaluation as they seek out external sources of input and feedback. Others may resist sounding different, however, preferring to hold on to their L1-influenced accent to preserve a well-established self-concept. According to Csizér and Kormos's (2014) study of hundreds of ESL learners, adults (mean age 35 years) had significantly weaker self-concepts than did two groups of younger learners (mean age 16 years, and 21 years, respectively). Younger learners had a greater sense of self-efficacy and autonomy and more positive attitudes about exercising control over their learning. By contrast, their older counterparts preferred that teachers construct the learning.

So while age does present challenges for L2 self-concept, adult learners have agency. They can notice discrepancies between their own output and the target sounds and sound patterns present in the input. When their attitudes toward the TL are positive, and the language itself is a part of their self-concept, they tend to seek purposeful practice, which benefits knowledge restructuring and advances native-like pronunciation. As teachers, we can encourage such positive affiliations and strategic learning, as discussed in the next section.

### **Pedagogical Strategies for a Strong L2 Self-Concept**

#### ***Goal-Setting and Visualization***

Mercer (2011) writes that there are no "magic, straightforward solutions to enhancing learners' L2 self-concepts" (p. 167) but notes that we *can* create a learning environment that fosters a sense of security, positive attitudes, and motivation toward the TL. On a practical level, Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) describe how to help learners establish a vision of an ideal L2 self and then develop specific goals and strategies for achieving those goals in the TL. Some starting points include:

- Defining an ideal L2 self in concrete terms. It should be plausible and should not clash with external expectations from family, peers, and so forth.
- Developing an action plan to stay on track, laying out strategies that constitute a road map to accomplish goals. This will help to maintain enthusiasm through time.
- Regularly activating an L2 self vision through self-reflective exercises, imagery-based activities, and meaningful L2 experiences, in and out of class.

What does this look like in practice? Hadfield and Dörnyei's (2013) activity to define an "ideal L2 self" offers a self-reflective activity that suggests how to implement this in practice:

1. Students think about the time commitment involved in various goals, using "Jill" as a fictional learner:
  - a. *Which of the following does Jill want to be able to do on her holiday in Greece?*

• Read novels	• Go shopping	• Talk about politics
• Order a meal	• Understand directions	• Make new friends who are native speakers

- b. *How much time does Jill have to study and prepare for these goals?*
  - c. *Compare your ideas with a partner's ideas. Do a reality check by placing each goal into a category: easy to achieve; possible, but long-term; very hard to achieve; not achievable in this time frame*
2. Students work individually and then in pairs to personalize the situation:
    - d. *What is your ideal self? What would you like to achieve?*
    - e. *List your ideal goals as easily achievable, possible but more long-term, very hard to achieve, and so on.*

Moving toward ideal L2 self-visualization, Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) set the stage as follows:

- *Play soft background music and ask students to close their eyes.*



- *Ask them to imagine themselves at a party, speaking the target language.*
- *Start asking questions from your prepared script, allowing time between each question for them to imagine themselves as you dictate the scenario.*
- *Ask students to share their visions with their peers.*
- *Ask students to describe how they felt during the exercise.*  
(adapted from p. 213)

A sample of such a visualization script appears in Magid and Chan (2012):

Close your eyes and imagine that today is the day of a very important job interview at a famous, international company that you have been dreaming of working in for a long time. This job could be in any part of the [L2] world where you would like to live. You have prepared very well for the interview and as you get dressed, you are feeling really confident that you will do well. As you look at yourself in the mirror, you are happy with how professional and mature you look.

You arrive at the company a few minutes before the interview and are feeling very calm as you wait to be called into the boss's office. When you step into his or her office, you can see that the boss is impressed by your business like appearance, your friendly, confident smile and your firm handshake. He or she asks you to sit down and starts to ask you questions. Although some of the questions are quite difficult, you are able to use your excellent English to answer all of them extremely well. You can see that the boss is pleased and very satisfied with all of your answers. The boss is also impressed by your fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in English. You show him or her that you have so much knowledge. ... As the interview ends, there is no doubt in your mind that you will get this job. Stay with this feeling of complete confidence as you open your eyes and come back to this room. (p. 117)

According to the authors, the key is to activate visualization of positive experiences, building upon times when the TL was used to good effect, such as giving a successful presentation or engaging with others in a social setting. This reinforces the learner's self-efficacy and boosts confidence through a feeling of competence. In other words, we can help our students put a positive spin on their core and situational self-beliefs that are so important to self-concept. (The authors maintain that even lower proficiency-level learners find the visualizations relaxing and motivating.)

Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) also offer a range of activities to address language-learning beliefs, motivation, learning strategies and styles, and willingness to communicate—all labeled for level appropriateness. One activity of interest is “Developing a Bicultural Identity,” in which students imagine how to think about cultural conflicts and differences when speaking an L2. This visualization task guides students to an imagined “Global Village,” where everyone speaks different varieties of English but all are “celebrated and understood” (p. 131). In other words, students’ grounding in their local culture is acknowledged and valued, yet they are encouraged to think of themselves as members of a worldwide culture of English speakers.

### ***Progress via Self-Regulation***

Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) suggest implementing over the long term a “self-barrier” activity at various points in the semester or across successive semesters. In this exercise students periodically identify intrinsic and extrinsic “blocks” to their goals. These may have to do with studying, speaking, or engaging beyond the classroom, and the prompts for such an activity could target accent.

