

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

At Mount Royal University (MRU) in Calgary, the English Language Program (ELP) has seen an influx of domestic students over the last five to ten years. This has meant a shift from predominantly Mexican, Southeast Asian and East Asian learners to a much more global presence in the ELP. It is not uncommon in a class of twenty to have students from fifteen different linguistic backgrounds. The more common Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Spanish speakers have been joined by students whose first language is Arabic, Amharic, Turkish, Russian, French, Vietnamese or Thai, to name just a few. With the demands of content in other areas, namely, essay research and writing, comprehensive reading and listening skills alongside the supporting language components of grammar and vocabulary, focused instruction in pronunciation often gets overlooked. This is compounded by the need to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a linguistically diverse groups of learners.

The Academic English program at MRU is a pathway for ELLs to move from non-credit English language preparation into degree programs at the university. Not finding ways to address pronunciation as it relates to oral communicative competence puts students in jeopardy when they are left to negotiate the realities of being in a credit program. Non-native speakers (NNS) struggle particularly with the demands of oral communication in class presentations and group projects and require additional support from professors (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Keefe & Shi, 2017). As a direct response to the complex needs of ELLs, we have designed *ProsodyPal*, an application that allows students to gain valuable insight into and practice with the prosodic features of English that directly impact their ability to be understood by others. On the instructional side, teachers can customize content and connect with learners within the application.

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (Rebecca)

As the subject matter expert (SME), I was solely responsible for determining the direction of the application from a language perspective. Implementing the theory of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), I originally choose to focus on the prosodic features of stress, pausing, pitch range and intonation. The goal of *ProsodyPal* is that by interacting with the application, students would be able to make appreciable gains in their

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intelligibility and comprehensibility, thereby improving their oral communication skills. At MRU, the Academic English level II class has an in-class task called *Academic Seminars* in which students are required to work in small groups, choose a documentary to watch, then conduct a seminar with the class about the issues raised. The current assessment tool for this task is a rubric that focuses primarily on the quality of content delivered by the group, as well as grammatical and lexical accuracy. Minimal attention is paid to the learner's ability to communicate ideas from the perspective of effective pronunciation. The *ProsodyPal* application was designed to address these gaps in feedback with the aim of better preparing them for the demands of credit study.

Pronunciation is a multi-layered concept; how this would be navigable within an application became a mounting concern. "Designing and Developing Robust Instructional Apps" (Luterbach, 2018) was a key resource in informing our application. My experience in designing effective curricula was a definite strength I brought to this project. Yet, my naiveté in thinking how easily those skills would transfer to an instructional application became apparent early on. Finding ways to make the shift from face-to-face to mobile curriculum development had me turning to SECTIONS (Bates & Poole, 2003) as a framework to narrow the scope of the application through developing answers to the framework's guiding questions. In addition, Bloom's taxonomy helped scaffold particular features (see Fig. 1.0). By employing the wisdom of others, I saw that by choosing stress, pausing, pitch range and intonation, I had, in fact, blurred my intention of the application. Therefore, I scaled it back to stress and pausing; two suprasegmental areas that could be addressed effectively within the platform in which we were working.

APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT (Shur)

Working within the confines of an application was a push in skill-sets for both Rebecca and myself (Shur). With Rebecca's role as the SME, I was primarily responsible for the design and navigational features of the application prototype on Marvel; a platform that was foreign to both of us. My background in web and graphic design expedited our early draft work as I could quickly organize our application hierarchy and familiarize myself with an editing platform. The main challenges presented themselves in the creation of activities. Often times, we found ourselves limited by the set templates and frameworks that were available on the Marvel platform. Nevertheless, we feel quite confident that our prototype demonstrates the pedagogical goals of our tool, driven by a two-fold purpose:

1. **For learning:** Features within the application demonstrate how learners will interact with content, instructors, and peers in improving their knowledge and practice of English prosody. This is broadly construed and situated in Bloom's taxonomy (see Fig. 1.0).
2. **For teaching:** Features within the application demonstrate the semi-customizable spaces where instructors can incorporate their own content into activities and provide personalized feedback. This includes:
 - Customizable content and embeddable spaces: On top of the fixed content of the application that focuses on sentence stress and pausing, instructors will be able to add theory, links, video and audio files to the application as Key Concepts or Practice Activities to allow them to customize the application to meet the pronunciation needs of their learners
 - Reports with Google Classroom integration: The application will allow instructors to export basic learner reports to Google Classroom to facilitate ongoing triangulation of learner data and needs
 - Feedback with Google G-Suite integration: On top of the private messaging functionalities within the application (instructor-learner / instructor-group / learner-learner / learner-group), the application will allow users to share to Google's G-Suite apps; sound files can also be shared to email. This will enable instructors to incorporate application activities into a broader feedback system.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

As an international language, it is important to recognize that certain features of English pronunciation that figure highly in an American context may be quite different in other parts of the world where English is widely spoken. The work of Ursula Franklin (1999) helped to broaden our approach to design by making us aware of the dangers of prescriptive technologies. In outlining and reworking the features of *ProsodyPal*, we were cognizant of the need to address current pronunciation texts and digital tools that strictly adhere to standard English. Guiding learners to achieve competency in standard American or British English pronunciation is usually the goal of such resources. However, to restrict language input and output in this way subscribes to the notion that these are the standards; the prosody of American or British English being the "prescribed" way of speaking. This caused us to

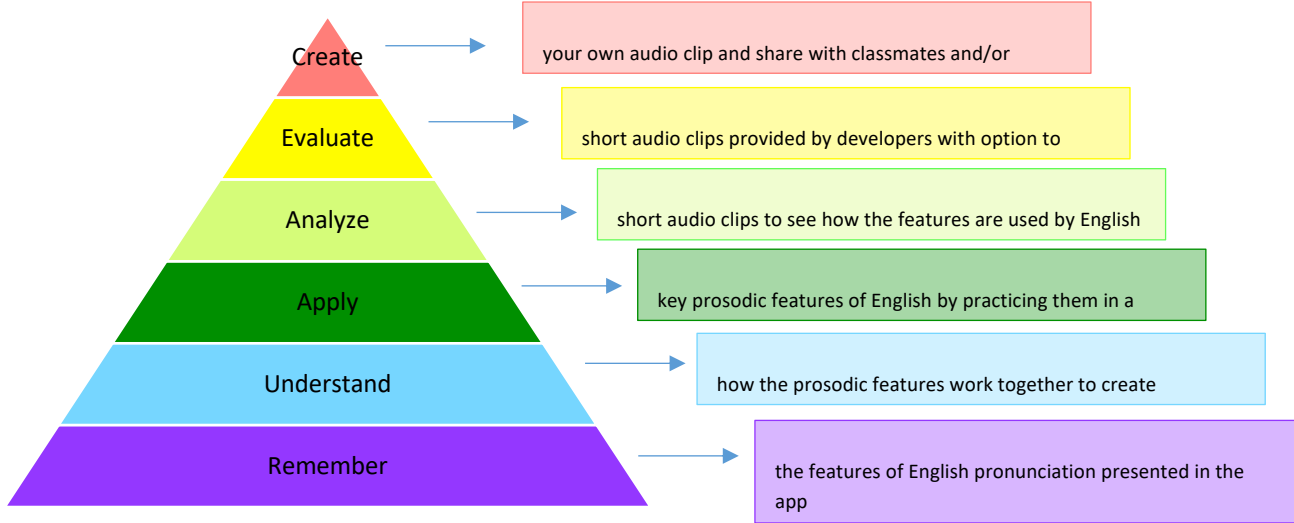
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consider the importance of recognizing the diversity of the English language speaking “ecosystem”; English as lingua franca beyond Canada/USA, Australia/New Zealand and the UK is undeniably a reality in countries like India, the Philippines and Nigeria. In our application prototype, we have explored a sampling of the prosodic features as they are relevant in a Canadian context. However, we believe an application like *ProsodyPal* should be expanded to include regional features of pronunciation in other English-speaking parts of the world, and developed alongside scholars conversant in these features of the English language that have sway in oral communication within those areas.

“A-HA” MOMENT

We began this project with the intention of creating a tool that would support some kind of dialogue between teachers and students in the field of English language education. The further we got into this task, the more we realized how important the aspect of dialogue is in a digital world with respect to instructional applications with a language focus. Creating a tool that helps to build relationships between teachers and learners is what we believe to be the most effective element of our project. We have both created websites that serve as rich resources for teachers *or* students. However, *ProsodyPal* engages users on *both* sides of the desk; the teacher’s ability to add to fixed content, comment on student progress and the learners’ ability to share their progress and be connected to their instructors and other learners. In creating our application, we wanted to remain cognizant of our desire to build a tool that advocated for communities of learners rather than developing a resource for learners to access in isolation. We believe that we have achieved a measure of “genuine reciprocity” (Franklin, 1999, p.157) in our prototype that if fully developed, would support the needs of English language learners in developing their oral communication skills.

Figure 1.0



References

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