Pronunciation-directed activities can also be designed to promote self-regulation:

- Ask students to identify the pronunciation features they find difficult and the types of practice and modes (e.g., aural, visual, kinesthetic) they find most helpful for mastering pronunciation and intonation patterns. Incorporate their ideas into activities as well as assessments.
- Adopt a process approach to phonological learning. Have students compare present and past speech samples and identify areas that still need improvement. These can take the shape of “can do” statements, as per the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2015), and incorporate checklists that can be reviewed. This kind of metacognitive reflection can have significant benefits for accent (Elliott, 1997; Moyer, 2014a).
- Introduce exercises that highlight situational variations in intonation patterns and speech rate so that learners understand the communicative impact of these features. Suprasegmentals have been shown to have a significant impact on intelligibility and comprehensibility (see Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Reading texts aloud and even playing with mimicry can promote metalin-

guistic awareness, which may increase authenticity in pronunciation.

- Encourage level-appropriate ways to engage in L2 experiences. Those who are likely to study abroad or who interact regularly with TL speakers likely have a stronger sense of L2 self, and this in turn correlates to a positive orientation and motivated learning behaviors (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013)—all of which are critical for developing an authentic-sounding accent.

### ***Awareness and Self-Monitoring***

There is at least one more challenge to note, and that is our learners' ability to recognize areas that need attention. Even if they believe in the efficacy of targeted exercises to minimize errors (Simon & Taverniers, 2011), they may not hear themselves accurately. In a study of 134 learners of English, Trofimovich, Isaacs, Kennedy, Saito, and Crowther (2016) present evidence that those on the lower end of the proficiency scale tend to assess themselves very positively compared to external evaluators' ratings. (In fact, the less comprehensible the speech, the greater this overconfidence!) The authors attribute this to misattribution of segmental and suprasegmental accuracy. The opposite also holds true: Those rated most nativelike disproportionately *underestimate* their abilities (see also Baran-Łuczars, 2012).

The good news is that most learners recognize the significance of pronunciation for communication (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002), and teachers believe that instruction can positively and permanently address common pronunciation difficulties (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). We can capitalize on these beliefs through activities and assessments that teach learners to better hear themselves, which is important for long-term progress. Trofimovich et al. (2016) note that for both unskilled and skilled performers, perceptions rather than reality may determine decision making. In other words, if you underestimate your abilities with accent, you might decline an opportunity to speak in front of an audience, or you may shy away from contact with native speakers, which can negatively affect progress in accent as well as self-concept. Strategies to promote accurate self-assessment include:

- Practicing self-assessment of recorded guided and extemporaneous speech. This increases awareness of segmental details in controlled tasks such as word lists and minimal pairs, while also practicing discourse-level features such as phrasal stress, rhythm, and intonation (see Levis & Grant, 2003, p.

- 15, for specifics). Give students the opportunity (and responsibility) to assess their own progress, which increases their sense of autonomy.
- Having students create original spoken texts. This can improve oral proficiency by increasing metacognitive awareness that enhances self-monitoring. Miller (2013) verifies the benefits of having students create their own podcasts based on authentic TL podcasts. Her students rated these activities very highly for increasing oral proficiency. When we give students the freedom to choose topics and create their own texts, we increase creativity, a sense of agency, and meaningful learning.
  - Asking students to provide feedback on their peers' spoken fluency. This can heighten awareness of the many features of L2 accent and lead to more accurate inferences about the assessor's own abilities in this realm.

### **Conclusions**

Csizer and Kormos (2014) assert that “without a positive attitude to language learning, and the intention to invest effort, energy and persistence when facing difficulties, it is hardly possible for learners to take responsibility for their own second language acquisition processes” (p. 73). Recent research on learner autonomy suggests that to translate future-oriented goals into present, conscious behaviors, learners must start with a clear mission and strong motivation.

Accent asks much of us as adult learners. Aiming for an authentic-sounding accent is built upon progressive leaps of faith—projections of an L2 “possible self” that, in the early stages, is surely at odds with our linguistic abilities. Age-related influences pose challenges, but evidence supports key connections between self-concept, motivation, and ultimate attainment in L2 accent. For example, we know that strong, consistent motivation leads to cognitive and metacognitive strategies that benefit long-term outcomes. Furthermore, the broader social environment in which learning takes place is more influential than cognitive factors such as age of onset (Pfenninger, 2017). Those who see the TL as relevant to their future success tend to seek L2 input and practice from multiple sources, which leads to more nativelike accent as well. Inside the classroom, this might manifest itself as actively taking roles in communicative tasks or making choices about how to use materials, but it could also be expressed as interest in exploring resources beyond the classroom (here, resources can be technological, textual, or interpersonal ways of engaging).

There are many ways to incorporate pronunciation skill building

into classroom instruction, integrating segmental and suprasegmental exercises with classic communicative activities such as information gap, role-play, storytelling, and dialogue (see Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010, for a comprehensive approach). Pronunciation learning can take place in both planned and unplanned speaking practice, in which we can raise awareness of suprasegmentals such as phrasal stress to show the effect this has on comprehensibility and overall communicative fluency (Levis & Grant, 2003).

Even if some instructors are conflicted about emphasizing a natively-like accent as a goal, their students seem to feel quite strongly about it (Simon, 2005). As teachers, we owe it to our students to discuss the significance of accent for communicative effectiveness. We also need to discover students' goals for phonological learning: We should ask how they want to use the TL now and in the future and help them set benchmarks for progress, while offering an array of practice activities that support their individual needs. This will encourage their sense of autonomy as learners and assist them in gradually building an L2 self-concept linked to accent. This is a challenge that requires a good bit of imagination and no small amount of courage—at least in the early stages. Given the significance of both affective and cognitive factors for long-term attainment in L2 accent, and the overall efficacy of pronunciation training (Lee, Jang, & Plonsky, 2015), it is clear that we should strategically promote learner agency, self-concept, and self-evaluation, increasing the odds that our students will eventually reach their goals.

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